

The majestic Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac

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[See table of contents](#)

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The majestic Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac

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While the Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac is not the oldest monastery in Canada, it is one of the best known in Quebec, if not in Canada, partly because of the prestige attached to the Benedictine order. Its site has attracted the attention of journalists, film-makers and the public in general. The reputation of the architects who designed the buildings, Dom Paul Bellot, Dom Claude-Marie Côté and Dan S. Hanganu, has most likely contributed to the renown of this splendid place of meditation.

Why a Benedictine abbey in French Canada? Why and when did the monks leave Europe to come to a country that was still in a state of colonization, nearly 100 years ago? Why in Quebec and, more specifically, in the Eastern Townships? And why did they settle at Bolton? Only history can answer these questions.

Origins of the Benedictine order

The origins of the Benedictine order go back to the early part

of the VIth Century in a mountainous area of Italy, around 529 AD. Although Saint Benedict of Nursia (*circa* 480-547) is not the founder of Christian monasticism, he did found the well-known abbeys of Subiaco and Monte Cassino in Italy. There, he wrote the Rule of his order: obedience, silence, prayer, apostolate and work, intellectual and physical alike. This code of religious life spread rapidly in all western world monasteries and stimulated the founding of many others. Saint Benedict is considered the Patriarch of occidental monks. In 1964, he was proclaimed by Paul VI, "principal, heavenly patron of the whole of Europe".

Anticlerical atmosphere in France

In France, during and following the Revolution, Benedictine life was practically extinct, but it flourished anew around the middle of the XIXth Century with Dom Prosper Guéranger. Monastic life was restored in a few monasteries in France: at Saint-Pierre-de-Soulesmes and

at Fontenelle in Normandy, founded by Saint Wandrille during the VIIth Century. It is from the latter that Saint-Benoît-du-Lac emerged.

The difficulties did not stop with the ending of the Revolution. Years later, in 1879, the strongly anticlerical government of the French Republic subjected religious orders to such unacceptable conditions of life that many were dissolved. Less than ten years after repossessing their monasteries in France, anticlerical laws drove all of the Benedictine monks into exile. They were dispossessed of their belongings, and the monks of Saint-Wandrille moved to Vonèche (diocese of Namur) in Belgium. This temporary situation and other factors like several costly moves were not compatible with a healthy monastic life and drastic changes became necessary.

Early attempt by M^{re} Antoine Racine (1822-1893)

The Benedictines considered leaving Europe in the 1890s. In



The original farm house, in 1913. (Source : Stanstead Historical Society)

1892, M^{sr} Antoine Racine, first Bishop of the diocese of Sherbrooke, promoted the founding of a monastery on the shores of Lake Memphremagog¹. M^{sr} Racine chose the township of Bolton, granted to Nicholas Austin in and his associates in 1797². It constituted an enclave of Anglo-Protestants with a few Catholic families, Irish and French Canadians, in the young (1874) Catholic diocese of Sherbrooke. The surrounding parishes of Saint-Cajetan of Mansonville (1872), Saint-Étienne-de-Bolton (1874) and the mission of Eastman were located some 16 km away. Taking into account the then means of transportation, they were considered far away. Catholics were not in sufficient numbers to justify the presence of a resident priest so M^{sr} Racine

thought that the presence of a monastery in Bolton would provide his parishioners with an adequate religious framework.

The Bishop had the collaboration of "Dean" David Shaw Ramsay, a Scottish Presbyterian converted to Catholicism and raised to priesthood in 1867. In 1891, David Ramsay had bought a farm of over 300 acres on the Nicholas Austin Road, halfway between Austin (then East-Bolton village) and Magog. He offered his farm to the Benedictines in exchange for a life annuity of \$280-\$320 a year, based on the estimated value of the property³. Communication between Ramsay, who traveled frequently, and the Benedictines in Belgium was difficult, while the situation in France seemed to improve for

the monks. M^{sr} Racine died in 1893 and the deal was never concluded.

M^{sr} Paul LaRocque (1846-1922)

Years later, in March, 1910, Father Joseph-Eugène Laferrière⁴ from Saint-Hyacinthe, while studying in Louvain, visited the Benedictines of Saint-Wandrille, then established in Dongelberg, Belgium. He informed M^{sr} Paul LaRocque, successor of M^{sr} Racine, that Dom Pothier, mitred Abbot, wished to resume discussions and had delegated Father Lucien David, a historian, to a Eucharistic convention to take place in Montreal in September. LaRocque and David met in Montreal and the subject of founding a monastery in the diocese was discussed.

M^{sr} LaRocque proffered a welcome to the Benedictines and promised his full collaboration, but nothing came of it.

