

Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The Origins of Laval University

Arthur Maheux

Volume 31, numéro 1, 1952

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300326ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300326ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Maheux, A. (1952). The Origins of Laval University. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 31(1), 22–27.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300326ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1952

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

THE ORIGINS OF LAVAL UNIVERSITY

BY ABBE ARTHUR MAHEUX

Université Laval

MY PURPOSE in writing this paper was not so much to produce something new as to clear up many points which have remained obscure in the public's knowledge of Laval University. The word "Centenary", commonly used this year, is itself misleading. This is the Centenary of the Royal Charter granted by Her Majesty Queen Victoria in 1852 to the Quebec Seminary. But it is not the Centenary of university teaching in French Canada. Such teaching, although not sanctioned by a Charter, is much older. As a matter of fact teaching at university level began in New France in 1635 when the Jesuits opened a college in Quebec City. That college was, right from the beginning, a classical college modelled on the colleges which the Jesuits had already made famous in Europe and especially in France. The fathers who came to Canada had all taken the entire course in France. Some of them had also taught in Jesuit colleges. They brought here their experience as well as their zeal. They copied exactly the programmes and the methods of teaching which were used in France, and they used the same text books. A classical course is composed of eight years. The first four years are practically the equivalent of the High School, or *Ecole primaire supérieure*. The last four years are the College of Arts, which in old French custom and in the present English or American style are the Faculty of Arts, an essential part of the university.

The Jesuits at Quebec were well able to give courses in Arts, with Latin, Greek, Mathematics, Sciences and Philosophy, at a very early date. Moreover, they had to organize the teaching of Theology for those of their young missionaries who had not completed that course in France. One then can rightly say that Quebec had the equivalent of the two major faculties, namely Arts and Divinity, very soon after the first settlement. These courses were fully organized when Bishop de Laval arrived at Quebec in 1659. He soon set up a Grand Seminary for training young men to the secular priesthood, which was needed for the parishes. In 1668 Bishop de Laval decided to take boys in a special house, a *Petit Séminaire*. These boys had to take the classical course. The bishop concluded an arrangement with the Jesuits, by which his Seminary students would take that course at the Jesuits College while at the Seminary they would receive the rest of their training. That system lasted to the end of the French regime, that is to the Seven Years War. Then came an interruption caused by the war. The classical course was completely closed down for ten years. In Theology, because the number of students was fewer than in the Arts course and classes could still be held, the interference was only partial.

Thus, the French colonists had the advantage of a training at university level from the beginning of the Colony in 1635 till the beginning of the civil government under the English rule. Of course, neither the Jesuits College nor the Seminary had the power to grant

degrees. Yet, that blessing might well have been theirs. Three medical doctors and three lawyers might have given courses in their respective field; that would have involved a relatively small expense; some medical and law schools, in France, had no more professors. But France waited too long, especially by comparison with the Spanish Colonies, in which university charters were granted within fifty and even within twenty-five years of their first formation.

A change came after the Treaty of Paris. First the Jesuits were not allowed to continue their college, nor even to take new novices. As for the Quebec Seminary, it was thoroughly examined by the Governor, James Murray. This man, after having studied the situation, came to the conclusion that two things were essential to the French-Canadians, namely a clergy with a bishop, and a seminary to train the clergy. Permission was immediately given the Seminary to reopen its classes, which it did in 1765 after the necessary repairs to the buildings. Then the question of a bishop was settled at London and Rome the following year. The Seminary was obliged to modify its recruiting. In the French regime the Jesuits had registered all young men, white or Indian, preparing for any career; the Seminary had cared only for those who wanted to become priests. Now the Seminary became a college, preparing young men for lay careers as well as for priesthood. The Seminary adopted the whole curriculum, programmes, methods and textbooks which had been used at the Jesuits College for Arts, Sciences and Philosophy.

