

The first and oldest — How does the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec compare to other societies?

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The First and Oldest – How does the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec compare to other societies?

by Patrick Donovan

Patrick Donovan is a recent graduate of the Masters in Historic Preservation at the Université de Montréal. In 2004, he returned to his native Quebec City to work for the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec, the country's oldest historical society. The Society is presently engaged in creating the Morrin Centre, a cultural centre in a designated heritage site that aims to showcase the contribution of English speakers to the city. Furthermore, Patrick is the Central/Eastern Quebec director of the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network. He is also a board member for Accès Transports Viables, a Quebec City organization promoting active and collective forms of transportation. Finally, Patrick is a regular contributor to www.urbanphoto.net

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For years, people have claimed that the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec (LHSQ), founded in 1824, is the oldest learned society in the former British Empire overseas. It would be great if this was true, but it isn't. This wearying talk of being "the first and oldest" happens frequently in heritage circles and should usually be treated with suspicion. Anyone can make a claim, and most of us would rather brag than get bogged down with the arduous task of comparative historical research.

The claims made about Quebec City illustrate this point. Founded in 1608, it is still quoted in many official sources as being the oldest city in North America. Other places make similar claims: Jamestown, VA (founded 1607); Annapolis Royal, NS (founded 1605); Tadoussac, QC (trading post established in 1600); Saint-Augustine, FL (founded 1565); and Saint John's, NL (first permanent residence built in 1528). If one adheres to a geographical definition of North America rather than a cultural one, all the Spanish cities in

Mexico should also be taken into account. And what about Native American settlements?

Over time, claims of being the first and oldest become distorted, and legends are born. Is the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec the "oldest in North America," "the oldest in the British Empire" or the "oldest in the world"? When memory fails us, resorting to the most pompous boast always sounds best.

The idea that the Society is the oldest in the former British Empire overseas goes back to 1875. It derives from a letter by Sidney Robjohns of the Royal Historical Society of Great Britain to the LHSQ. This casual letter was taken as an authoritative source. It was referred to in two M.A. theses as well as the federal government's 1984 heritage study on the LHSQ. With such credible endorsements, the boast of being the first and oldest appeared to rest on solid ground. Let us examine a few older societies that prove otherwise.

India, part of the former British Empire, has several societies older than ours. The most important of these is probably the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, India. Sir William Jones founded this society in 1784 as a centre to study "the history, civil and natural, the antiquities, arts, sciences and literature of Asia." Its Bombay counterpart, founded a few years later, still maintains a musty Victorian lending library that bears an uncanny resemblance to the one at the LHSQ, mezzanine and all.

The United States also founded several historical societies in the days when it was also part of the British Empire overseas. "The first drudgery of settling new colonies is now pretty well over," wrote Benjamin Franklin in 1743, "and there are many in every province in circumstances that set them at ease, and afford leisure to cultivate the finer arts, and improve the common stock of knowledge." That same year, Franklin founded the American Philosophical Society (APS). The Society's mandate covered not only philosophy but also the

natural sciences, literature and history. The APS continues to flourish today and publishes its *Transactions* regularly. Other existing American learned societies predating the LHSQ include the Massachusetts Historical Society (1791), the New York Historical Society (1804), and the American Antiquarian Society (1812).

An argument could be made that learned societies existed in Canada before the LHSQ,

though in short-lived skeletal forms. The *Académie de Montréal* (1778) had aspirations of growing into its French counterpart, and tried to introduce Enlightenment ideas, but its founder was soon imprisoned by the government. La *Société Littéraire de Québec* was founded in 1809 by a group of francophone intellectuals, including Philippe-Joseph Aubert de Gaspé (*Les Anciens Canadiens*). This group held meetings every other week. Although literary

discussion and creation were their main preoccupations, the circle once hosted a talk on the medicinal effects of music. During the *Société's* first summer, a public contest was held with silver medals awarded to "la personne qui célébrera la naissance de sa glorieuse majesté George III, par une pièce de vers, Anglaise, Française ou Latine." Within less than a year, the society had folded.



Library of the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec.
(Photo : Patrick Donovan, 2007)

Unlike these earlier models, the LHSQ was closer to the accepted British model for a learned society. Its preoccupations were encyclopedic, covering not only literature but also history and science. Furthermore, the LHSQ engaged in publication, scholarly research, collecting archives, and operated a museum with many complete natural history collections used for serious study. It served as a model for later learned societies in Quebec, such as the numerous *Instituts Canadiens* founded throughout the province. Its activities also fostered the creation of the Royal Society of Canada, Library and Archives Canada, the National Battlefields Commission, and the Geological Survey.

Although the LHSQ has survived to this day, its mandate has evolved. It is more of a local than a national institution, more community-oriented than academic. The Society eventually focused on its private library, which became a meeting place for people seeking out English-language books in Quebec City. Since 2004, the LHSQ began to renew its past vigour through the Morrin Centre project (www.morrin.org). This project, which aims to restore the 200-year-old building the LHSQ has called home for most of its history, has taken the Society beyond the library. It now manages a full-fledged cultural centre. The team has grown from a few part-time librarians

to over a dozen full-time staff. In addition to library services, there are heritage tours and publications, literary readings, historical talks, theatrical performances, virtual exhibits, and a yearly Celtic festival that draws thousands.

It may be a stretch to call the LHSQ a learned society today, but it nevertheless continues its initial mandate of fostering cultural vitality. It may not be the oldest outside the British Isles, but isn't it better to be alive and growing than moribund and stale?



Library of the Asiatic Society, Mumbai, founded in 1804. (Photo : Patrick Donovan)