Discovering the Fortified City of Old Montréal

Old Montréal

You can literally follow in the footsteps of history in Old Montréal. The granite paving stones throughout the streets, sidewalks and public spaces of Old Montréal mark the buried remains of the 18th-century fortified city's stone walls and main sites.

What Are Those Marks on the Ground?

When it was first founded, Montréal was defended by fortified structures. As early as 1688, the colonial administration urged its inhabitants to build a large number of small forts, houses, fortified mills and redoubts—outworks or fortified fortifications. The first stockade made of wood, was erected between 1667 and 1669.

The new stone ramparts, built between 1717 and 1744, were a symbol of authority and a guarantee of security, which both had a positive impact on the economy of Montréal. The new ramparts were constructed from grey crystalline and black limestone masonry and all the rampart walls—consisting of three distinct types of ramparts forming an irregular-shaped enclosure—were coated with roughcast, a plaster made from lime and sand.

A stonemasonry wall was built on the side facing the St. Lawrence River, where only attacks by boat were possible. This wall was mounted with a parapet, pierced with meurtrières—gun sites—and, in some places, was reinforced by a supporting wall and a terreplein, or sloping bank.

A wall similar to the one facing the St. Lawrence was built on the land side to protect the enclosure from small cannon fire. The wall was pierced with a rampart—a step running along the inside of the parapet and supporting the wall. A ditch and a glacis, or sloping slope, were also planned and together, they formed a defensive barrier over 25 metres wide.

Many types of craftsmen were recruited: the most important were stonemasons and stonefitters, but haulers, carpenters, blacksmiths, sawyers, locksmiths, roofers and others were also hired. Most of the workers were employed by building contractors and construction supervisors to work alongside soldiers.

The 18th-century fortified city formed a dense urban mosaic, dotted with large buildings—many belonging to religious communities—landscaped with great walled gardens, and nearly 400 houses were built during this time of expansion. The fortifications were gradually dismantled between 1804 and 1817 following the adoption of The Act to Demolish the Old Walls and Fortifications Surrounding the City of Montréal in 1801.

Free from its enclosure walls, the city and its suburbs now opened directly onto the river. This soon changed the very pattern of the city, and as early as 1807, twice as many people were living in the suburbs as in the city.
Discovering the Fortifications of Montréal

The remains of both the government stronghold and the residence of the Governor of New France (1701-1720) are marked on the ground here. Archaeologists unearthed one house, 40 outbuildings, kitchens, gardens, orchards and a street. In 1672, the door of Government House opened directly onto rue Sainte-Claire (Place Jacques-Cartier East) and a deep embankment ran along rue Saint-Hubert.

During the 18th century, a windmill, gardens and cemeteries. Some remains of the church and the wing for the poor can both be seen on rue Saint-Pierre.

In this case, the area between the scarp and the counterscarp of the fortification can both be seen here.

The hospital occupied a large 4.5 hectare tract of land outside the wall at Place Jacques-Cartier, which included the shores of both the Saint-Pierre (Place Royale) and St-Laurent Rivers. This important building complex consisted mainly of a church—part of which still stands west of rue St-Pierre—a convent, a washing house, a windmill, gardens and cemeteries. Some remains of the church and the area for the poor can both be seen on rue Saint-Pierre.

We hope that following this trail through time will give you a glimpse of the urban landscape of 18th-century Montréal, as well as some insight into the impact the fortifications had on city planning.

Remains of Building Sites

The hospital occupied a large 4.5 hectare tract of land outside the wall at Place Jacques-Cartier, and included the shores of both the Saint-Pierre (Place Royale) and St-Laurent Rivers. This important building complex consisted mainly of a church—part of which still stands west of rue St-Pierre—a convent, a washing house, a windmill, gardens and cemeteries. Some remains of the church and the area for the poor can both be seen on rue Saint-Pierre.

Discovering the Fortification and its Building Sites

Archaeology and its Building Sites

The Trail of Discovery

We hope that following this trail through time will give you a glimpse of the urban landscape of 18th-century Montréal, as well as some insight into the impact the fortifications had on city planning.