As long as there were Jesuits living in Quebec it was imperative for the Seminary to do at least as well as the Jesuits had done. That was a rule of excellency. Moreover, the Jesuits had completed the classical course by special lessons of a higher degree in Mathematics, Surveying and Navigation. So, the Seminary had to do something equivalent. We still have, in the Archives of the Seminary, some of the manuscripts left by the professors of the Seminary. They bear witness to the accuracy of their work and to their open-mindedness. They already possessed a spirit of research, rather rare in those times. In the Arts course the final yearly examinations were held in public, with great solemnity; theses were read and discussed, especially in Mathematics. No degree was given, of course, but the brightest young men received in public a tribute which was a sort of consecration for the future. Their names appeared in the newspaper.

In 1789 the English-speaking officials offered to plan for a University, at first planned as the "Royal Institution", and later as McGill College at Montreal. The plan was not accepted by the Catholic authorities, on account of its neutrality. A few elementary schools were built by some French-Canadian parishes, more by the English-speaking people.

In the 1840's the question of the Jesuit properties became acute. At the death of the last Jesuit, these properties had passed to the government. The Catholic bishops wanted them to be restored to their original purpose, namely Education and Missions. This gave rise to the hope of a Catholic university and a plan was discussed between 1843 and 1848; the plan included a lengthy account of the Jesuit properties, of their origins, and of their purpose and was followed by a programme for university courses. The bishops made their request in January 1845, and the clergy signed a petition to

the government in June 1847. But apparently there was some difficulty at London about the Jesuit property. Consequently the plan was dropped.

In the meantime McGill College had developed; medical courses were given at the Montreal Institute of Medicine; courses in Law were given at Montreal; a Medical School at Quebec had had its incorporation from the Legislative Assembly. The bishops of Quebec and Montreal deplored seeing young Catholics registering at those schools, which were either Protestant or without any religious control. They wanted a non-neutral university, an institution in which religion would be highly considered. At that time, about 1848, there were two major Catholic corporations for teaching; the Seminary of St. Sulpice at Montreal, and the Seminary at Quebec. Both had large estates, seigniories, farms, buildings. The Sulpicians, soon after 1800, had offered a plan for a College, under the name of Clarence, as an alternative to the plan of the Royal Institution; but it was not accepted. The Quebec Seminary offered nothing at that time.

In 1848 a new generation occupied the directorship at the Quebec Seminary, and it was composed of distinguished men. The eldest was Jerome Demers. Besides the Arts course and Theology he had studied Surveying and he had a passion for Sciences. He has left a collection of manuscripts about Philosophy, Physics, and Architecture. He organized a Cabinet de Physique, i.e. a laboratory and museum. He trained good pupils. One of them was Louis-Jacques Casault, who, for the first time, taught Physics as a subject different from Philosophy. He also has left a collection of manuscripts on Physics, and one on Electricity and Magnetism. Aubry and Brien had been, in 1835, the promoters of the teaching of Greek language and literature at the Seminary. Taschereau (the future first Cardinal) then a young man, was devoted to Sciences as well as to Theology and Canon Law. Félix Buteau was a Mathematician. Léon Gingras had obtained a doctorate at Rome. John Horan was deeply interested in the Natural Sciences, John Holmes was a promotor of every kind of teaching. Louis Gingras and Antoine Parent were good administrators. These men were aware of the talk about a university. They were on the best terms with the members of the government and especially with the Governor-General, Lord Elgin. In March 1849 they sent Taschereau to Montreal, in order to study the charters which had already been granted to English Canadian institutions of learning. We still have the Manuscript Report written by Taschereau. Along with notes on the various charters he offers proposals on how to proceed with the organization of a university.

Classical colleges existed in Lower Canada at Quebec, Montreal, Nicolet, Ste-Anne, L'Assomption, Ste-Thérèse, St-Hyacinthe, Trois-Rivières. If a university came to existence, such colleges might be joined in some manner to the university. If so, there would be hundreds of students in the Arts course. Theology was taught in most of these colleges, especially at Montreal with the Sulpicians and at the Quebec Grand Seminary; these could be affiliated in some way and strengthened. The Quebec Medical School might enter in the plan. That is the "academic" side of the problem.

