THE COTTAGES OF QUEBEC

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THE first settlers of French Canada were a simple people. The remote colony, with its severe winters and its unknown dangers, did not attract the wealthy or the noble, and it was a peasant folk who came out to colonise New France. But, though simple, they were not in reality uneducated, for they brought with them their traditional knowledge, their ways of life, their legends, their folksongs and their mediæval methods of building.

The Renaissance reigned in Europe in the seventeenth century, but, although these classic and learned forms might appeal to the cultured, the peasantry still clung to the ways of their forefathers in the building of their houses. (*1*)The earliest illustration of a house in Canada, the wellknown "Abitation de Quebecq" built by Champlain in 1608, shows a building with mullioned windows, diamond panes and other mediæval characteristics, and this was the house of a gentleman. The first houses of the peasantry must have been even more mediæval. But these have long ago disappeared and the earliest houses which we now have date from the eighteenth century. Yet even in these the methods of construction are still quite gothic. It was not until after 1870 or so that wire nails took the place of the mortice and tenon of the skilled joiner and that the tradition of craftsmanship died out in French Canada. Even today it survives in districts sufficiently remote from the city hardware store.

The cottages in the Province of Quebec are of a very different character from those in the English-speaking provinces or in New England. In the Maritimes and in Ontario practically all the old houses are of wood and one might search whole districts without ever finding an old stone building. In Quebec, although the modern houses may be of wood, the older ones are of stone, square set buildings with substantial walls and gables.

(*1*)—*We are not here considering the highly trained artists and craftsmen engaged in the service of the church.*

The first English settlers in America brought with them a tradition of southern English wood building, but the tradition of Normandy was one of stone building, and this was followed in New France. Stone walls are warmer in winter, cooler in summer, and in the stony soil of Quebec the material was not hard to obtain. Only on the Ottawa river and in the neighbourhood of Montreal do we find old log houses. Here they were built of the logs floated down the Ottawa river in the early logging operations. Over the greater part of the Province the houses are stone walled.

The houses vary in character considerably in different parts of the province so that it is not difficult to tell from what district a particular type has come. The principal types are that of the East, centering round Quebec, and that of the Montreal district. In the Ottawa valley is found a type with hipped roofs and deep eaves carried round the house, perhaps particularly associated with the houses of the Hudson Bay Company. In the southern districts we find a few houses of the New England type, importations from across the line. Georgeville, on Lake Memphremagog, for instance, is a New England village. But the two main "schools" are those of Quebec and Montreal.

They are not mutually exclusive. Houses of the "Montreal" type are found east of Quebec and Quebec homes occur in the west of the province; the classification is a very general one.

The earliest settlements were made about Quebec, on the banks of the St. Lawrence and on the Island of Orleans. It is here that we may expect to find the oldest cottages. But the earliest have long ago disappeared and those now existing are at best the third generation of building. They are oblong buildings with low whitewashed walls, high pitched roofs and a large stone chimney in the centre. (*Fig. 1.*) Sometimes the gables are carried up in stone, but more usually the stone wallhead is carried across the gable ends and the gable itself is filled in with framing and shingled. Ornamental chimneys of shingled framing are usually placed on the gables. Sometimes one of these may be a real chimney of stone, but often both are purely ornamental. A chimney seems to have been regarded as the proper termination for a gable, possibly it was to some degree a sign of social standing as indicating a house of many rooms and fireplaces. In any case these little decorative chimneys were often set on where no real chimney was necessary.

The houses are of one storey with a large attic in the roof. The door is usually to one side of the centre with two or three

large windows to one side and to the other one large window and a little one for the store room. (*Fig. 2.*) This arrangement corresponds with a well established plan. (*Fig. 3*).

The front door enters directly into a room with a large fireplace, to-day usually filled up and replaced by a stove. In one corner a steep ladder-stair leads to the attic; beside the fireplace is the oven. This is the "summer room." It is required for little more than cooking meals, since in summer life is largely spent in the open. It is a rather bare working room.

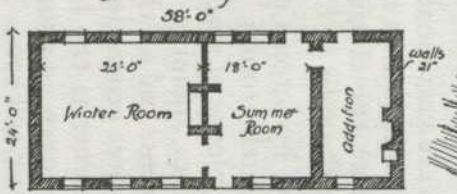
From it a door opens into a large room occupying the rest of the ground floor. This is the "winter room" used in summer only as a state room in which to receive a distinguished visitor, but in which the family live during the cold months. This room is elaborately furnished. The floors are painted yellow and covered with gaily coloured "catalogne" carpets and hooked rugs. The walls are hung with religious pictures and family photographs; against them are great chests of drawers in which are laid away the garments of ceremony. The windows have lace curtains. The raftered ceiling is often painted blue, and at one end, in the place of the old open fireplace, stands a brightly polished stove. All through the summer this room is kept carefully darkened, the windows filled with bright blue paper, which gives a most brilliant effect from the outside as well as preserving the carpets from fading. The carpets are all home made and the furniture is probably of local manufacture.

