

# CHAPTER ONE

## The Montréal Harbourfront: A History



## Introduction

The story of Montréal's old harbour is at the heart of much of Canada's economic, political and social history, and can consequently be considered of national significance. It is a story rooted in its geography, which combines three features highly conducive to the development of a dynamic port.

First, the area forms a natural harbour — an essential precondition for the settlement of New France during the 17th century, when rivers were the only important links to the outside world. It is also situated at the confluence of three major waterways offering access to the interior of the North American continent (the St. Lawrence, Ottawa and Richelieu rivers).

Finally, the harbour is located at the western boundary of the navigable section of the St. Lawrence. Since navigation was hampered by the Lachine Rapids, it was for a significant time an obligatory stopping point, as well as a hub for the exploration and development of the hinterland. Birthplace of the modern port of Montréal (today North America's largest inland fresh-water port), the old harbourfront is also, more broadly, the cradle of Montréal and its surroundings.



**Figure 1.1**  
Plan of the canal proposed by the Sulpicians (not constructed), designed to bypass the Lachine Rapids. Plan by Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry, 1733.

Source: Archives nationales de France. Centre d'Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence.

## 1.1 The harbourfront, cradle of Montréal: 1535-1700

### 1.1.1 Aboriginal people and the harbourfront

There has been a human presence in the harbourfront region since the so-called archaic period, more specifically the Laurentian Archaic (6000-4000 BP\*). A site dating from this era has been discovered on Nuns' Island. Most of the Aboriginal vestiges relate, however, to the middle (2400-1000 BP) and late (1000 BP-1534) Woodland periods, principally to the St. Lawrence Iroquoians (ancestors of the Iroquois nations), and testify to the introduction of pottery into their society. The diverse provenances of the many artefacts discovered during archaeological excavations reflect the harbourfront's important role as a crossroads of trade even at this period. In addition, owing to its extensive marshlands and the proximity of the Lachine Rapids, the region provided Aboriginal people with excellent hunting and fishing grounds. It also marked the entrance to a portage trail that made it possible to circumvent the rapids and reach Lake Saint-Louis, as well as one of the access points to the Iroquoian village of Hochelaga, formerly situated in the island of Montréal's interior.

### 1.1.2 Cartier and Champlain — explorers

In 1535, the French explorer Jacques Cartier became the first European known to have set foot on the island of Montréal. During this expedition, he visited the Iroquoian village of Hochelaga and gave Mount Royal its name.

He made no mention on this occasion of the harbour, which some see as an indication that he arrived at the island via the Des Prairies River. However, on a second trip to Montréal, in 1541, he approached the region by the St. Lawrence, noting at that time the presence of a natural harbour near another island (Sainte-Hélène). Since the main goal of his expedition was to discover resources comparable to those found in the Spanish colonies, as well as a route to the Orient, his stay in the Montréal area was brief.

More than sixty years would pass before another European visited the harbourfront. Samuel de Champlain, the founder of Quebec City, made his first trip there in 1603. Like Cartier he arrived in a small boat, since negotiating the waters of Lake Saint-Pierre in a large vessel was too risky, owing to its many

shallow areas. His second expedition, which took place in 1611, had a greater impact. It was then that he named Île Sainte-Hélène in honour of his wife, Hélène Boullé, and laid out Place Royale (near the site of the square that bears the name today). The walls composed of clay bricks, made on the spot, and the handful of log cabins he had built that year along the riverbanks are considered to be Montréal's first European constructions.

Champlain was far more than a simple explorer in search of hoards of gold and silk: he had the soul of a nation builder. He returned twice more to the harbourfront region (in 1613 and 1616), which, until the founding of Montréal in 1642, served on occasion as a summer trading centre between whites and Aboriginal people, and as a base camp for exploration of the Great Lakes region.

### 1.1.3 The founding of Montréal (Ville-Marie)

In 1639, a group of Catholic mystics from the region of Paris, led by Jérôme Le Royer de La Dauversière, formed the Société de Notre-Dame de Montréal with the aim of founding a permanent settlement whose mandate would be the religious conversion of the Aboriginal people. The society entrusted Paul de Chomedey de Maisonneuve, Jeanne Mance and some forty settlers with the task of establishing this mission on the island of Montréal. The harbourfront seemed the ideal location.

The small company disembarked at Pointe à Callière on May 17, 1642. The site offered a number of advantages. It formed a triangle bounded by the St. Lawrence, the Saint-Pierre River and an area of marshland, thus offering the future settlers a degree of security. It also allowed the inhabitants to anticipate the arrival of supply ships coming from France or from Quebec City, but also to spot from a distance the birchbark canoes of their Iroquois enemies. A small fort of wooden stakes was erected on the point, and a few cabins were soon built within the enclosure. The settlement, baptized Ville-Marie, endured until 1680. It is possible that a first simple wharf was constructed in 1645 near the fort, in the region of what is now Port Street.

It quickly became clear that Pointe à Callière was subject to flooding, as witness the famous episode when Sieur de Maisonneuve set up a cross on the summit of Mount Royal (1643). As a result, the town spread onto higher ground, along a trail that, at the time, overlooked the riverbank and that would soon become Saint-Paul Street.

### 1.1.4 The Messieurs de Saint-Sulpice

After twenty-four years' of existence, the Société de Notre-Dame was dissolved. It was succeeded by the "Messieurs de Saint-Sulpice," a Paris-based community of secular priests who became the new seigneurs of Montréal and began truly developing the region. They drew up the town's first development plan (1672), which in the harbourfront area resulted in the construction of two portage trails leading to Lachine: the Lachine road, which ran along the riverbank (now LaSalle Boulevard and Wellington Street), and the Saint-Joseph road, which was located on higher ground, safe from spring flooding (now Upper Lachine Road, and Saint-Jacques and Notre-Dame streets).

Even more ambitious was the plan to build what eventually became the Lachine Canal. The idea was to construct a navigable waterway that would bypass the Lachine Rapids by following the course of the Saint-Pierre River and Lake Loutres (also called Lake Saint-Pierre). The project was directed by the Sulpicians' Montréal superior, François de Salignac Fénelon, and by his successor, François Dollier de Casson. Digging of the Saint-Gabriel canal, as it was then called, began on June 13, 1689. But the massacre of the inhabitants of Lachine in August of that year, combined with the refusal of the Sulpicians' Paris mother house to finance the work, brought the project to a halt. Two further attempts (in 1700 and 1733) to revive the Sulpicians' dream fell through, and no further progress was made under the French regime. This first canal was apparently located near a fortified farm that belonged to the Sulpicians, of which no trace remains.

### 1.1.5 The fur trade

Despite a marked interest in the canal project, the Sulpicians paid little attention to the port itself, which over the years degenerated into a boggy shore used as a common grazing ground for cattle and even, in some spots, as a dump. At this period, large and medium-size vessels were obliged to drop anchor in the harbour, since the waterside offered nowhere to berth. Goods and supplies were carried by smaller boats to the shore, which nonetheless boasted a few private piers and gangways. The remains of a 17th-century wooden gangway were actually discovered at the bottom of Jacques Cartier Square in 1998.

Commercial activity at the time centred on the fur trade, and around 1680 the wealthiest fur traders were Charles Le Moyne and Jacques Le Ber. The latter built a huge fortified farm at the eastern tip of Île Saint-Paul (later Nuns' Island), of which extensive archaeological remains still survive. His estate and those of his neighbours gradually passed into the hands of the Sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, a religious teaching community founded by Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys. It was she who received the *filles du roi* when they arrived from France, lodging them at the Saint-Gabriel farm, located on the mainland opposite the island (1668-1698). Toward the end of the 17th century, the harbourfront skyline was augmented by the Charon Brothers' hospice (1693), with its windmill, and the residence of the governor of Montréal, Hector de Callière, situated near the market place (1653).

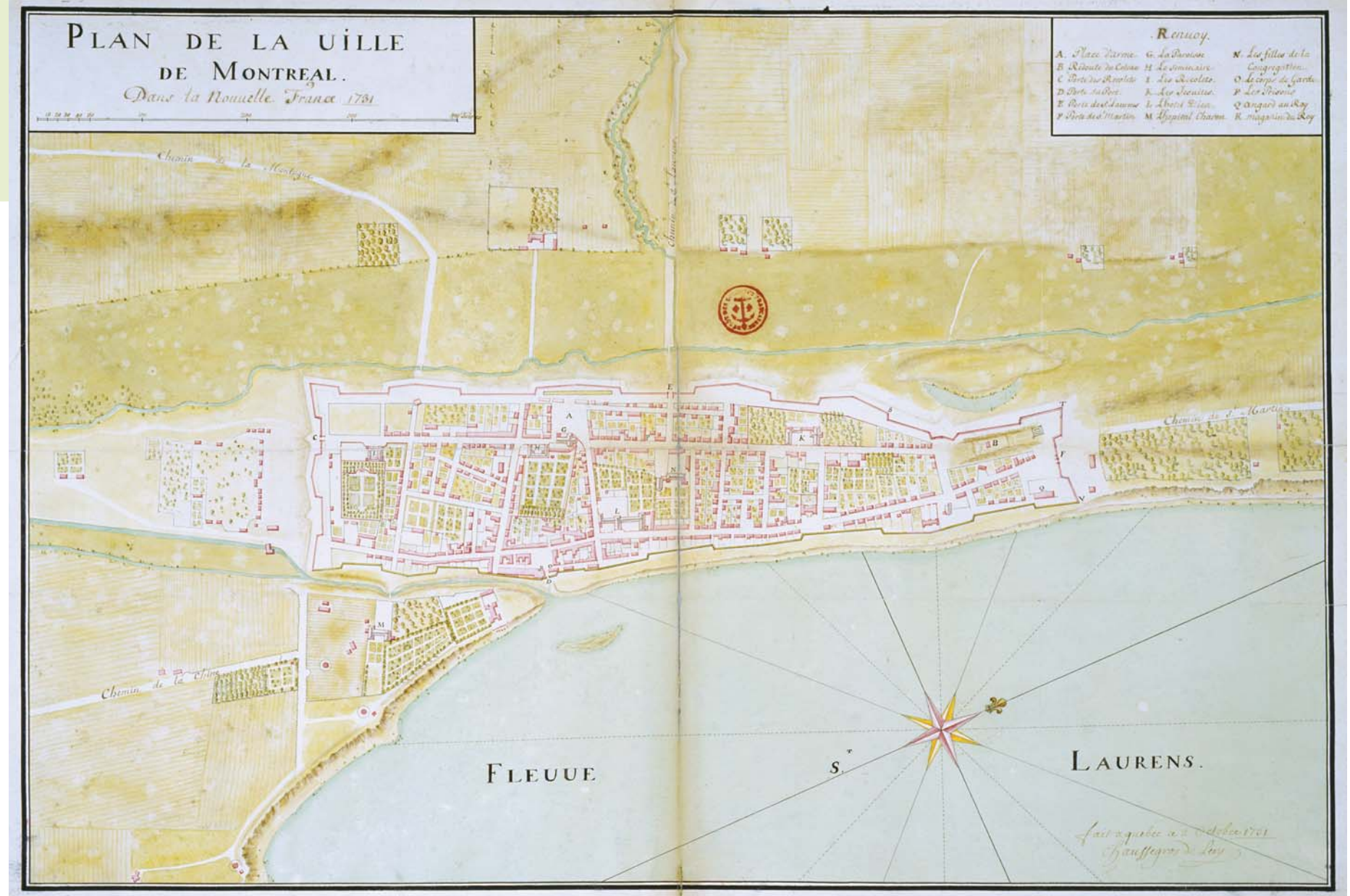
\*BP : before present.

## 1.2 War and peace along the harbourfront: 1701-1820

### 1.2.1 The Great Peace of Montréal

During the 18th century, Montréal's importance as a commercial centre grew. Because constant skirmishes had a negative effect on trading, it was essential that calm be established. It was Governor Callière who brought about the signature of a peace treaty with the Aboriginal peoples known as the Great Peace of Montréal. The treaty was signed in 1701 during a highly colourful ceremony attended by Native leaders and French officials, all wearing their most elaborately formal costumes. The event took place at the harbourfront, just below the governor's chateau, at a site known henceforth as "Pointe à Callière." The Great Peace meant that the colonization of the island of Montréal could proceed securely. In the new circumstances, the palisade of cedar stakes that had surrounded the town since 1689 no longer seemed necessary. But things would change.