There remained the financial aspect. The Quebec Seminary was reputed to be wealthy. As far as landed property was concerned that opinion was correct. The Seminary had the Beaupré Seignior, extending from Montmorency River to Gouffre River at Baie St-Paul. It had another Seignior near Montreal, Jesus Island. It had mills of various kinds, houses, and buildings in Quebec City used for teaching purposes. But that was not liquid money, ready for paying professors and for new buildings. Financial problems, between 1820 and 1848, had been difficult, on account of a heavy debt, and because sources of revenue had remained closed. But this double handicap had been overcome by 1848. So, there was hope for the future. Yet, except for sending Taschereau to Montreal in 1849, the Seminary did not move. The difficulty seems to have been the fact that being a Seminary, according to its foundation by Bishop Laval with letters patent from Louis XIV, King of France, it was under the immediate authority of the Bishop of Quebec. Taking charge of a university meant a serious change, so the bishop had to speak first.

The bishop then was Archbishop Turgeon. He was much interested in the plan for a university. Bishop Bourget, at Montreal, was equally interested. The other bishops were those of Ottawa, Trois-Rivières, St.-Hyacinthe, Kingston and Toronto. They met at Quebec in the summer of 1851. The question of a university was debated, and they unanimously agreed to declare that a Catholic university was a necessity and that all Catholics should favour such an organization. The resolution was addressed to the Quebec Seminary by order of the Bishops' Council. The Seminary Council considered the text remembering that Bishop Bourget, in a letter addressed to Archbishop Turgeon, (31 March 1851), had expressed the opinion that the Quebec Seminary was the institution suitable for the undertaking. The Seminary simply declared its willingness to cooperate with the bishops. Being urged later to take a final decision, the Seminary Council faced this same difficulty, namely that it was immediately dependent upon one bishop, the Archbishop of Quebec. The directors were not happy with the possibility of being under the control of a number of bishops, residing from Quebec to Toronto, some of whom were English-speaking. That double difficulty would much delay the decisions, even if they applied only to the main principles involved in the administration. Consequently it was moved and ruled (on 29 March 1852) that the new university as well as the Seminary, would immediately depend on one bishop, the Archbishop of Quebec.

Bishop Bourget had thought of a "provincial" university. He had in mind the case of the University of Louvain, in Belgium; there the Belgian bishops had the authority. But in Belgium all distances are short and it was easy to have frequent meetings of the bishops; the situation was quite different in Canada. On the other hand, it is not clear whether Bishop Bourget meant, by the word "provincial", both Lower and Upper Canada or only Lower Canada. There were four bishops in Lower Canada, and three in Upper Canada. Those of Lower Canada were and would always be French-speaking; those of Upper Canada would eventually be English-speaking, except perhaps at Ottawa. The Seminary Council hearing of Bishop

Bourget's idea, warned the Archbishop of Quebec, (April 11, 1852), who in turn urged Bourget to take a final stand, asserting that the various classical colleges would enjoy privileges and lose nothing of their independence (April 27, 1852). So Bourget yielded and gave his consent in writing. The Seminary Council immediately started writing the plan of a Constitution or Charter. They believed it would be easier to obtain the charter from the central government at London than from the local government. They knew well the animosities that had marked the late thirties, the Rebellion, the Durham Report and the scope of the Act of Union. Yet they had to ask permission from the Governor-General. They sent him a draft of the charter on (3 May, 1852). He required more details, which were sent. They received Lord Elgin's approval on 5 June, 1852.

The Superior of the Seminary was then Louis-Jacques Casault. He left with a companion, Thomas-Etienne Hamel, for England in June 1852. They were welcomed in London. On July 7, as soon as the Governor's approval was received at London the text of the charter was approved. The delegates, however, asked that the Charter be officially signed on December 8. Being free, they started visiting universities in the British Isles, in France, Belgium, Italy, and made abundant notes which were later used for framing the rules of the university. The Charter was duly signed on December 8. There was a reason for that date. Bishop Laval and the Jesuits had always had a peculiar devotion to the Virgin Mary under the title of the Immaculate Conception and they had already settled that that would be the Patron Saint of the university. The Charter arrived at Quebec on 14 January, 1853.