Sometimes a couple of tiny bedrooms are partitioned off in this room, each just large enough to accommodate an immense wooden bed and a chest of drawers. Here the elders of the family sleep whilst the others must climb the stair to the attic.

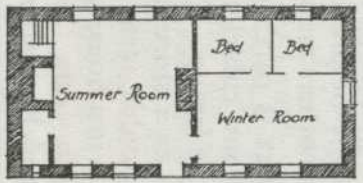
In the roof the space is partitioned off by screens or wood divisions into numerous cubicles and little rooms for the younger members of the family. There is plenty of space in the big roof and it serves as a store for clothes, spinning wheels, flax choppers, candle moulds, farm implements and all the other material which collects in a house where three generations have lived together for many years. In one corner is the loom on which the blankets and homespuns are woven, in another the girls have cleared a space where they can sit and sew. There is room for everything in a Quebec attic. The house is a family house with a continuous life and tradition passing on from one generation to the next, not a temporary habitation to be bought or sold.

Sketch Plans and Details of Houses on The Island of Orleans 1925 · no scale ·

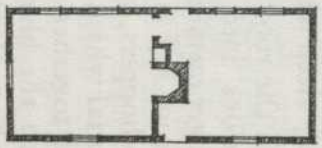
FIG. 3



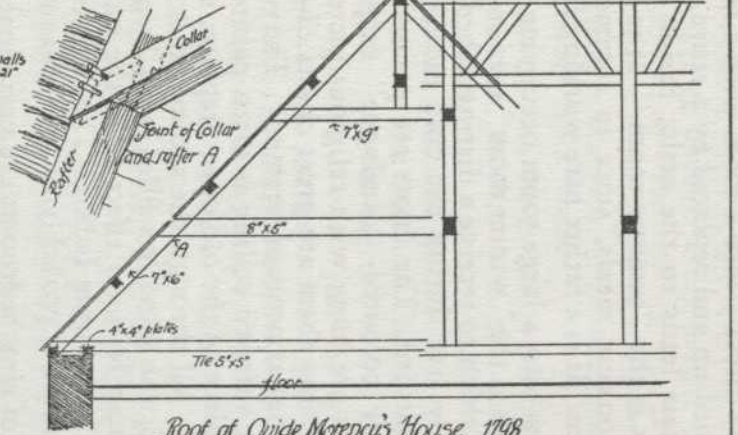
House of Napoleon Pichette



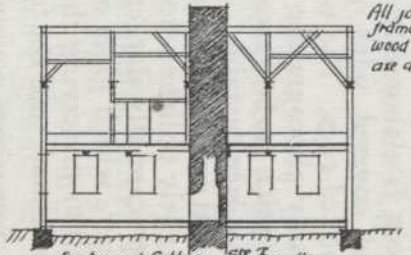
Drouin · House ·



Cottage at 3rd Famille ·

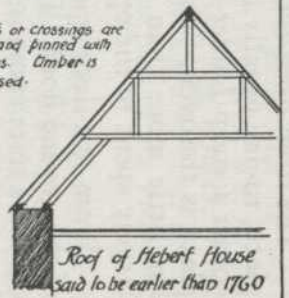


Roof of Ovide Morency's House 1798



Section of Cottage · 5th Famille ·

All joints or crossings are trimmed and pinned with wood pins. Timber is axe dressed ·



Roof of Hebert House said to be earlier than 1760

FIG. 1—*The Hebert House, Island of Orleans, built before the English Occupation and one of the few not destroyed.*