**Figure 1.2**  
Plan of  
Montréal by  
Gaspard-  
Joseph  
Chaussegros  
de Léry,  
1731.



Source: Archives nationales de France. Centre d'Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence.

### 1.2.2 The building of the fortifications

The War of the Spanish Succession made armed conflict — this time with the British — once more a fact of life. In 1711, a fleet headed by Admiral Hovenden Walker was making its way to Québec City. The Egg Island disaster upset British plans (several of Walker's ships were caught in a storm and sank), but the episode gave the aging Louis XIV cause for thought. The following year he decided to fortify the principal towns of New France, including Montréal. King's engineer Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry, newly arrived in the colony, was entrusted with the task. The result of his efforts was a fortified city on the "Vauban" model, constructed between 1717 and 1744. The southeast wall, facing the harbour, was the last to be erected (about 1735-1744). Less vulnerable than the other sides to possible attack — navigation conditions in Montréal and Québec City were different — it originally had four gates opening directly onto the shore or the Saint-Pierre River (the Petite Rivière, Marché, Gouvernement and Canoterie gates).

Following the fire of 1721, which destroyed practically half the town, the intendant of New France, Michel Bégon, issued an ordinance stipulating that all buildings erected inside the fortifications be made of masonry. This edict can be seen as Montréal's first urban planning by-law. But only the more prosperous could afford to obey it: the poor, obliged to use wood, had no choice but to build their homes outside the walls.

This ordinance led to the creation of Montréal's first *faubourgs*, two of which bordered the harbourfront. These were Faubourg des Récollets, west of the fortifications, between the Saint-Martin and Saint-Pierre rivers, and Faubourg Québec, which formed a long strip straddling the road to Québec, to the east.

Montréal's two other 18th-century *faubourgs* were Faubourg Saint-Laurent, which ran along the road of the same name, and Faubourg Saint-Louis, near today's Champ-de-Mars.

### 1.2.3 The first port infrastructure

Although the city was being organized into a coherent whole, the port remained in a state of utter confusion. It boasted a *quai des barques* (a boat wharf) that was, it seems, nothing more than the shore itself, along with a few private piers made of wood. These short-lived

structures were frequently destroyed when the ice broke up in the spring, which accounts for the lack of evidence and information concerning them. The best known were those belonging to the Magasins du Roy, the Compagnie des Indes Occidentales, the Marquis de Vaudreuil and the Grey Nuns, a religious order that took over the Charon Brothers' hospice in the mid-18th century. At the western tip of the harbourfront stood at least four windmills, along with the small chapel of Sainte-Anne.

### 1.2.4 The Seven Years' War

After numerous attempts to take New France, England tried again during the Seven Years' War. Quebec City fell in 1759. The Chevalier de Lévis reassembled the French forces in order to retake the city. He won the battle of Sainte-Foy, but the arrival of British reinforcements forced him to withdraw to Montréal. He took up positions on Île Sainte-Hélène, part of the seigneurie of Longueuil since 1665 and hitherto occupied only by the summer residence of the Baroness of Longueuil and its outbuildings (cider press, sheepfold, stables). In July 1760 Lévis and his men hastily set up gun positions and built earth entrenchments. But the troops led by Amherst, Haviland and Murray converged on Montréal, making this last stand hopeless. On September 8, 1760, the city surrendered. Lévis burned his regimental colours to deny them to the enemy. The Treaty of Paris, signed in 1763, settled the fate of New France: the harbourfront was now British.

### 1.2.5 The American Revolution

Montréal would nonetheless again be the site of conflict. On November 12, 1775, American revolutionary forces invaded the city. While Benedict Arnold and his troops made their way to Quebec City, General Montgomery and his men first occupied Nuns' Island and Point St. Charles before entering Montréal from the west, via Faubourg des Récollets. Governor Guy Carleton temporarily retreated from Montréal with his troops, taking refuge in Quebec City.

Although many citizens, notables and members of the clergy loyal to the British Crown feared the consequences of this invasion, others, residents of the three *faubourgs* — forty of whom signed a letter of welcome addressed to General Montgomery's irregular troops — took an entirely different view. These sympathizers hoped that the Canadians would accept the invitation

extended by the Congress of Thirteen Colonies to join the revolutionary movement and to elect their own representatives to the Continental Congress, in Philadelphia. The forty signatories, intellectuals and merchants, supported the liberal ideas espoused by the American Revolution and its representatives — among whom was Benjamin Franklin, who visited Montréal in 1776 with the French printer Fleury Mesplet. The latter settled permanently in the city and founded the *Gazette littéraire et de commerce* (ancestor of the *Montreal Gazette*) as a forum for the revolutionary ideology.

But after the failure of the siege of Quebec City, which dragged on into the depths of winter, and the death of the fatally wounded Montgomery, the exhausted irregular troops — who had gradually lost the sympathy and support of many of the inhabitants of Lower Canada — withdrew to Montréal, then to Saint-Jean, and finally retreated back over the border. Montréal and the Province of Quebec remained British.

Altogether, the Bostonians' incursion into Lower Canada lasted nine months, from the start of the siege of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu (45 days) on September 17, 1775, to the complete withdrawal of the American troops on June 18, 1776. Montréal was occupied from November 12, 1775, until June 15, 1776 — a period of seven months, during which the Château Ramezay, on Notre-Dame Street, served as the Boston army's headquarters.

### 1.2.6 The proto-industrial period

Once peace was re-established, commerce resumed. But the French-Canadian merchants were no longer alone. They had to contend with a new middle class, made up of English and Scots immigrants, among whom was John Molson, an Englishman from Lincolnshire. Molson and his descendants would change the face of Faubourg Québec and the entire eastern section of the old harbourfront. The family would take Montréal on its first steps towards its industrial revolution and the diversification of an economy hitherto concentrated on the fur trade. In 1786, John Molson bought a small brewery that gradually developed into the complex that exists today on Notre-Dame Street. Following the example of Europe's first industrialists, Molson lived literally next door to his factory, surrounded by his foremen and workers. His descendants even built their own Anglican house of worship on brewery land (St. Thomas Chapel, about 1840).

The Molson brewery was situated just opposite the powerful Sainte-Marie current, notorious for slowing the progress of ships entering the harbour. Many had to be towed by horses plodding along the riverbank. A flat-bottomed vessel able to navigate close to the shore, known as the Durham boat, appeared in the region around 1800. The following year the first ferry service between Montréal and Longueuil was introduced, enabling generations of South Shore farmers to sell their produce — first in Jacques Cartier Square (constructed in 1803, on the site of the Château de Vaudreuil, destroyed by fire) and later at the Bonsecours Market (1847-1852), whose dome was to become one of the symbols of the harbourfront. This service would also facilitate trade with the United States, via the Chambly road and the Richelieu River.

John Molson, however, had his sights set even higher. In 1809, at his own harbourfront wharf, he launched Canada's first steamship, the *Accommodation*. Built in Montréal and powered by an engine made at the Saint-Maurice ironworks, the vessel was the world's first steamship designed entirely outside the British Isles. It made the run between Montréal and Quebec City for many years. A few other early industrial structures began to appear at the western tip of the harbourfront, including the tanneries and flourmills that grew up along the banks of the Saint-Pierre River, already partially canalized by the Sulpicians during the 17th century.

### 1.2.7 The demolition of the fortifications and the Commissioners' Plan

In 1792, the British colonial government considered the demolition of the walls surrounding Montréal. Made obsolete by the modernization of the art of warfare, they prevented the free circulation of people and goods. It was not until 1801, however, that the *Act to Demolish the Old Walls and Fortifications that Surround the City of Montréal* was passed.

The work began in 1804, under the supervision of three commissioners (James McGill, John Richardson and Jean-Marie Mondelet). These commissioners — not to be confused with the commissioners of the future Montreal Harbour Commission — were also entrusted with the mission of drawing up a development plan for the large areas freed up by removal of the walls.

This became the *Commissioners' Plan*, whose main features were drafted in 1804 by the road surveyor, Louis Charland. The aim of the plan was to repair the scars left by the fortifications and to clean up the streams surrounding the old town, many of which had been used as dumps since its foundation.

Although demolition of the fortifications was completed in 1817, the improvements and alterations that were to follow were not realized for forty years, and then only partially. They nevertheless had a lasting impact on Montréal's urban development.



Source: Port of Montreal archives.

**Figure 1.3**  
Before the age of steam, ships had to be towed through the powerful Sainte-Marie current by horses and oxen, 1800.

**Figure 1.4**  
Commissioners' Plan of 1804, drafted by Louis Charland.



Source: Musée de la civilisation, fonds d'archives du Séminaire du Québec.

With the removal of its fortifications, the town was now open to the harbourfront and the *faubourgs*, which would expand considerably and merge with the urban core. The walls themselves were replaced by public squares and broad thoroughfares. McGill Street was constructed to the west, although the canal designed to link the Saint-Pierre and Saint-Martin rivers, which was to run up the middle of the new street, was not built. McGill Street ended at the new Haymarket (later Victoria Square). Craig Street (now Saint-Antoine Street) was constructed to the north, while Berri Street and Dalhousie Square (no longer in existence) bounded the city to the east. Finally, Commissioners Street (later De la Commune Street) ran along the harbourfront to the south, commemorating

the men who had overseen the demolition of the fortifications. The Saint-Pierre River (under what is now Place d'Youville) and the Saint-Martin River (under Saint-Antoine Street) were canalized, remaining initially on the surface but eventually being channelled underground.

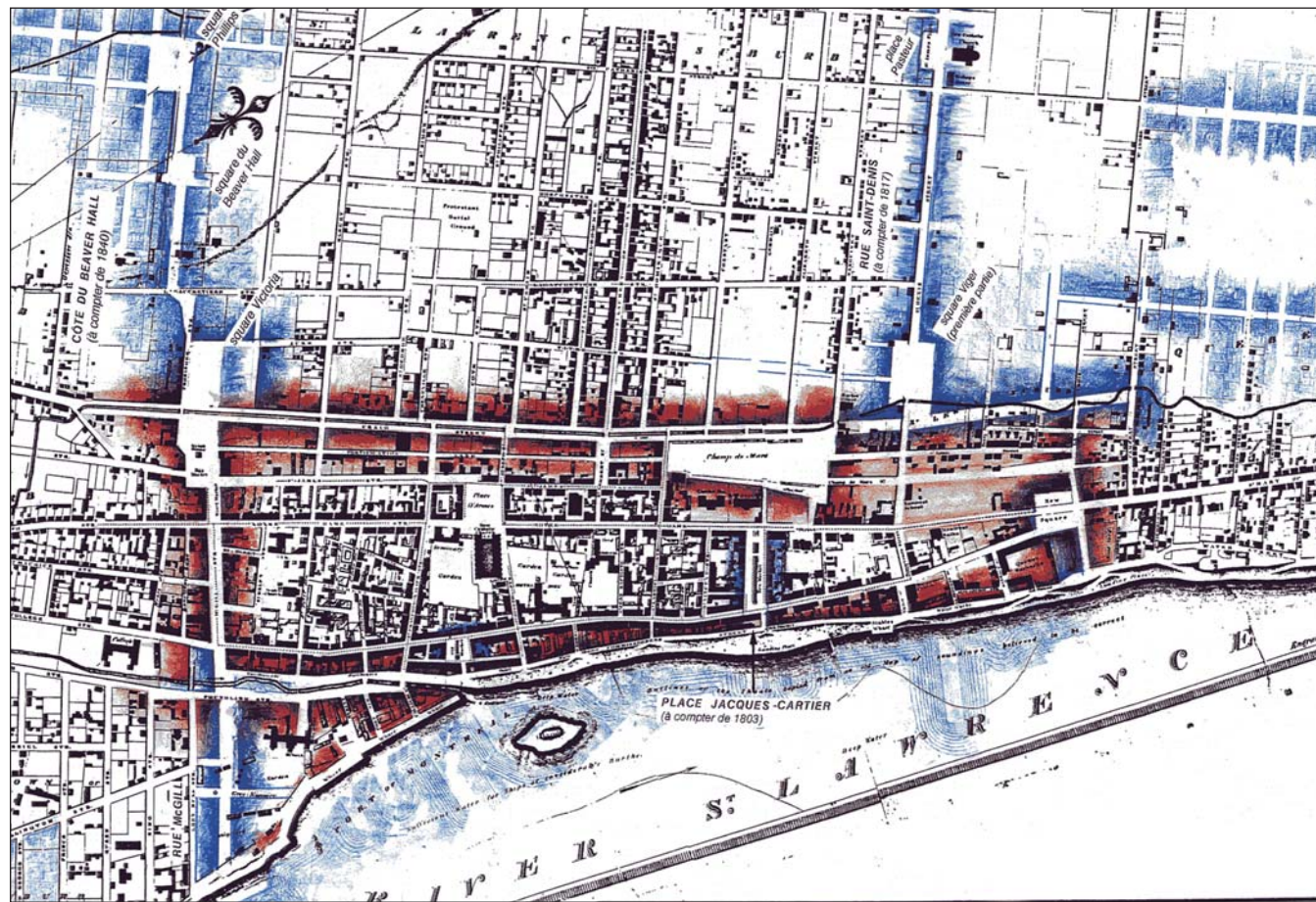
The land that had been expropriated many years before, when the fortifications were built, was returned to the original owners' descendants and heirs, which led to real estate development made hitherto impossible by the presence of the walls.