In the preceding decade, numerous religious orders had migrated to Quebec where a more favorable atmosphere allowed them to fulfill their missions. Among them, the Daughters of Charity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus came to Magog in 1907 from Newport, Vermont, where they had been since 1905. In terms of religious orders, it appears that the needs of other dioceses had been met and, in some instances, exceeded, but Sherbrooke was the exception⁵. M^{sr} LaRocque saw a golden opportunity to fill the gap in Bolton. Correspondence between the Benedictines and the diocese of Sherbrooke resumed in February, 1912, and two sites were then considered: the Lake Megantic region and Gibraltar Point on the western shores of Lake Memphremagog, at the entrance to Sargent's Bay. The latter was preferred and agreed upon.

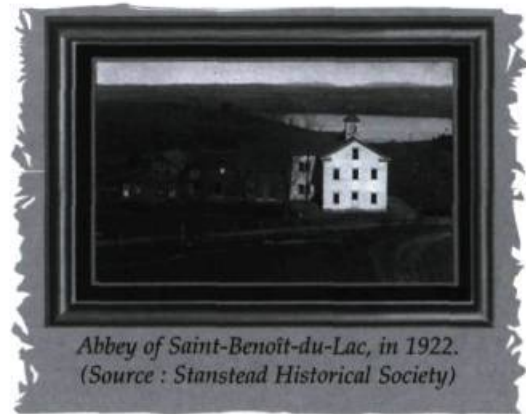
At Gibraltar Point

Dom Paul Vannier, a former sub-prior intrigued by the adventure, convinced his superiors to let him go to Quebec. He arrived in Montreal on July 4th, 1912⁶, accompanied by Brother Raphaël Pélissier. He contacted M^{sr} LaRocque and met him in Sherbrooke. Vannier was then referred to the parish priest in Magog, François-Xavier Brassard. Together, they sailed in Brassard's

yacht to visit a property for sale on the western shores of the lake: it was Gibraltar Point, overlooking the lake⁷.

Around 1870, a group of French-Canadian businessmen from Montreal founded the Company of Cap Gibraltar and built a village called the Town of Gibraltar, referred to by some as Furness (Furniss) Mills⁸. It included ten avenues running east-west and four streets running north-south, all named. About forty houses were built, a furniture factory operated for a while, and there were two stores, a saw mill and a gristmill. A hotel of sixty-five rooms, the Gibraltar Hotel, was also erected, but was never completed. The company invested over \$300,000 in the venture, but ran into financial difficulties around 1877. The entire site was bought by the Dufresne brothers (Salem and Amédée) from Montreal, who occupied both the hotel and the farm house for some time.

On October 5th, 1912, with the authorization of his superiors, Dom Vannier bought, for \$12,500 from a Mr. Lachapelle, about 400 acres of land with a farm house and a few outbuildings that still stood. By then, the village and the hotel had disappeared. They took possession on December 4th and it was named Saint-Benoît-du-Lac. Dom Vannier moved in with three companions: two French converse brothers, Raphaël Pélissier and Charles Collot, and Louis Prévost, a Canadian postulant from Notre-



*Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, in 1922.
(Source : Stanstead Historical Society)*

Dame-des-Bois where Dom Vannier had ministered from August until November.

Fresh settlers arrived from France in 1913: Dom Félix Lajat in April and Dom Ernest Boitard, accompanied by Brother Hilaire Fraudeau, in August. Just before the first World War erupted in August, 1914, two other Fathers, Paul Allix and Paul Brun, were able to leave Europe and arrived on September 11th.

A double tragedy

On November 30th, 1914⁹, Dom Vannier and Charles Collot were on their way to Magog by motorboat to attend a ceremony commemorating the Episcopal Consecration of M^{sr} LaRocque. Inexperienced on the lake, they failed to notice a thin layer of ice that had formed overnight. About a mile from Magog, the hull of the boat was punctured by the ice and filled with freezing water¹⁰. The monks were drowned before anyone on shore could reach them. Father Vannier's body was found later in the day, but his companion's was only pulled out in the following spring after the ice had melted.



*Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, in 1935.
(Source : Stanstead Historical Society)*

As a result of the war, the community was cut off from its parent congregation in Belgium, and no Superior was named to replace Dom Vannier. Despite this and other difficulties, the community prospered, although slowly. In 1918, Dom Ernest Boitard reservedly accepted the nomination. In 1919, after the war ended and the abbey of Saint-Wandrille was liberated, the monks of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac were summoned to return to Europe and to remain there¹¹. Fathers Boitard and Brun, who did not agree with the decision, sailed to France to plead their cause to maintain their Canadian house. Because of their insistence and the unconditional support of M^{gr} LaRocque, they were allowed to return to Quebec and continue their work.