FIG. 2—*The Drouin House, Island of Orleans.*

FIG. 4—*House of Pierre Asselin. Island of Orleans.*

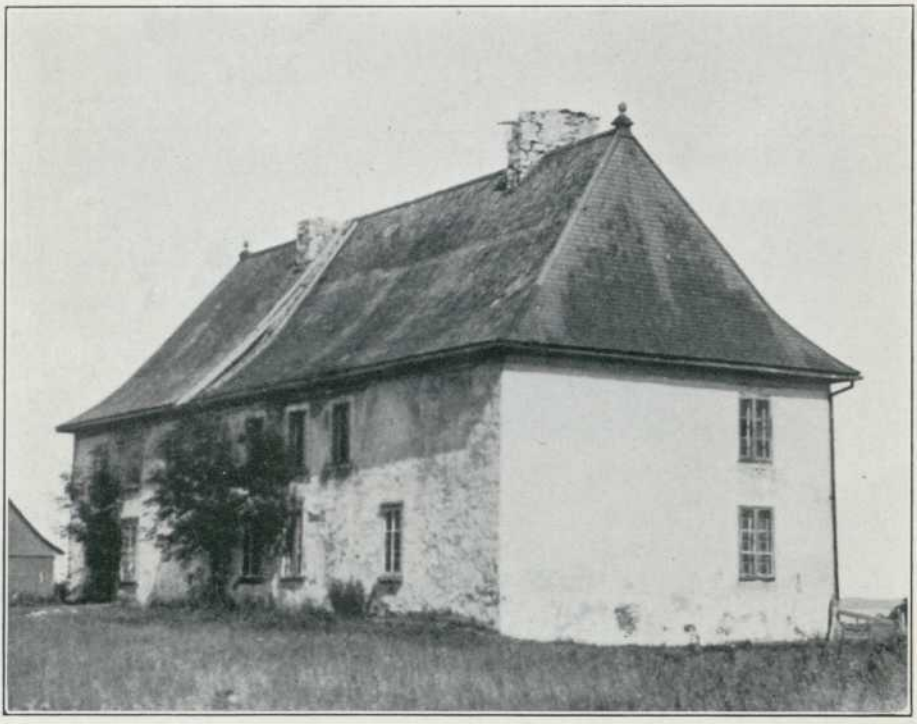


FIG. 5—*The Manoir Mauvide. Island of Orleans.*

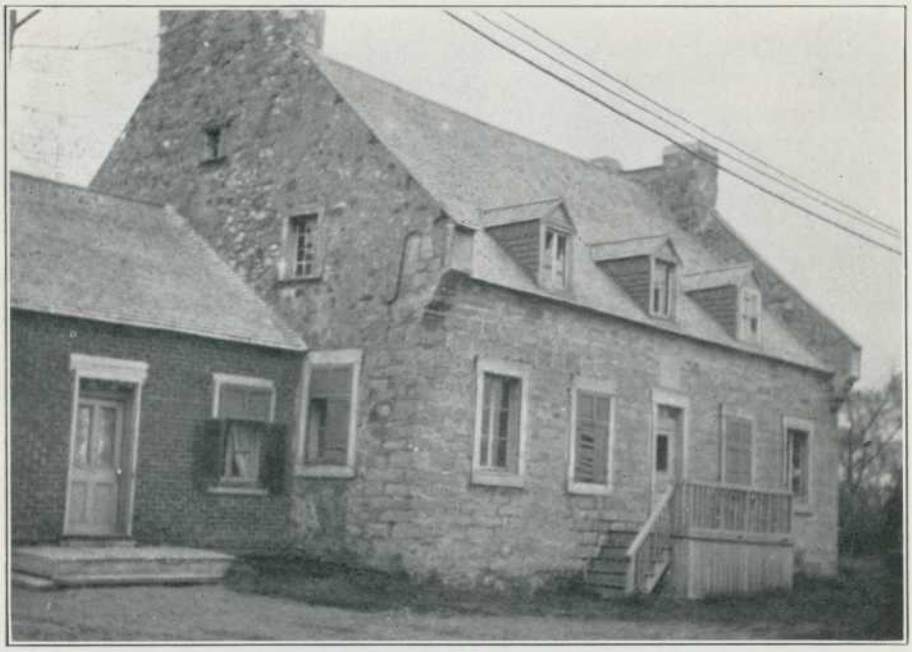


FIG. 6—*Le Duc House, Lower Lachine Road, Montreal, 1817; now destroyed.*

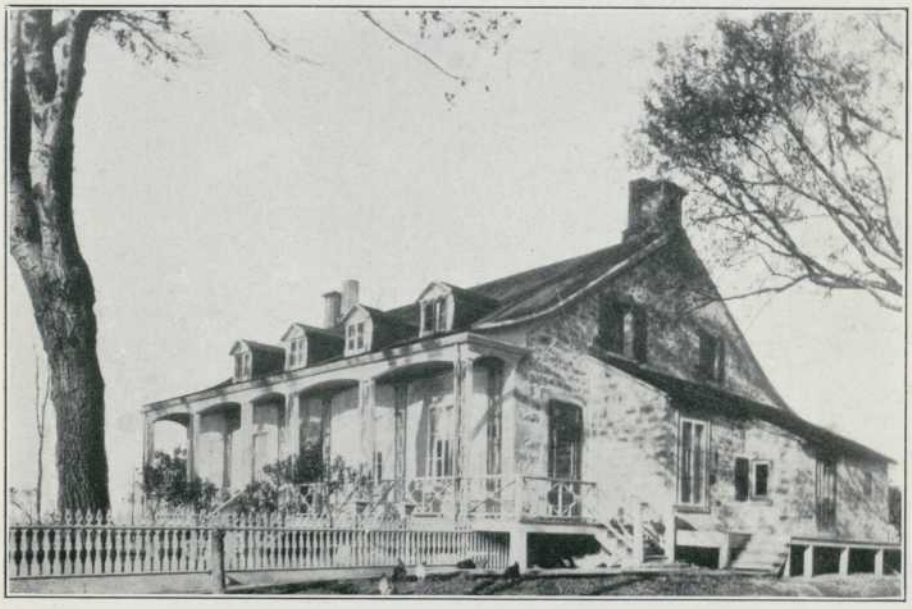


FIG. 7—*Presbytery, Pointe Claire.*

FIG. 8—*House, St. Charles Road. Island of Montreal.*

FIG. 9—*Hebert House, Island of Orleans. Door and Corner Cupboard.*

The roofs are framed together with heavy timbers, about seven or eight inches square, tenoned and morticed at the joints and fastened with long wooden pins. They usually have strong longitudinal windbracing in the ridge and collar beams about half way up. A large roof will have double collars, with struts. From end to end this is carpenter work made without nails or metal fastening of any kind. The method of construction has hardly changed since the seventeenth century.

The "habitant" has a good eye for colour and the exterior is usually gay. The roof shingles have a deep black colour from age, the wood of the gable ends is painted a strong red, the walls are whitewashed, the woodwork of doors and windows is bright green or blue and the windows are filled in with the blue paper. In winter, when the colours show against the white snow, the effect is charming and has attracted many of our Canadian painters.

Today we rather associate deep eaves with the Quebec cottage, yet the oldest cottages do not seem to have had projecting eaves although these were often added later, possibly to keep the snow away from the windows and wall head. These additional eaves produced the curving bellcast which is so characteristic and which was copied in the later houses. The deep shadow beneath the eaves is of great artistic value, but practically the curving roof tends to hold the snow and to form icicles; it is not a good winter roof. But it was apparently admired, since all but the earliest houses have the bellcast. The dormer windows are small; they are placed usually on the wallhead, a foot or fifteen inches above the floor and are fitted with casement frames opening inwards. This is the universal pattern. Sash windows or casements opening out are English.