The section of Faubourg Récollets located to the south of the Saint-Pierre River was divided into plots in 1818.

Its streets were named after members of the British aristocracy (east-west streets) and their titles (north-south streets). The whole area was baptized Griffintown, in honour of the project's promoter, Irishman Robert Griffin. North of the Saint-Pierre, the Sulpicians built the Petit Séminaire (1806) on the site of the swamp that had once protected the inhabitants of Ville-Marie, which had been filled in with debris from the fortifications. Remains of this building, which the Sulpicians left in 1861, still exist underground. A few country homes sprang up near John Molson's estate in Faubourg Québec, the property of such leading figures as John Johnson, head of the Indian Department, and Judge Panet. Reigned over by neoclassical villas, these bourgeois domains were situated right on the shore, offering splendid views of the river and of Île Sainte-Hélène.

### 1.2.8 The Anglo-American War of 1812

The fortifications were already partially demolished when the Anglo-American War of 1812 broke out—an indirect result of the Napoleonic Wars. In 1813, American forces advancing on Montréal were stopped *in extremis* at the famous battle of Châteauguay. But the British military authorities, represented by Commodore Owen, had been more than a little alarmed. They decided to set up an integrated defence system throughout Upper and Lower Canada. Montréal would be protected by a fort, constructed on Île Sainte-Hélène (1820-1824) according to plans drawn up by military engineer Lieutenant Colonel Elias Walker Durnford. This allowed stocks of gunpowder and munitions to be kept outside the city, thus increasing the safety of its inhabitants. The British Army garrisoned the fort on Île Sainte-Hélène until 1870.



**Figure 1.5**  
Effects of the implementation of the Commissioners' Plan of 1804.

The red areas on this plan show the roads and public spaces proposed as part of the reconstruction of the city in sections once covered by the fortifications.

The blue areas indicate other building projects designed to complement the Commissioners' Plan.

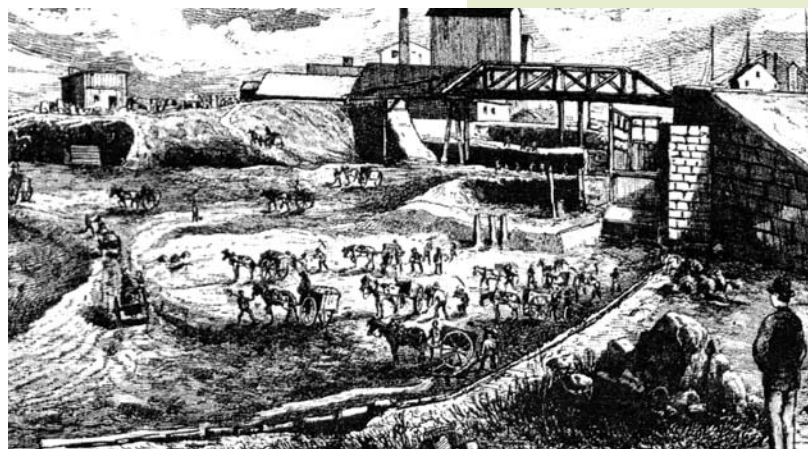
Source: Ville de Montréal.

## 1.3 The birthplace of Canada's industrial revolution: 1821-1860

### 1.3.1 The construction of the Lachine Canal

The decline of the fur trade, marked by the disappearance of the North West Company in 1821, signalled the end of one era and the start of another, oriented towards the diversification and mechanization of Montréal's economy. The scene had already been set in 1817, with the foundation of the Bank of Montréal. But the major mobilizing project of this period would be the long-awaited building of the Lachine Canal. Following the Anglo-American War of 1812, Commodore Owen had expressed the need for a canal bypassing the Lachine Rapids that would facilitate the shipping of British armaments into Upper Canada. It was ultimately for commercial reasons, however, that the canal was built. In 1817 the United States had begun construction of the Erie Canal, which would soon provide a link between the city of New York and the rapidly developing Great Lakes region. Not wishing to be outstripped by its competitors, the British government finally began work on the Lachine Canal in 1821.

The project was undertaken by the Public Works Office, under the direction of businessman John Richardson. The 14.5-kilometre-long waterway only partially coincided with the course planned by the Sulpicians' for the Saint-Gabriel canal. Montréal contractors Stanley Bagg, Thomas Phillips, Oliver Wait and Andrew White managed the building of the canal's various sections, according to plans drawn up by the British engineer Thomas Burnett. For the most part, the approximately five hundred labourers working on the site were newly arrived immigrants from Ireland.



Source: Canadian Illustrated News.

**Figure 1.6**  
With the opening of the Lachine Canal, all the elements needed to trigger Canada's industrial revolution were present, 1841.

This represented the first massive wave of immigration in the city's history. The Irish newcomers settled in Griffintown, in Faubourg des Récollets and in the new district of St. Anne, immediately to its west, forming working-class ethnic ghettos.

After being opened partially to shipping in August 1824, the Lachine Canal was officially inaugurated in 1825. The original canal, which was 14.6 metres wide and 1.5 metres deep, included seven cut-stone locks and a towpath running parallel along its length. The first link in a chain of canals that allowed shipping access to Lake Superior, the Lachine Canal also acted as a powerful corridor of urban development oriented towards the west of the Island of Montréal. With the opening of the Lachine Canal, all the elements needed to trigger Canada's industrial revolution were present.

### 1.3.2 Prelude to the port's development

Around 1825, Montréal's harbour was still little more than a muddy beach, serving as both landing stage and dump, punctuated here and there by small privately owned piers, randomly positioned and roughly constructed out of tree trunks and wooden planks. The largest were those belonging to the entrepreneurs and merchants Berthelet, Cuvillier, Logan, Moreau and Molson. Most bigger vessels were unable to get closer than 15 metres from the shore without risking getting stuck in the mud. Carters would therefore run their vehicles axle-deep into the water in order to get as close to the boats as possible before transferring goods and passengers.

Three government bodies had nonetheless begun making tentative improvements. In 1818, for example, at the instigation of the commissioners for internal communications of Lower Canada, a first public pier had been built opposite Pointe à Callière (Commissioners' Pier). These officials, who were not associated with the future Harbour Commission, pursued trade and military objectives throughout the whole of Lower Canada's territory.

**Figure 1.7**  
Around 1825, Montréal's harbour was still little more than a muddy beach, 1839.



Source: McCord Museum. William Henry Bartlett Fonds. M20030.

More significantly, around 1815 the commissioners charged with overseeing demolition of the fortifications had begun construction of Commissioners Street, which led to the gradual creation of a waterfront consisting of a row of greystone warehouses facing the St. Lawrence River. Their plan also included access ramps designed to run from Commissioners Street, which was higher than the riverbank, to the water's edge, left in its natural state. The first access ramps, which appeared shortly before 1820, were simply mounds of earth secured by a framework of logs covered with planks. The rest of the harbour continued to deteriorate, however, and this was a source of complaint among both merchants and visitors.

The third government body to have an impact on the development of the harbour during this period was Trinity House, created in Quebec City in 1805. The mission of Trinity House was to oversee the flow of river traffic on the St. Lawrence, and it adopted a number of regulations aimed at making the harbourfront cleaner and safer. But to the annoyance of Montréal's ship-owners and merchants, its mandate gave indirect priority to the harbour in Quebec City, and in 1823

they began lobbying for the creation of a powerful local organization whose specific mission would be the development and management of Montréal's harbour.

### 1.3.3 The Montreal Harbour Commission: early accomplishments

On March 26, 1830, the repeated demands for improvement of the harbour finally bore fruit when the British government created the Montreal Harbour Commission, and the sector moved into a new stage in its development. The many changes introduced over the next twenty years would considerably alter the look of the harbour. Between the Lachine Canal and Frisonne Street, the muddy beach was replaced by a series of piers and jetties. These structures at last gave Montréal's port a competitive edge in the business of conveying a wide range of European goods into the heart of North America and efficiently exporting to Europe the lumber and grain needed so urgently by its inhabitants.





**Figure 1.8**  
Among its accomplishments, the Montreal Harbour Commission raised the level of Commissioners Street and built walls and access ramps, 1859.

The first works program (1830-1833) continued with the construction, in freestone, of the first supporting walls, staircases and access ramps along Commissioners Street (along the axes of Place Royale, and Saint-Sulpice, Saint-Dizier and Saint-Gabriel streets, 1831-1833). As well as enhancing the harbour's appearance, these walls served to shore up the banks and provide access to the piers. The political unrest that marked the next five years, which culminated in the Rebellions of 1837-1838, resulted in a slowdown of the work. The only construction undertaken during this period was the erection of the Custom House on the north side of Place Royale (John Ostell, architect, 1836-1838).

During a second works program (1839-1841), the level of Commissioners Street was raised (in order to reduce the risk of flooding in the old town), the piers, walls and access ramps were extended to the west (up to the mouth of the Lachine Canal) and to the east (up to the New Market (Jacques Cartier Square)), and the Saint-Pierre River was canalized. In addition, two jetties were built in front of the New Market, and sidewalks covered in grey paving stones (completed in 1847 by

the addition of a neoclassical-style metal railing) henceforth ran the full length of Commissioners Street, enabling onlookers to observe the harbour and its activities from above. Several of these projects were conceived by John Cliff, superintendent of harbour works at the time. This period also saw the first efforts to dredge the riverbed and the areas around the piers (1840), accomplished with a steam-powered dredger purchased in Great Britain in 1832.