A period of accelerated growth

In 1921, Dom Paul Brun succeeded Dom Boitard and further expansion was undertaken to improve conventual monastic life. The new Superior was granted permission to build a noviciate, which was inaugurated on the 5th of October, 1924, when seven postu-

lants took the robe. At his own request, Brun was relieved of his functions and was replaced by Dom Paul Cosse. The latter was summoned to return to France three years later. On the 7th of April 1929, the Benedictine house was raised to the rank of Priory and Dom Fernand Lohier became its first Prior. Under his priorate, the first guest house was built and named Villa Sainte-Scholastique, after the name of Saint. Benedict's twin sister. In 1931, under a new Prior, Dom Léonce Crenier, permission to build a new monastery was requested, but not granted. However, enlarging the existing building was allowed and around 20 "cells" were added, encircling the original farm house. In 1935, the monastery was elevated to the rank of an autonomous Priory, allowing further growth of the community.

Dom Paul Bellot, architect (1876-1944)¹²

In 1938, it was decided to build a new monastery according to plans drawn up by Paul Bellot, a French Benedictine monk and renowned architect. The corner stone, blessed by M^{gr} Philippe Desranleau, bishop of Sherbrooke, was set in place on the 11th of July, 1939, the memorial day of St. Benedict. A section of the old monastery was converted into a guest house, and the new monastery was blessed on July 11th, 1941. In 1944, Dom Georges Mercure was elected to become the first Canadian superior. Under his priorship, great attention was

devoted to liturgical chant and the strengthening of monastic spirit. In 1947, the St. Benedict tower, which houses an authentic relic of the Patriarch, was erected near the monastery.

In 1952, the status of the monastery was again raised, this time to the rank of Abbey, marking the last phase of its development. Dom Odule Sylvain was named its first Abbot. It was under his leadership that a new guest house and the crypt were built. Construction of the Abbey Church itself began in 1990 under the direction of Dom Jacques Garneau, elected Abbot in 1983. The plans were drawn up by Dan S. Hanganu, a Montreal architect, and the first permanent church was inaugurated on December 4th, 1994, to commemorate the founding of the monastery by Dom Paul Vannier in 1912.

An unusual municipality

Saint-Benoît-du-Lac is politically and economically separate from its surroundings. It separated from Austin in 1939 and became a distinct municipality¹³. It has neither a mayor nor a council, but is managed by a Corporation of monks. It has no representative at either level of government, federal or provincial, and pays no taxes. According to historian Guy Laperrière of the University of Sherbrooke, the Abbey had its greatest influence on The Benedictine monks are renowned for their religious music, notably their Latin Gregorian chant, and have recorded several CD's.

Music remains an important component of their religious services. Besides spending considerable time in meditation and prayer, the monks participate in frequent and elaborate liturgical exercises accompanied by Gregorian chant. They perform many physical tasks and are considered a self-supporting community. A guest house is available to visitors so that people from all walks of life can come to Saint-Benoît-du-Lac to experience the abbey's peace and tranquility, some for a weekend, others for longer. The community is still considered a "Gibraltar of prayer, meditation and both intellectual and physical work".

Notes

- ¹ Service des Archives de l'Archidiocèse de Sherbrooke (S.A.A.S.).
- ² SHUFELT, Harry B. *Nicholas Austin the Quaker and the Township of Bolton*. The Brome County Historical Society, 1971, p. 121.
- ³ S.A.A.S. Correspondance between M^{re} Antoine Racine and M^{re} David Shaw Ramsay.
- ⁴ BERGERON, Claude et SIMMINS, Geoffrey. *L'abbaye de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac et ses bâtisseurs*, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1997, p. 62.
- ⁵ S.A.A.S. Correspondance between M^{re} Paul LaRocque and Father Joseph-Ernest Laferrière.
- ⁶ *La Tribune de Sherbrooke*. 29 September 1962. Supplement on the 50th Anniversary of the Saint-Benoît-du-Lac Abbey, p. 3.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ ABBOT, Louise. *Furness Mills: The Ghost Town of Austin Bay*. *Journal of the Stanstead Historical Society*, vol. 21, 2005, p.13.
- ⁹ BERGERON, Claude, *Op.cit.* p.69.
- ¹⁰ *La Tribune, Op. cit.* p. 4.
- ¹¹ S.A.A.S. Letter from Dom Ernest Boitard to M^{re} Paul LaRocque, 20 March 1919.
- ¹² BERGERON, Claude, *Op. cit.*, Chapter 4, p. 79, dedicated to Dom Bellot.
- ¹³ *Noms et lieux du Québec*. Commission de toponymie, 1994, p. 613.



A view of the Abbey of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac. (Source : Société historique de Stanstead)