Here and there we will find a cottage with a steep roof hipped back at the ends instead of gabled and with finials on the points of the hips. (*Fig. 4.*) This is an old form, the "pavilion" roof of French architecture, and is often used on the churches and manor houses. It possibly represents a more aristocratic tradition than do the plain gabled houses. The house of Pierre Asselin, on the Island of Orleans, is a cottage of this kind; the Manoir Mauvide and the manor at Baie St. Paul are examples of larger houses. (*Fig. 5.*) These are typically French.

They have moderately projecting eaves and a small bellcast. This is a usual feature of French architecture, though not always found in the simple cottage building. The very wide eaves developing into a gallery are, however, of independent Canadian origin.

In the cities the oldest houses were of two or three storeys with plain windows and steep roofs. They were separated each from its neighbour by partition gables of stone resting on moulded stone corbels at the eaves and rising above the roofs to form fire partitions. Through these rise the double chimneys from the front and back rooms. The roofs were covered with sheets of tinplate—"ferblanc"—as a protection against fire and were always, or almost always, parallel to the street. Under the French regime the right *d'avoir pignon sur rue* was a privilege; it implied a more private entrance by a courtyard whilst most houses entered direct from the street. Until recently a few of these houses were left in Montreal, now they seem all to have vanished to make room for modern improvements. Early drawings of the City of Quebec, as well as the model in the Archives at Ottawa, show that the streets were lined with simple solid houses of this kind. The features which develop naturally in the town house are the stone parapet gable, the double chimneys, the metal roof and rooms to back and front.

Now it is from this town house that the typical country cottage of the Montreal district seems to have been developed. (*Fig. 6.*) It is a deep rectangular building, without breaks or projections, covered with a steep roof with stone parapet gables at either end. The walls are some two feet thick, of rough stone smothered in mortar, rising a foot or so above the first floor level. Dressed stone is used for the moulded corbels below the gable parapets at the angles and round the windows. The gables have large chimneys, often double, and connected by a horizontal parapet. The door is in the centre of the front with the windows arranged more or less symmetrically on each side. The windows have the usual double casement sashes set close to the outer face of the wall and finished with a little wood moulding or with a flat gable form at the lintel. They are divided into small square panes by wood glazing bars.