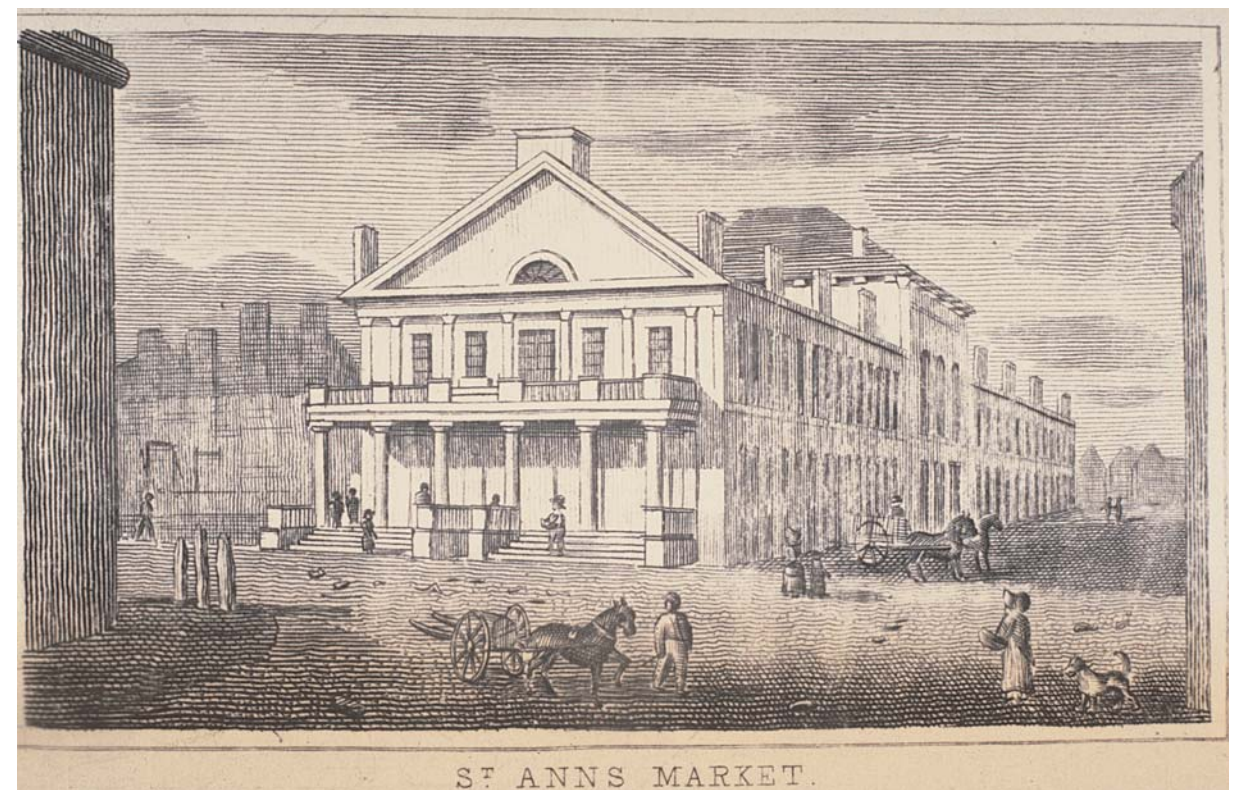
The three-member Commission (the first appointees were George Moffat, Jules Quesnel and Robert S. Piper) reported directly to the Governor in Council. The commissioners got to work immediately, acquiring Îlot Normandin, a rocky protuberance (also known as Île du Marché or Oyster Island) by concession from the Sulpicians. Today it is part of the territory of the Old Port, located opposite Saint-Sulpice Street (formerly Saint-Joseph Street). Here they built piers based on plans drawn up by Commissioner Piper, who was a member of the Royal Engineers, and a jetty linking the island to the mainland.

Source: McCord Museum. William Notman Fonds. N-0000.193.37.

A third works program (1845-1847) included construction of what is today the Victoria Pier, which advances into the St. Lawrence at the level of Friponne Street. It was built using the new so-called "cribwork" technique (involving structures made of wooden beams held together by a metal frame and filled with earth and rocks), rather than the traditional piles. The last major undertaking of this period was the digging of a fairway between Montréal and Quebec City, mostly in Lake Saint-Pierre, which enabled ships of greater tonnage to reach the Montréal harbour (1851-1854). In the years that followed, a number of ambitious plans were developed but never realized, including one to create a series of canals and docks at the site of the Saint-Martin River, to the north of Old Montréal, which would have made the area resemble the dockyards of London (1852).

In 1840, eager to promote the harbourfront's new facilities and to inform potential shipowners that the port of Montréal was henceforth accessible during all but the coldest winter months, the commissioners introduced a tradition that is still alive today: the awarding of a prize to the captain of the first ocean-going ship to enter the harbour following its annual reopening. Initially, the prize was simply a hat, but around 1880 this was replaced by the famous gold-headed cane. Since the port has remained open year-round (1964), thanks to more efficient icebreakers, the cane is presented to the captain of the first ocean vessel to reach it on January 1.

**Figure 1.9**  
During the 1840-1850 decade, Montréal became the capital of the province of United Canada, whose parliament was located on today's Place d'Youville, 1839.



Source: McCord Museum. James Duncan Fonds. M15949.18.

### 1.3.4 The widening of the Lachine Canal: A vital step at a key point in Montréal's economic and political development

The decade between 1840 and 1850 marked a turning point in the political and economic history of Montréal, which became for a brief period the capital of the province of United Canada. This new entity was the result of the Act of Union (sanctioned by Queen Victoria on July 23, 1840), following the Rebellions of 1837 and 1838 in Upper and Lower Canada.

On April 25, 1849, using the precedent of a bill adopted in 1845 aimed at compensating the inhabitants of Upper Canada for material and financial losses incurred during the Rebellions, the LaFontaine-Baldwin government tabled and had sanctioned by parliament (then located in what is today Place d'Youville) a similar bill to compensate the inhabitants of Lower Canada. The vote included the provision of a sum of £90,000.

The idea was extremely ill received by a large proportion of the population and of the Anglophone members of parliament, who did not feel that *canadien* insurgents should be compensated for their losses, and a powerful movement of opposition developed as debates on the *Rebellion Losses Bill* proceeded. The evening the bill was adopted a riot broke out, and the parliament building was set on fire. Losses included its library (25,000 books, many of which were no longer available) and all the archives accumulated by the government of United Canada since its inception in 1841. These troubles, compounded by serious economic problems, sounded the death knell of Montréal's reign as capital of the province of United Canada.

This episode occurred at a particularly critical moment, economically speaking. Between 1842 and 1849, the British government had gradually dismantled all the elements of its protectionist trade policy, left over from the colonial system, which had hitherto favoured trade in raw materials between the colonies and the mother country. Great Britain began adopting a free-trade approach, progressively reducing its customs tariffs. Among other things, it repealed both its Corn Laws— which guaranteed the British market privileged access to grain products originating in the colonies— and its shipping laws. These measures operated to the advantage of the U.S. economy, already far more productive and dynamic since the revolution that had freed it from its colonial constraints.

Lower Canada was now in the grip of a serious economic depression. Montréal's markets were being taken over by New York. Transport costs were on the rise. Not only was American wheat not being shipped to Montréal via the St. Lawrence canals, completed in 1848, but Canadian wheat was being sent to New York via the Erie Canal, to the profit of American charter companies. Financiers and merchants in the Montréal region vehemently denounced the new English policy.<sup>1</sup> The situation forced the provinces that formed Canada at the time (British North America)— the province of United Canada and the colonies of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland— to increase commercial exchange between themselves and to orient their exportation of basic commodities towards the U.S. market. In 1849 reciprocal free trade of raw materials began to operate between the British colonies of North America, and in 1854 a first reciprocal agreement was signed with the United States. This agreement guaranteed the mutually free trading of raw materials between the signatories, but maintained high customs tariffs on processed goods. Montréal began turning increasingly towards New York and the northeastern United States.<sup>2</sup>



Source: Library and Archives Canada. Public Works Canada Collection. PA-110118.

**Figure 1.10**  
The hydraulic power provided by the canal led to the establishment of the Redpath sugar refinery and the Ogilvie flourmill near the Saint-Gabriel Locks, 1920.

It was against this backdrop that industrial activity and the infrastructure necessary to the transportation of goods began to develop on Montréal's harbourfront and around the Lachine Canal.

Less than twenty years after it was opened, widening of the canal became imperative if it was to meet the needs of the industries that were springing up along its banks— not only in order to facilitate transportation of their raw materials and finished products, but also to provide them with a source of cooling water and hydraulic power. The proximity of the port of Montréal and the concentration in surrounding neighbourhoods

of a large French-Canadian and Irish labour force were other factors that militated in favour of industrial development along the Lachine Canal.

The widening of the canal would also make it easier for steamships to reach Lake Saint-Louis from the Montréal harbour. The project (1843-1848) increased the canal's width to 36.6 metres, and its depth to 2.7 metres. The number of locks dropped from seven to five, which both reduced locking time

1. See Lacoursière, Jacques, *Histoire populaire du Québec, 1841 à 1896*, vol. 3, Septentrion, 1996, pp. 41ff.

2. See Arteau, Richard, "Libre-échange et continentalisme : récapitulations," in *La Politique économique canadienne à l'épreuve du continentalisme*, ACFAS-GRÉTSÉ, 1988, pp. 169-195.

and increased differences of level, thus enhancing hydraulic capacity in a number of specific locations.

Hydraulic lots were granted in three areas: along Mill Street (1846), where the huge flourmills of Royal Mills were immediately built; near the Saint-Gabriel Lock (1851), soon to be the site of the Redpath sugar refinery and the Ogilvie family's flourmill; and on Côte-Saint-Paul (1853), kingdom of John Frothingham (manufacturer of nails, axes and shovels). The lots were rented to wealthy industrialists and speculators by the canal authorities, which enabled them to partially pay off the loans contracted to finance the widening. The hydraulic energy of the canal, which turned the factories' mills and turbines, could be regulated by a series of weirs.

As in other countries, the industrial revolution that took place in Montréal during the 19th century was characterized by extremely poor working conditions. The many Irish labourers who worked on the widening of the Lachine Canal are a case in point. Underpaid, crammed together in ill-heated shacks, they decided in 1843 to go on strike.

The work stoppage lasted several months and resulted in six deaths, but conditions did not improve.

### 1.3.5 The Victoria Bridge

As we have seen, the disappearance of the colonial commercial system coupled with British preferences had obliged the province of United Canada and its short-lived capital to look to the U.S. market in its efforts to develop its economy. A rapid improvement in political relations, the abolition of protectionist tariffs on raw materials, and a certain commercial rapprochement, combined with the swift development of the continent's hinterland, would stimulate the economies of both countries. Since production and export go hand in hand, it was vital that an efficient method be found of transporting goods and people along the north-south axis. The canals, designed as supply routes but also for defence, did not cross national boundaries, even though in some cases they ran very close by. The answer lay in a new British invention: the railway.

Even though it was not located at the harbourfront, Canada's first railway, which when it opened on July 21, 1836 created a new link between Laprairie and Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, was closely connected to it. The Champlain and St. Lawrence Railroad, another innovative achievement of the Molson family, became part of a transport network linking Montréal and New York more efficiently. It involved a number of transfers, however. Goods and passengers left Montréal's harbour on a steamship. Once on the

**Figure 1.11**  
The Victoria Bridge under construction.



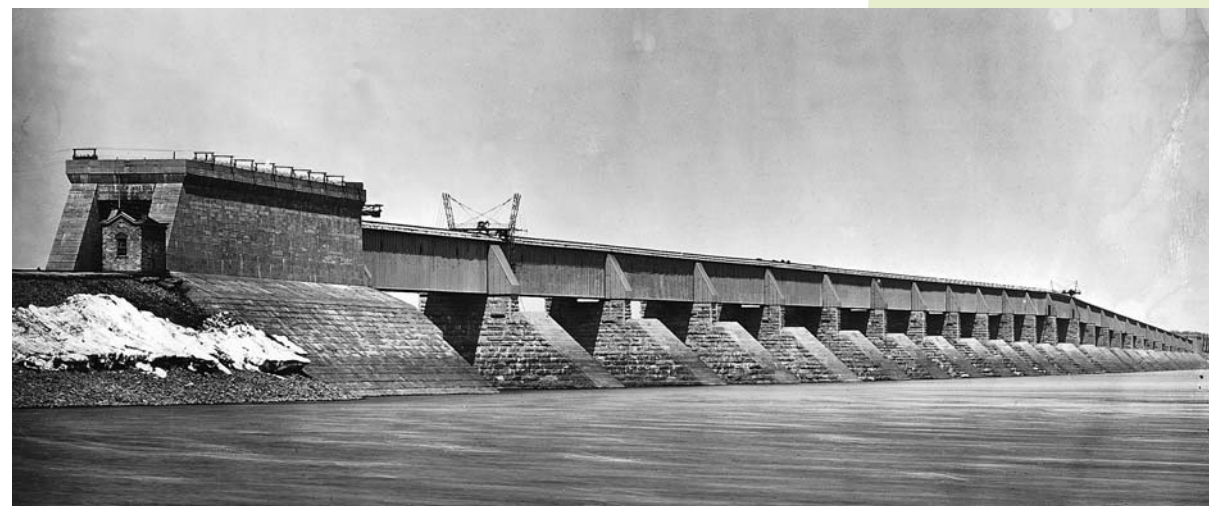
Source: McCord Museum. M15934.19.