The first Council of the University was composed, according to the Charter, of all the members of the Seminary Council; later, after the official creation of the faculties of Law and Medicine, six laymen would join the Council. There were four faculties in all: Divinity, Law, Medicine, Arts, each being represented in the Council by its three senior members. The six members of Law and Medicine would always be laymen, the three of Divinity always priests; the three of Arts might be either; besides those twelve members, all the members of the Seminary Council would be priests. Two major decisions were soon taken. The first was to build three houses; a big one containing the library, the reception room, the Convocation Hall, the museums, the laboratories, classrooms for Law and Arts, the administrative office, another one would be occupied by the Medical School. The third was a boarding house for those of the students coming from outside the City. The other decision was to organize the curriculum in Arts for the B.A. degree, and consequently the rules for the affiliation of the various classical colleges. (18 February, 1853). For the Medical faculty, the Rector Casault chose to take the physicians who already had taught in the Quebec Medical School, which had held about six sessions and had granted certificates. On the ecclesiastical side, an official recognition from Rome was necessary, to grant degrees in Divinity. The bishops had sent a request to this end in May 1852. The authorities at Rome were at first reluctant and raised objections to which Casault gave answers in July 1852. As soon as the Charter arrived at Quebec, the Rector Casault sent a copy to Rome (21 January, 1853). The permission was given on March 6, 1853.

This good news produced great rejoicing in Canada. All the bishops wrote congratulating the Archbishop, the new Rector and the Seminary (February, 1853). The superiors of the classical colleges were not so hasty; the question of their autonomy was at stake; the rules set for examinations towards the B.A. degree seemed too rigid or not quite clear enough; some wanted one session of examinations instead of two. Others said that their college was still too young. One college (Ste.-Thérèse) declared its willingness to affiliate immediately. Nicolet said they did not want the affiliation. That between February and May 1853. One queer objection concerns the English language and must be set in its proper background. The French Canadians, of course, resented the decision taken in the Act of Union (1840) against the official use of the French language; this rule had been replaced but the feeling persisted. All French Canadians thought that knowledge of English was necessary; and all colleges taught that language. The Quebec Seminary seems to have been very attentive to the subject; there had always been English teachers. In the private register kept by the Rector Taschereau we find notes of registration in English for the English-speaking students. In the rules of examinations for the B.A. degree, an English essay was required. One bishop asked why. There was no answer and the rule was maintained.

Since the beginning of the English regime it had been a constant practice at the Seminary to take as students young English-speaking men, either Protestant or Catholic. That policy was to be continued. During the first ten years, from 1854 to 1864, the English names in the faculties of Law, Medicine and Arts account for nearly 25% of the student body. The bishops of Upper Canada hoped to send students to Laval; nearly all these students would be English-speaking. So the English language could not be put aside.

Another important decision was made in the spring of the year 1853, that of sending to Europe some chosen men for higher studies. The first group, composed of three, was to study Greek, Latin and French, in order to obtain the degree of Master. Soon others were to follow for Sciences, for Medicine, for Law, all at Paris or Louvain; for Theology it was Rome.

The professors in Law and Medicine were appointed in the autumn of 1853. Much work had been done in a short time, so well that at the first anniversary of the Charter, on December 8, 1853, the Archbishop of Quebec, Visitor of the University, published a long letter announcing the erection of the University. The printed text is in French and English, 9 pages each. The other bishops wrote their own letter to be read at the same time, in all churches, with the Visitor's letter. In May 1854 another meeting of all the bishops was held at Quebec; at which they approved the foundation of the University. Everything seemed now ready for the official opening of the University. The ceremony took place in September 1854. The Governor-General, who had been prayed for in good Latin, presided. Degrees of doctor were conferred, especially on the new professors of Medicine and Law. The students found their boarding house ready. The courses in Law and Medicine began. As for Arts and Theology the courses continued as usual. The sky was bright for the moment. Clouds would soon come.