The larger houses have double slatted shutters, two or four to each window, which open back against the walls and are held by "S" shaped wrought iron catches. These shutters, like the rest of the woodwork, are usually painted bright green or blue. In the smaller cottages the windows are more often single and without shutters.

The main floor is often raised on a low basement some three or four feet from the ground and the door is reached either by steps or from a gallery. This basement provides a good cellar for storing vegetables and raises the living rooms above the winter snow level. The division into "summer room" and

"winter room" does not seem to be so definite near Montreal as it is in the eastern part of the Province. The ground floor is usually divided into two large rooms, one serving as living room and kitchen, the other as "best room." A few bed-closets may be partitioned off, but the planning is of a rudimentary character. The life of the peasant does not call for that elaborate distinction between diningroom, drawingroom, library, bedroom and kitchen to which townsfolk are perhaps too much accustomed; he lives, eats and sleeps in the whole house.

The larger houses are often very deep. The Chateau de Ramezay in Montreal is some fifty feet from back to front and it is a typical "Montreal" house of large size. In these large houses there is often a longitudinal wall dividing the space into a series of front and back rooms, a survival of the city plan. This leads naturally to the great double chimneys in the gables which are so characteristic.

The floors are sometimes very solidly built of squared logs laid close to one another and tied into the walls by large "S" iron anchors on the outside. The Chateau de Ramezay has quite a row of these on the front, and they are usual in pairs on the gable ends. The roofs often have "tin tiles" laid diagonally. These weather in time to a beautiful golden brown and green colour like the scales on the back of a perch. They are one of the most admirable features of French-Canadian architecture.

Tin is not found in commercial quantities anywhere in America and all these tiles of tinned iron must have been imported. As early as the seventeenth century there are records of tiles of "ferblanc" being imported in barrels, and the City of Quebec had a by-law at one time forbidding the use of any other roofing material in the city. From the cities they spread into the country, where they were used for church spires and, occasionally, for the whole roof. 'Round Montreal they came to be used extensively on the farm houses. The tin tile, like the parapet gable is in origin a fire precaution, used first in the cities and later extending into the country. The "Montreal" type of house is in fact a city house built in the country. There is no better roof for a snow climate then one of metal, and to practical advantages these tiles add that of beauty. It is a pity that they have gone out of use.

The gable parapets are not so practical: they collect the snow and give opportunities for leakage in the spring thaws. Possibly it is on that account that in many houses, particularly

in the less pretentious, the roofs were taken over the gables to form shallow verges. With this came a great extension of the eaves. They were stretched out in front and back of the house to the utmost limit of construction and were even sometimes carried across the gables as a little pent. The next step was to support them on posts, and in this fashion we arrive at the gallery house so often found as a Presbytery in the Quebec villages. (*Fig. 7.*) Quebec has a good gallery climate. Here is shelter in winter from the snow and in summer from the sun, and here gather young and old. In larger houses the verandahs were often double; in the Ottawa valley type they are carried all 'round the house. (*Fig. 8*).

The double sloped mansard roof is often found in the villages; it gives greater space in the attic, but seems to be quite a recent introduction. When combined with the curved bellcast it has an altogether Chinese air.

The attic is lighted by small dormer windows with either hipped or gabled roofs. These are set low down on the roof so that they do not break the skyline of the house; otherwise the roof is quite unbroken. This extreme simplicity of roof is one of the charms of the cottages; it not only looks well but gives little hold to the snow in winter. The picturesque gables and broken roofs of Europe are not suited to our climate.

Very little internal fitting is to be found now. There was more at one time but it has been removed, and it is rarely that one finds a corner cupboard, a door with shaped and moulded panels or a piece of old furniture. (*Fig. 9.*) Fortunately the curio hunter has not been able to carry away the houses as well.

These old cottages of Quebec are one of the few genuine vernacular styles of North America. Their first inspiration was derived from old France and their structure still retains the imprint of this tradition. But during the many years of isolation from their Motherland, which has been the lot of French Canada, this original type has been moulded and adapted to Canadian life and climate. They are not, like so many of our modern houses, merely copies of European styles. They form a true natural style, simple and lacking perhaps in the graces of skilled ornamentation, but none the less well built, well adapted to their purpose and with the charm which always accompanies direct and honest work.

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