South Shore, they took the train, finally re-embarking on a ship that made its way to the United States via the Richelieu River and Lake Champlain. The Laprairie terminus was closed in 1852 and replaced by the one on Moffat Island (now part of Île Notre-Dame), opposite Saint-Lambert. That same year, the St. Lawrence and Atlantic Railroad opened a line between Longueuil and Sherbrooke.

This embryonic network was nonetheless full of obstacles, and people soon began dreaming of a seamless link between Montréal and the United States, which would provide direct access to a port that was ice-free all year round. But such an undertaking would require major capital investment. It was at this point that a group of Montréal businessmen and politicians led by James Ferrier, William Molson and Sir George Simpson joined forces to found the Grand Trunk Railway System. George-Étienne Cartier drafted the charter of the company, which officially came into being in 1851.

Since the Montréal group did not have access to sufficient capital to finance all the Grand Trunk's plans, Sir Alexander Galt travelled to London to raise funds among investors, including the Baring Brothers bank. The company's first large project was to extend the St. Lawrence and Atlantic

**Figure 1.12**  
Composed of a metal tube supported by limestone piers, the Victoria Bridge would be described as the "eighth wonder of the world," 1873.



Source: McCord Museum. James Duncan Fonds. M15949.18.

line, which it had acquired, as far as Portland, Maine (1853), thus finally gaining access to an ice-free port. But an important link in the chain was missing: it was still necessary to cross the St. Lawrence by ferry to reach the train on the South Shore. Before long, however, the river would be spanned by the longest railway bridge in the world. And it would be named for England's Queen.

The Victoria Bridge was designed by the famous English engineer Robert Stephenson, son of the inventor of the steam engine. He opted for a plan featuring a metal tube laid on supports made of rusticated limestone. Construction got under way in 1854. More than three thousand workers, mostly Irish, worked tirelessly and sometimes at the risk of their lives to complete what Montrealers of the time described as the "eighth wonder of the world." In 1860, almost a year after its completion, the bridge was officially opened in a lavish ceremony by the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VII). The tube employed for the Victoria Bridge, copied from a British model generally used for smaller bridges, was less suited to a structure of this size. The smoke produced by the locomotive could not escape from its metal prison, and the poor prince was almost asphyxiated during the maiden voyage. The bridge was modified in 1898 and given the form we recognize today.

The Victoria Bridge helped make Montréal a major North American rail centre. It also served to significantly reduce the constraints of winter, since the transport of goods and passengers towards the United States and Europe was no longer ruled by the condition of the ice or water levels. Even more importantly, the close railway-shipping connection that characterized the harbour after 1860 represented a major commercial advantage — one that would guarantee Montréal's position as the Canadian metropolis for over a century.

### 1.3.6 Point St. Charles

The insertion of the Victoria Bridge into the Point St. Charles landscape radically altered this hitherto rural and agricultural sector of Montréal. Under the French regime, aside from the large estates belonging to Montréal's main religious communities — of which only the Saint-Gabriel farm, owned by the Sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, remained — the area included Goose Village, a temporary "hamlet" where hunters had once congregated in the fall to await the arrival of the wild geese. The marshland surrounding the cabins had been drained and filled with material excavated during the digging of the Lachine Canal. The thousands of Irish labourers working on the bridge had to be lodged near the site, since at that time Montréal did not possess a public transport system. The filled site of Goose Village, located immediately northeast of the bridge (east of Bridge Street), seemed suitable. A few years later this area had developed into the poor working-class neighbourhood of Victoriatown. A real ghetto, completely cut off from the rest of the city by a maze of rail tracks, Victoriatown consisted in those days of only four streets.

In 1856, to the southwest of the approaches to Victoria Bridge, the Grand Trunk began erecting a vast complex of sheds and maintenance workshops in the centre of a huge marshalling yard. Opposite the shops, the company built a terrace of workers' houses — apparently designed by the engineer Stephenson — named Sebastopol Row (1857). Ancestor of the vernacular Montréal dwelling, and a rare example in the city of housing built by and for a private company, the row on Sebastopol Street lost four of its seven quadruplex units during the second half of the 20th century.

The radical transformation of Point St. Charles from the mid-19th century on was not limited to the new dense and constricted occupation of the area, focused on industry, transport and workers' housing, but also included significant modifications to the site's topography. Around 1860, for instance, the Sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame rented some of their land out for use as a dump. This dump soon overflowed into the waters of the St. Lawrence, gradually altering the shoreline. A dyke was also built in 1888 between Victoria Bridge and Verdun, designed to protect the inhabitants and factories in the neighbourhood (known by this time as Point St. Charles) from flooding. The area beyond the dyke was gradually filled in with large quantities of waste, which by the 20th century had created a substantial protrusion into the river, representing about one-third of the neighbourhood's total surface area. Finally, the spillway of the Montréal aqueduct was constructed in 1856, in the most westerly part of the sector, on one of the branches of the Saint-Pierre River.



Source: McCord Museum. Alexander Henderson Fonds. MP-0000.10.87.

**Figure 1.13**  
In 1865, on the banks of the St. Lawrence, the Saint-Gabriel farm overlooked a landscape that was still rural and agricultural.



Source: McCord Museum. Alfred Walter Roper Fonds. MP-1977.76.62.

**Figure 1.14**  
In 1856, the Grand Trunk began constructing a vast complex of sheds and maintenance workshops in the centre of a huge marshalling yard, 1898.

## 1.4 The harbourfront, at the heart of Canada's metropolis: 1861-1967

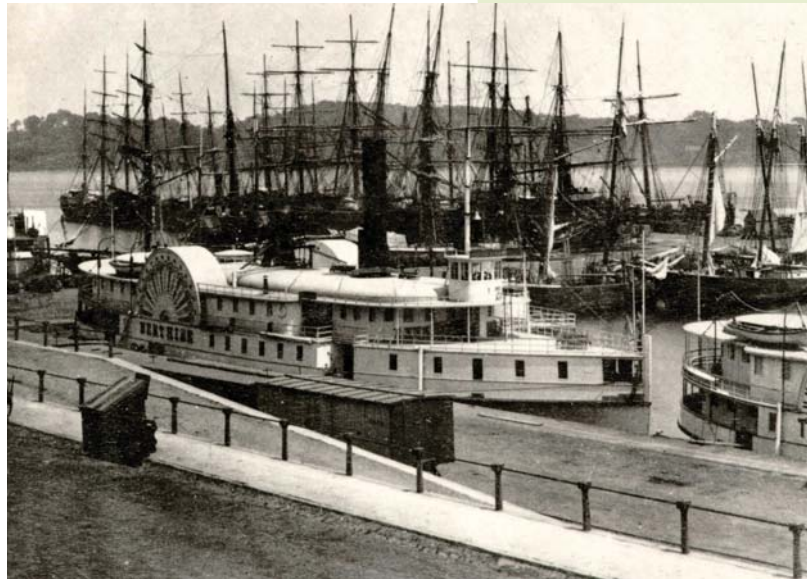
### 1.4.1 The increase in shipping traffic

From his office high up in the tower of Ravenscrag (1861), his new residence on Pine Avenue, Sir Hugh Allan could survey the comings and goings of his ships in the harbour. Allan had become the richest man in Canada thanks to his fleet of transatlantic liners: the Allan Royal Mail Line (whose official name was the Montreal Ocean Steamship Company) had held a monopoly in the transport of mail since 1855 and enjoyed a virtual monopoly in passenger transport between Great Britain and Canada. The lone competitor struggling to survive in the shadow of the giant was the small Beaver Line, prestigious ancestor of Canadian Pacific Ocean Services. The nerve centre of the Allan Royal Mail Line was located at the time in the relatively modest building that today houses the headquarters of the Old Port of Montréal Corporation (333 De la Commune Street West). In front of this Renaissance Revival edifice (John William Hopkins, architect, 1858) stands a statue of John Young (Louis-Philippe Hébert, sculptor, 1908), the other figure who dominated harbourfront activities during the 1860s and 1870s.

Like Hugh Allan — and many other influential businessmen in Victorian Montréal — John Young was born in Scotland. He served as president of the Montreal Harbour Commission on a number of occasions during the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s. Open to free trade with the United States, Young was active in the import-export business and in real-estate

speculation, which led to a number of controversial conflict-of-interest situations during his presidency. His reign was nonetheless marked by a considerable increase in port traffic. In 1860, for instance, 259 ocean liners docked in Montréal's port, while by the following year the number had risen to 574. During this period, the port was open for an average of 238 days per year, from the end of April to mid-December. This increase can be accounted for in part by the opening of the Victoria Bridge and the gradual dredging of the St. Lawrence upriver from Quebec City, which resulted in a deeper channel able to accommodate vessels of larger tonnage (by 1878 the channel was 7 metres deep, as compared to 5 metres in 1854). Until 1888 this task was undertaken by the Montreal Harbour Commission, even though the dredging work sometimes took place over two hundred kilometres downstream from the port. Dredging later became the responsibility of Canada's Department of Public Works (the channel presently measures 11.3 metres deep). One of the effects of Confederation in 1867 was to concentrate development of the transport industry in the new country's central sector — which included the Montréal harbour — to the detriment of the Maritime provinces and even the port of Quebec City.

**Figure 1.15**  
As a result of the opening of the Victoria Bridge and the dredging of the St. Lawrence, 574 ocean liners docked in Montréal's harbour in 1861. Photo, 1867.



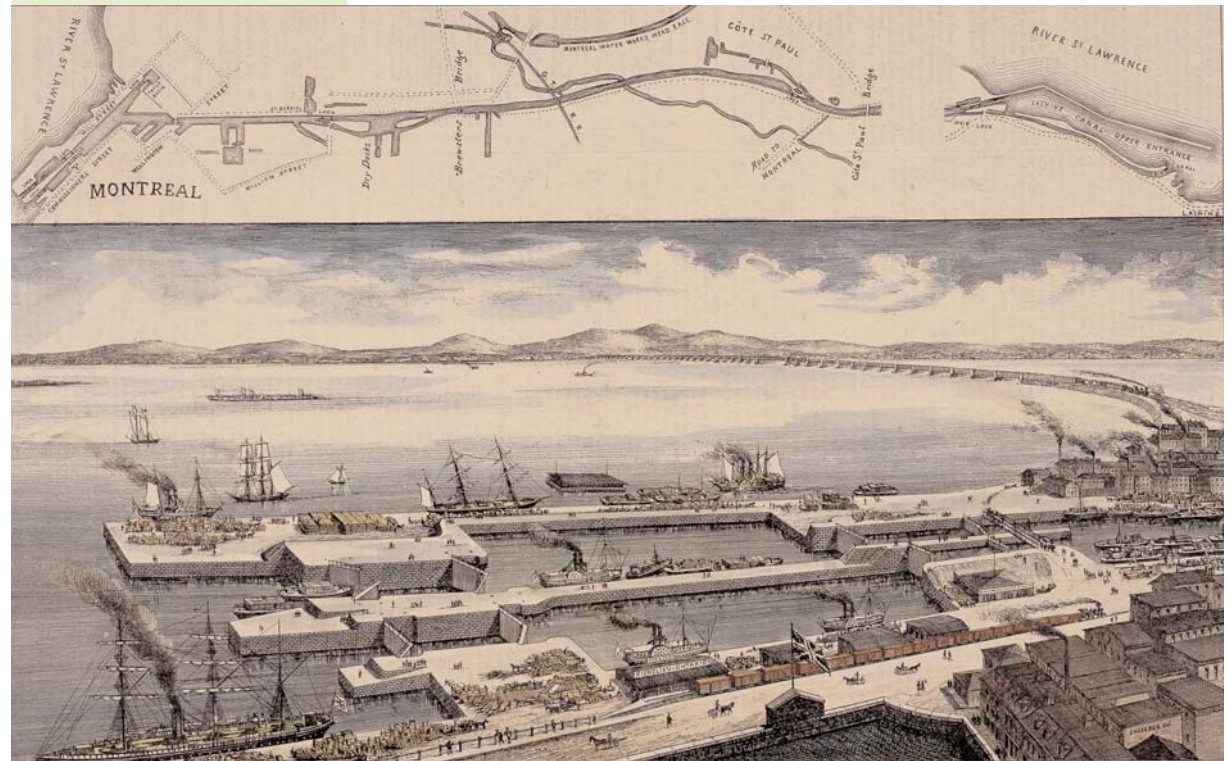
Source: Port of Montreal archives, National Archives of Canada Collection.

The alterations actually made to the harbour during John Young's reign were remarkably modest. Basically, they consisted of the construction of the Windmill Point pier and basin (1863), and the running of railway lines onto harbour property (1871). However, Young conceived a number of ambitious plans that were not realized. A visionary, with ideas perhaps beyond his time, he dreamt of a canal that would link the St. Lawrence River to Lake Champlain at the level of Kahnawake, a railway tunnel that would run under Mount Royal (eventually built several decades later), and a bridge that would traverse the St. Lawrence at the eastern tip of Île Sainte-Hélène (Royal Albert Bridge, 1874-1876). In the year of Young's death, an impressive building was completed at 357 De la Commune Street West that would be the Harbour Commission's headquarters until 1936, subsequently serving as home to the National Harbours Board until 1969 (Hopkins, Wily and Hutchison, architects, 1874-1878).

### 1.4.2 The second widening of the Lachine Canal

Between 1874 and 1883, as part of its plan to standardize the dimensions of Canada's canals, the federal government undertook a second widening of the Lachine Canal. When the work was complete, the canal measured 46 metres wide and 4.3 metres deep, and was able to accommodate ships of up to 2,500 tons. A large pool named the Peel Basin was created at the main bend in the canal, between locks 2 and 3 (Saint-Gabriel). This allowed ocean liners to make deliveries to the industries located on the banks of the basin, before turning around and heading back towards the Montréal harbour. In the years that followed, a new type of vessel specially adapted to canals made its appearance — the "canaller." This boat was the forerunner of the "laker," and its bridge was located near the front, rather than at the rear, which made manoeuvring into locks easier.

**Figure 1.16**  
As part of the plan to standardize the dimensions of Canada's canals, the Lachine Canal was widened again between 1874 and 1883. Engraving, 1877.



Source: McCord Museum. Eugene Haberer Fonds. M20947.

### 1.4.3 The industrialization of the old faubourgs

During the second half of the 19th century, the old *faubourgs* flanking the city to east and west underwent a complete metamorphosis that transformed them into Montréal's principal industrial and working-class districts. To the east, in the old Faubourg Québec, where the Pied-du-Courant Prison had been built in 1836, the Molson Brewery complex expanded rapidly, the buildings of the Dominion Oil Cloth company appeared, the warehouses of the City of Montréal's Roads Department (east division) were built, and a massive silhouette was added to the skyline: the Canadian Rubber factory (1854), which initially produced rubber boots and raincoats before turning, with the rise of the bicycle and the automobile, to the manufacture of tires (Uniroyal Tires). Initially, Canadian Rubber owned its own wharfs, but these gradually became part of the Montréal harbour facilities.

The most significant change to this sector, however, occurred in 1882, when the new Canadian Pacific Railway Company was obliged to level out the whole area between Berri Street and the property once owned

by Judge Panet, in order to lay down the tracks of its first Canadian terminus. The company named the terminus Dalhousie Station, to commemorate the public square once of that name situated nearby. The City of Montréal constructed a tunnel between the harbour and Saint-Antoine Street East, lined up on Beaudry Street, so that goods could be transported from the wharves towards the city without having to cross the railway tracks. Canadian Pacific's main goal at the time was to build a transcontinental railway that would stretch from one side of the country to the other. Dalhousie Station, located right near the harbourfront,

would serve as a junction between the port, where immigrants were arriving in increasing numbers from all over Europe, and the Canadian West, where many of them hoped to settle. It was from this station, moreover, that the first train to Vancouver (Port Moody) set off on June 28, 1886. Dalhousie Station (known later as the Dalhousie depot), which closed following the opening of Viger Station in 1898, was until recently home to the National Circus School.

At the opposite end of Old Montréal, the neighbourhood of Griffintown and the old Faubourg des Récollets were also undergoing major changes. The inhabitants — mostly of Irish origin — were quickly moving out, making way for a wide variety of industries. The New City Gas Company, whose buildings still exist, set up shop there in 1859, providing Montrealers with a source of gas (for heating and lighting) that was both regular and safe. This tradition was continued by the electric companies that opened up in the neighbourhood after 1900 (Royal Electric, 1902; Montreal Heat and Power, 1928). Today, the area is home to Hydro-Québec buildings and the infrastructure that support the heating systems of the city's downtown skyscrapers. Large metalworks — the Ives and Allen company (1864-1872) and the Darling Foundry (1909) — also went into operation in the sector. In 1871, the Victoria Bridge was linked to the Montréal harbour by Brennan Street. The residents of the old *faubourgs* were forced to move farther out — those of Faubourg Québec towards Sainte-Catherine East, Hochelaga and De Maisonneuve streets, and those of Griffintown and Faubourg des Récollets towards the communities of St. Anne, St. Gabriel, St. Cunegonde and Saint-Henri-des-Tanneries.



**Figure 1.17** By the end of the 19th century, the landscape of Griffintown and the Faubourg des Récollets was showing the impact of the industrial revolution. Photo, 1890.

Source: Port of Montreal archives, National Archives of Canada Collection.



**Figure 1.18** Health conditions were deplorable for working-class families living in Montréal's *faubourgs*. Photo, 1903.

Source: McCord Museum. William Notman Fonds. II-146359.

#### 1.4.4 Health conditions in Montréal's *faubourgs*

Throughout the 19th century, public health conditions in Montréal were among the worst of any industrialized nation. The situation for working-class families was deplorable. Garbage removal was inefficient, drinking water was hard to obtain, and in 1895 most of the dwellings located south of Saint-Antoine Street were still not equipped with a bathroom. That same year, exasperated by the situation, Herbert Ames published his famous study entitled *The City Below the Hill*, which would trigger certain improvements. Working-class neighbourhoods were also struck by major epidemics. In 1832, an outbreak of cholera decimated the Irish community, so closely associated with the harbourfront and its development. And in 1847-1848, over two thousand people died of typhus in Montréal alone. Sheds were hastily thrown up in Goose Village (later Victoriatown), and the sick were sent there to die. At the entrance to the Victoria Bridge stands a monument to the six thousand Irish people across Quebec who died of typhus, erected by the bridge site workers. Finally, the smallpox epidemic of 1885 — a direct result of poor hygiene — struck the French-Canadian and the Irish communities, largely ignorant of the existence of an effective vaccine.

#### 1.4.5 Early tourist and recreational activities in the harbourfront area

The harbourfront was not only a focus of production, transport and sometimes poverty, but also a marvellous playground for Montrealers in general. With the arrival of the outdoors-loving Scots, makeshift skating rinks began appearing on the river opposite the city, to the delight of winter sports enthusiasts. As well as Mohawks from Kahnawake, members of the French-Canadian and Irish populations also practiced various sports along the harbourfront, including snowshoeing, curling, lacrosse and hurling. The two latter would eventually be combined, making Montréal the birthplace of ice hockey as we know it today (1875).

In 1870, the British army vacated its barracks on île Sainte-Hélène. The island (with the exception of the fort) was rented out by the federal government to the City of Montréal, and became a public park in 1874. The Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste held a huge picnic there on June 24, to commemorate the final days of New France. Ironically, the manor house once belonging to the Baroness of Longueuil was demolished around this time. A seasonal ferry service between the island and the port came into operation in 1875, enabling all Montrealers, regardless of social



**Figure 1.19** With its riverside tables, Sohmer Park resembled one of the outdoor cafés that graced the banks of the Marne, 1890.

Source: McCord Museum. Cumming & Brewis Fonds. MP-0000.827.4.



Source: Port of Montreal archives, National Archives of Canada Collection.

**Figure 1.20**  
In the old days, the rapids were "run" in a steamboat! 1865.

this thrilling experience in about 1865, and in those days the descent took place in a steamboat! For those who preferred a calmer voyage, there were the romantic cruises run by Canada Steamship Lines and the Richelieu and Ontario Navigation

Company, which made regular trips from Montréal to Mille-Îles, Murray Bay (La Malbaie) and Tadoussac. River cruises, first introduced into North America by ship owners on the Mississippi, became extremely popular on the St. Lawrence, and the famous white steamships known as the *bateaux blancs* plied its waters until 1966.

class, to enjoy this natural setting. The city of Montréal purchased Île Sainte-Hélène in 1908, with the Canadian government retaining usufruct of the military buildings.

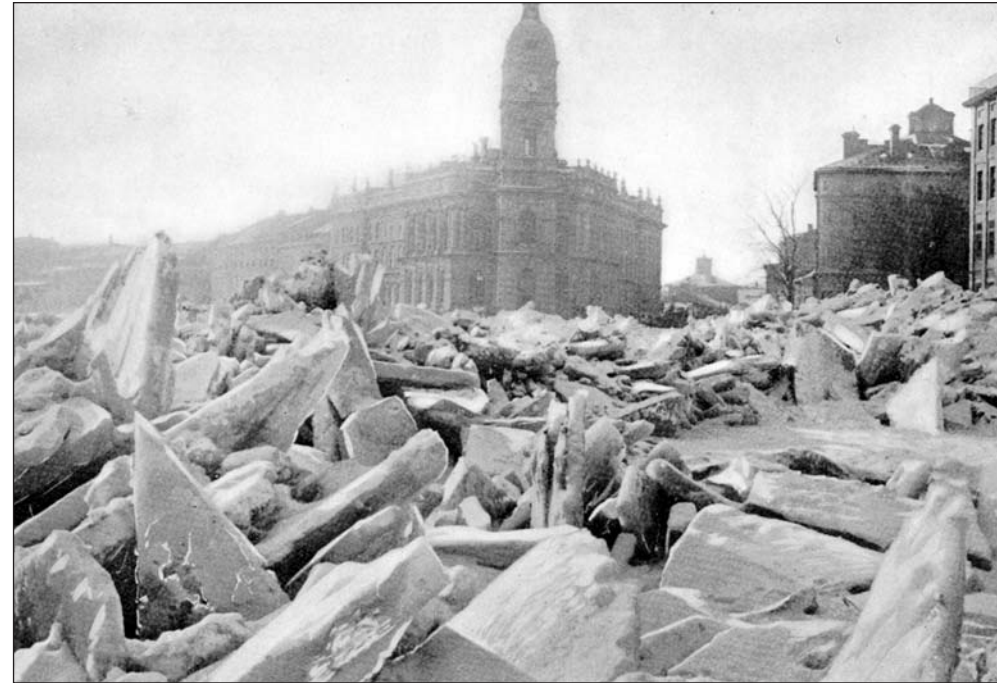
Forerunner of Montréal's amusement parks (Belmont Park, the Garden of Wonders and La Ronde), Sohmer Park (1889) was a popular attraction among the French-Canadian working classes. The park — situated on the banks of the river, on the land once owned by Judge Panet — offered concerts, film shows (as of 1896) and local strongmen contests. One could also sample refreshments, seated at a riverside table just like those of the outdoor cafés gracing the banks of the Marne. Flanked to the east by the Molson Brewery and to the west by the Canadian Pacific facilities, Sohmer Park, which provided local inhabitants with their only real "window" onto the river, closed after a fire in 1919. The other end of the harbourfront soon became the site of a number of sailing clubs, such as the Grand Trunk Boating Club of Point St. Charles, which soon moved out to the West Island.

Montréal's more intrepid citizens, preferring action to contemplation, loved to run the Lachine Rapids — as they still do today. Boat companies first began offering

#### 1.4.6 The perils of the harbour

Since the time of the first explorers, shallow waters and powerful currents had disrupted more than one voyage to Montréal. The harbour was notorious for its Sainte-Marie current, which considerably slowed an approaching vessel's progress, but also well known was the Sault-Normand current (at the level of what is now Cité du Havre), which could push a large ship off course. Boats also often ran aground on the islands and numerous sandbanks opposite the city. Nothing, however, was more deadly than an ice jam, which could materialize in a matter of minutes. The famous floods that struck the lower town in the springs of 1886 and 1887 (partly the result of ice jams) had a major impact, not only on the harbour but on the whole of Montréal's downtown area, for they contributed towards the shift of commercial activities from Notre-Dame Street to Sainte-Catherine Street that occurred in the final decade of the 19th century (e.g. Birks jewellery store, Morgan's department store).

To reduce the risk of flooding, De la Commune Street was raised by 22 inches (around 56 centimetres), and two pumping stations were built — one at each end of



Source: Port of Montreal archives.

**Figure 1.21**  
Damage caused by river ice, before construction of the protecting wall opposite Place Royale, 1870.



Source: McCord Museum. George Charles Arless Fonds. MP-0000.236.2.

**Fig. 1.22**  
The flood of spring 1886: water spread through the lower town, reaching as far as Bonaventure Station, at the intersection of Peel and Saint-Antoine streets.

the harbourfront as defined at the time (the Craig Station, at the foot of today's Jacques Cartier Bridge, and the Riverside Station, near Mill Street, 1887). These major architectural structures still stand today, although they no longer serve their original function. But the main element of the solution was the construction of the Guard Pier (Mackay Pier, 1891-1896), which Harbour Commissioners had been demanding since 1833. This made it possible to keep out the ice that had hitherto regularly blocked the harbour. The dyke, 1.6 kilometres long, was designed by the Harbour Commission's chief engineer, John Kennedy.

Since time immemorial, winter has been a reality for the inhabitants of Montréal, who have sometimes turned it to their advantage. For example, during the winter season Aboriginal people found it easier to move around on the region's frozen rivers and lakes, which were often impossible to navigate during the summer. The French followed suit, and for many years contact with Laprairie, Saint-Lambert and Longueuil was easier during the cold season. Sleighs were used to travel on ice roads marked out on the frozen surface with fir trees. In the winter of 1880, the Quebec, Ottawa, Montreal & Occidental Railroad Company even started a seasonal train service between the harbour and the South Shore. It did not last very long! In 1883, a locomotive crashed through the ice, putting an end to this daring enterprise.

#### 1.4.7 The port's busiest years

In 1896, the Allan Line got rid of its last sailing ship (the Glenmorag). This spelled the end of wood and cast-iron hulls, of masts and sails. The Allan Line was actually one of the first North American shipping companies to acquire a steel-hulled ocean liner powered exclusively by steam (the Buenos Ayrean, 1880). Faster ocean liners and freighters allowed service to more ports. Montréal's harbourfront, the city's main international gateway, was now open to the world. This enabled Montréal and the whole of Canada to achieve greater independence: thanks to sea transport, Great Britain and, to a lesser degree, France and the United States no longer entirely dominated the country's culture, economy and immigration. The pogroms of Germany, Poland (Prussia) and Russia forced thousands of Jews to flee Europe, squeezed onto ships headed for Canada. Poverty in Italy prompted whole families to come to Montréal. And Greeks, Hungarians and

Ukrainians began disembarking here in large numbers, expanding the population of Canada's metropolis and transforming it into a truly cosmopolitan city.

It was also in 1896 that a new government, headed by Sir Wilfrid Laurier, was elected in Ottawa. His minister of public works, Montrealer Israël Tarte, was largely responsible for the new infrastructure that gave the Montréal harbour its present form (1896-1902). With the help of Kennedy, the Harbour Commission engineer, Tarte made carefully thought-out plans for the expansion of Montréal's port, which he saw as a key tool in the development of the city and of the entire country. The three imposing piers to be seen in the Old Port today date from this period (Alexandra, 1899; King Edward, 1901; Jacques Cartier, 1904). The Jacques Cartier Pier was actually modified many times, as a rudimentary version had existed since 1839. To these must be added the Bickerdike Pier (1896), situated near Mill Street, for which the Harbour Commission had already drawn up plans. These structures were built using the very latest techniques, which combined caissons made of both wood and concrete. After 1945, the perimeters of the piers were reinforced by the addition of metal cylinders filled with concrete.

The most significant alteration to the harbour skyline, however, would be the construction of a series of grain elevators and tall warehouses. The port's first warehouses (about 1840) were temporary, they were erected in the spring and then taken down again and stored in the fall, in order to avoid damage from cold and ice. Long-term storage was confined to the magnificent greystone buildings on De la Commune Street. But the growing popularity of the port of Montréal justified the construction of permanent warehouses. In 1885, Canadian Pacific built the first wooden silos to store wheat coming from the Canadian West. These were soon replaced by steel elevators

**Figure 1.23**  
General view of Commissioners Street and Bonsecours Market in 1895.



Source: Port of Montreal archives, National Archives of Canada Collection.



**Figure 1.24**  
Grain Elevator No. 5, built for the Grand Trunk Railway in 1906, completely altered the harbour skyline, 1953.

Source: Archives gaies du Québec. Alan B. Stone Fonds.

supported on concrete pillars. Grain Elevator No. 1 — built in 1904 (demolished in 1982), opposite Place Royale — was of this type. So was the central section of Grain Elevator No. 5, constructed for the Grand Trunk Railway in 1906, which still stands near the entrance to the Lachine Canal (John S. Metcalf, engineer). Another revolution would take place with the construction of the world's first grain elevator made entirely of concrete (Elevator No. 2, 1912). It was demolished in 1978, but remains of it can still be seen along the Old Port promenade, opposite the Bonsecours Market. This ensemble of structures was hailed enthusiastically by the originators of the modernist movement, including Walter Gropius, founder of Germany's Bauhaus, who travelled to Montréal to admire these innovative buildings, and Le Corbusier, who reproduced a drawing of Grain Elevator No. 2 in his book *Vers une architecture*.

By the end of the First World War, thanks to these structures, Montréal had become the largest grain port in North America. In 1926 alone, 136 million bushels of grain were stored in its harbourfront elevators (27% of it from the United States). Among the many



**Figure 1.25**  
By the end of the First World War, Montréal had become the largest grain port in North America, 1963.

Source: Ville de Montréal. Gestion de documents et archives. VM94-A-121-9.





Source: Port of Montreal archives.

other commodities to pass through the port were wood, coal, paper pulp, meat, fruit and vegetables. To ensure the adequate storage of the latter three commodities, a huge refrigerated warehouse was built at the eastern end of Berri Street (John S. Metcalf, engineer, 1922). At the time, its calcium chloride-based cooling system was at the very cutting edge of technology. In 1926, as well, 65,263 passengers arrived in the port on transatlantic liners. Serving as the main junction between ocean travel and traffic within the interior of North America, Montréal took pride in being closer to Europe than any port of the United States. It was, in fact, only 2,760 nautical miles from Liverpool, as compared to 2,783 for Portland, and 3,043 for New York.

As well as the warehouses and grain elevators, a police station was erected on the harbourfront (Théodore Daoust, architect, 1923), which included both a tower for drying the hoses used to supply water to vessels docked in the harbour, and tin and iron workshops. The Clock Tower, completed in 1922, was built as a symbol of welcome to travellers arriving in the harbour and as a tribute to sailors who died during the First World War. It also once served as a support for a

conveyor system that has been demolished. The Clock Tower, whose foundation stone was laid by the Prince of Wales in 1919, was entirely restored in 2002.

Among changes that occurred around the harbourfront was the inauguration by the Montreal and Southern Counties Railway, in 1909, of Montréal's first commuter train service, which linked the city via the Victoria Bridge to Saint-Lambert, Greenfield Park and even Granby. The company built a terminus at the intersection of McGill and Youville Streets (1923), which remained in operation until 1955. Another major alteration was the prolongation of St. Lawrence Boulevard south of Notre-Dame Street (1911-1912) and the resulting demolition of the old convent belonging to the Sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, which included several buildings dating back to the 18th century. A plan to extend Saint-Denis/Bonsecours Street all the way to the river, which would have required the demolition of the chapel of Notre-Dame-de-Bonsecours (also known as the Sailors' Church), was fortunately shelved.

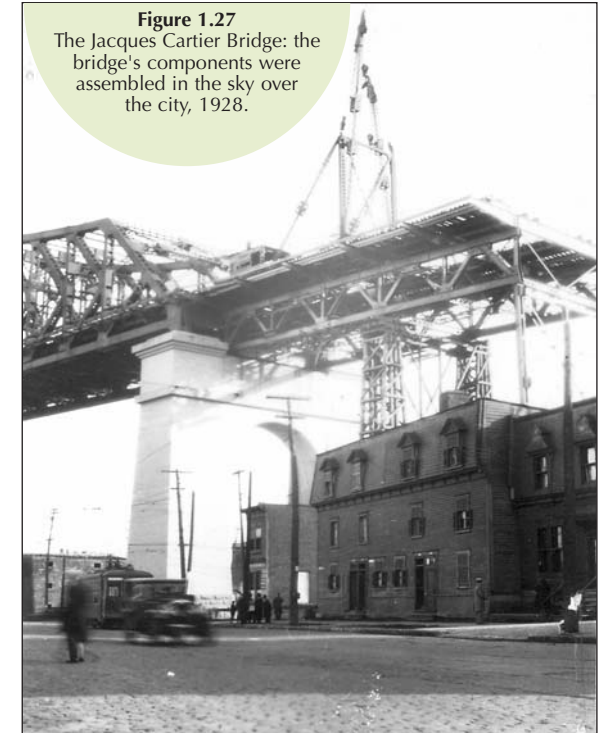
### 1.4.8 The Jacques Cartier Bridge

**Figure 1.26**  
A huge refrigerated warehouse for storing perishable goods was built at the eastern end of Berri Street, 1922.

In 1929, the federal government acknowledged the historic importance of the Lachine Canal. This major infrastructure had galvanized a whole population during the 1820s. A century later, another large-scale project— construction of the Jacques Cartier Bridge— would have the same effect on another generation. The dream of building a bridge between Montréal and Longueuil was not new: John Young had had the idea in 1874, and the Shearer plan had been presented in 1914, but never developed.

However, with the sharp increase in car drivers during the 1920s, the construction of an automobile bridge had become a priority. A number of sites were considered, but the one that allowed the eastern point of Île Sainte-Hélène to be used as a central support won the day. It was also essential that the bridge's superstructure be high enough to allow even the largest ships to pass underneath on their way to the harbour.

The expropriations required before the approaches to the bridge at the Montréal end could be built proved to be a real challenge. Although demolition of the warehouses belonging to the city's Roads Department



**Figure 1.27**  
The Jacques Cartier Bridge: the bridge's components were assembled in the sky over the city, 1928.

Source: Ville de Montréal. Gestion de documents et archives. VM6-D780-23-15-1.

**Fig. 1.28**  
When it was opened on May 24, 1930, the Jacques Cartier Bridge became the harbourfront's most imposing monument, 1941.



Source: Ville de Montréal. Gestion de documents et archives. VM6-D780-23-15-2.

presented no problem, that of the soap factories run by the influential Barsalou family proved impossible. This resulted in a modification of the bridge's route, and it soon became known as the "crooked bridge." Work got under way in 1925, according to plans by J. B. Strauss — also the author of San Francisco's famous Golden Gate Bridge. The Jacques Cartier Bridge was finally opened on May 24, 1930, just in time to celebrate the Harbour Commission's centenary. It was initially called the Harbour Bridge, before being renamed in 1934 in honour of the 400th anniversary of the Saint-Malo-born explorer's discovery of Canada. To mark the festivities, the French government presented a bust of Cartier, which was installed near the Île Sainte-Hélène exit (France was not responsible for the four "Eiffel towers" that crown the bridge, an exuberant addition by the designers). The Jacques Cartier Bridge thus became the harbourfront's — and Montréal's — most imposing monument. It represents the culmination of a century of efforts to make the Montréal harbour a transport centre unrivalled in the rest of Canada.

#### 1.4.9 The Depression and the Second World War

The stock market crash of 1929, which resulted in a ten-year economic and social depression, would have a considerable impact on Montréal's harbour — as on the rest of the western world. The port authorities were faced with a number of decisions regarding the distribution among America's starving populations of the huge reserves of food stored in the harbour's warehouses. And these same authorities had to address the fate of the thousands of people fleeing Hitler's Europe and seeking refuge in Canada and the United States. These decisions were of national importance. The Harbour Commission was therefore dissolved in 1936 and replaced by the National Harbours Board. This new body was able to manage all arrivals and departures of ocean traffic for the whole of Canada.

In an effort to create work for the thousands of Montrealers left unemployed by the Depression, the mayor, Camillien Houde, embarked on a number of municipal projects that had a lasting impact on the city (e.g. Botanical Gardens, several public baths and markets) and on the harbourfront. In 1931, Île Sainte-Hélène — now easily accessible via the Jacques Cartier

Bridge — became the focus of these large municipal projects. The landscape architect Frederick G. Todd, whose achievements included the master plan of the Town of Mount Royal, was commissioned to redesign the space and add a number of buildings. Among the additions made at this period were the Lévis tower (D. Beaupré, architect, 1936, actually an elegantly designed water tower), the sports pavilion (1937, now the Hélène de Champlain restaurant, built on the site of the former residence of the Baroness of Longueuil) and the bathing pavilion (completed in 1953). All these structures were built out of the local brecciated granite, its high iron-oxide content giving them their orange colour. During the Second World War, the old fort on Île Sainte-Hélène was used as an internment camp for Germans and Italians living in Quebec, and as a prison for deserters from the Canadian army (1939-1946).

Canadian National (CN), created in 1923 by the consolidation of several rail companies, had big plans for Montréal. In 1930, the company began work on the construction of a railway viaduct designed to link the old Grand Trunk marshalling yard in Point St. Charles

to a huge Art Deco complex in the downtown core, similar to New York's Rockefeller Center. The plan included a hotel and several high-rise office buildings. But the Depression intervened, and only the viaduct and the train station were actually built at this stage (1938-1943). The effect was to divide Griffintown and the old Faubourg des Récollets into two unequal parts, henceforth cut off from one another. To the southwest of the Grand Trunk workshops, rebuilt in 1929, CN built another marshalling yard on embankments that deprived the Saint-Gabriel farm of its direct access to the river. Once the Depression and the war were over, other ambitious projects were proposed. In 1948, for example, a plan for an expressway running along De la Commune Street was developed that would have necessitated the demolition of Bonsecours Market. Oddly enough, this elevated urban highway was perceived at the time as a tourist attraction.

#### 1.4.10 The St. Lawrence Seaway and the Champlain Bridge

Considerable pressure to provide the industrial Midwest with better access to the Atlantic Ocean resulted in the creation of the mammoth St. Lawrence Seaway (1954-1959), whose construction was financed jointly by the United States and Canada. It was inaugurated by President Eisenhower and Queen Elizabeth II on June 26, 1959. The harbour authorities, obliged to work extremely hard to retain their shipping partners, began in 1964 allowing the port to remain open all year round. This is made possible by the relentless work of the icebreakers that keep a channel permanently open on the St. Lawrence — inspired by the heroic effort of the Danish ship *Helga Dan*, which arrived in the Montréal harbour on January 4, 1964 after a week-long battle against the ice. Three years later, the port handled its first container, going on to open Canada's first container terminal in November 1968. In 2003, the Montréal harbour handled over 1,100,000 containers.

On the eve of the Quiet Revolution, the extraordinarily swift expansion of the suburbs warranted construction of a third link between the harbourfront and the

**Figure 1.29**  
The bathing pavilion on Île Sainte-Hélène was initially located on the banks of the river, 1953.



Source: Archives gaies du Québec. Alan B. Stone Fonds.

**Figure 1.30**  
Construction of the railway viaduct leading to Central Station had the effect of dividing the Faubourg des Récollets and Griffintown in two, 1941.



Source: Canadian Airways Limited.



**Fig. 1.31** One of the effects of the building of the Champlain Bridge was the development of Nuns' Island, 1960.

Source: Port of Montreal archives.

South Shore. One of the effects of the new Champlain Bridge, built between 1957 and 1962 (P. L. Pratley, engineer), was the development of Nuns' Island (formerly Île Saint-Paul), on which the bridge touches. In 1956, the Sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, who had occupied the island for two centuries, sold it to a Chicago development company (Metropolitan Structures), which negotiated a long-term lease with Quebec Home and Mortgage to build an ensemble of homes and commercial outlets designed by the famous architect Mies van der Rohe (1965-1969). The service station that is part of this project is the only one of its kind in the world. This was the start of Montréal's exciting love affair with modern architecture, in which the harbourfront would play such an active part. Progress was also made during this period in the realm of heritage preservation, as witness the restoration of the Saint-Gabriel farm in 1965-1966, and the opening of the Stewart Museum in the fort on Île Sainte-Hélène, which had been refurbished in 1962.

#### 1.4.11 Expo 67: the apotheosis

Jean Drapeau's terms as mayor (1954-1957 and 1960-1986) shook up the city, which had remained somewhat impervious to change since 1930. The greatest achievement of this period was without question the holding on the harbourfront of the 1967 World's Fair—Expo 67—under the general theme of "Man and His World." Between April 28 and October 27, 1967, this major international event attracted over 50 million

visitors. But even more significant than the record attendance figures was the impetus created by Expo, which introduced the whole world to a new way of living. More than simply an exhibition, it actually provided a premonitory glimpse of our own era.

The sites that had been under consideration for the event since 1960 were either too far from the downtown core or uninteresting. The mayor had hoped to locate Expo on the islands opposite Montréal, but the site was too small. So Guy Beaudet, then director of port of Montréal, came up with the idea of using the 25 million tons of rock excavated from the tunnels of the metro construction site, the Louis-Hippolyte-Lafontaine bridge-tunnel and the dredging of the river to create an outstanding site in the middle of the St. Lawrence, facing the city. Île Sainte-Hélène was thus enlarged by linking it to Île aux Fraises and Île Ronde, while Île Notre-Dame was created almost from scratch, using tiny Moffat Island as a base. The Mackay Pier was widened to become Cité du Havre. Judged to be insalubrious, the entire Victoriatown district was razed by the City of Montréal in 1964-1965.

**Figure 1.32** The Bonaventure Expressway became the main access road to Expo 67's Place d'Accueil and the downtown area, 1966.



Source: Ville de Montréal. Gestion de documents et archives. B-32-11.

This area was used for part of the Expo 67 parking lot (Victoria car park) and for a section of the Bonaventure Expressway. It also became the site of the Autostade, a 25,486-place outdoor stadium that from 1967 to 1975 was home to the Montréal Alouettes football team.

Some of the buildings erected on the site became veritable icons of 20th-century architecture: the French pavilion (Jean Faucher, architect, 1966), the American pavilion (Richard Buckminster Fuller, Chicago engineer, 1966)—this first geodesic dome, representing the biosphere, has since become the ultimate symbol of World's Fairs (Expo 86 in Vancouver, Epcot Center, etc.)—and finally Habitat 67, the revolutionary housing complex designed by Israeli architect Moshe Safdie while he was still a student at McGill University.

**Figure 1.34** A bird's-eye view of Expo 67.



Source: Gordon F. Callaghan, Callaghan-Bagshaw Inc., Montréal.



**Figure 1.33** Over 50 million visitors passed through the turnstiles of Expo 67, 1967.

Source: Bibliothèque nationale du Québec.

Alexander Calder's sculpture *Man*, the largest stabile ever created by this American artist, crowned the whole. To reach Expo, visitors could take the metro line running under the river (now the Jean Drapeau Station), travel on the Expo Express train from Cité du Havre, or arrive by car on the newly constructed Bonaventure Expressway (1966).

## 1.5 Restructuring the harbourfront: 1968 to the present

### 1.5.1 The end of an era

1968 was a pivotal year in the history of the harbourfront and of the world in general. The mood had changed. The years that followed were marked by social conflict, political unrest and war. For some time the Seaway had been effectively fulfilling its role, diverting economic activity towards the Midwest – to the detriment of New York and Montréal. Government authorities, aware of the problem, came up with all sorts of projects designed to redress the economic balance between the two regions. In Montréal, work began on the construction of the Ville-Marie Expressway, to the north of Old Montréal.

In 1970, the Lachine Canal was completely closed and some of its locks and basins filled in. If the port was to remain competitive, it had to be restructured. The decision was taken to fill in the basin situated between the Jacques Cartier and Victoria piers, and to replace it with a container terminal (1973). The defenders of Old Montréal, who had succeeded in having the area declared a historic district by the Quebec government (1964), were opposed to this project, which they saw as a threat to their plans to breathe new life into the old town.

### 1.5.2 Rethinking the harbourfront

In 1975, the Lincourt report, produced by the Société générale des systèmes urbains for the National Harbours Board, recommended that most of the port's activities be relocated to the east of Old Montréal. The terminal project was therefore abandoned after the basin had been filled, and a long process of public consultation began. A number of different harbourfront redevelopment projects were submitted between 1975 and 1983, some of them involving the construction of hotels and large apartment buildings similar to those found along the old Boston harbourfront. However, Montrealers opted instead for an open, public space that would be their "window on the river." In 1983-1984, two years after the creation of the Old Port of Montréal Corporation (1981), a verdant esplanade was laid out at the site of the demolished grain elevators and conveyors (Peter Rose, architect). The project continued in 1990-1991, with the partial clearing and refurbishing of the Jacques Cartier basin and pier (Cardinal and Hardy, architects), and later by the conversion of some of the warehouses on the King Edward Pier into the Science Centre.

Meanwhile, the Expo site – whose original function was prolonged until 1981 with the annual Man and His World – saw one quarter of its pavilions demolished in 1980 to make way for the Floralies internationales de Montréal. Most of the remaining pavilions, designed as temporary structures, were destroyed between 1984 and 1989 and replaced by green spaces. Under the new administration of Mayor Jean Doré, a public beach was opened on Île Notre-Dame. The former French pavilion was transformed into an exhibition centre (the Palais des civilisations), before eventually becoming the Montréal Casino in 1993. The former U.S. pavilion, whose clear acrylic covering was destroyed by fire in 1978, was transformed into a museum of water (the Biosphère). Habitat 67 rapidly became a luxury housing complex, joined in subsequent years by two other condominium apartment developments. The Musée d'art contemporain, which had made its home at Cité du Havre since 1968, was later relocated to a site near the Place des Arts. Radio-Canada continued to operate its huge Studio 1, and the Expo-théâtre became a cinema studio.

The Lachine Canal was taken over by Parks Canada in 1975. A bicycle path was constructed along its banks, and partial excavation of the first two locks was undertaken in 1984. After the Peel Basin was excavated in 2001 and the remaining locks restored, the canal was finally reopened for pleasure craft in May 2002. Other projects were realized at either end of the harbourfront, including the Faubourg Québec project in the east and, to the west, the Cité Multimédia (in the old Faubourg des Récollets) and the Cité du Cinéma, where major full-length movies are shot.

In 1983, administration of the port of Montréal became the responsibility of the Montreal Port Corporation, an organization better able to keep abreast of local issues (known since 1999 as the Montreal Port Authority, or the MPA). Since then, the port has been on an upswing, and is now the largest container port on Canada's east coast. The Old Port, directly in front of Old Montréal, has also been partially refurbished by the Old Port of Montréal Corporation. Nonetheless, the fate of several sectors of the old harbourfront, which extends from the Champlain Bridge in the west all the way to the Jacques Cartier Bridge in the east – and including its approaches – still requires careful consideration. The Société du Havre de Montréal was created in order to offer solutions aimed at reshaping the whole area – one that looks to its future, but also respects the best of its past.



**Fig. 1.35**  
With the demolition of Grain Elevators Nos. 1 and 2, Montrealers could once more enjoy their "window on the river," 1983.

Source: Pierre Malo image bank.

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