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Volume 23, numéro 1, 2017

Montréal, ville d'histoires...

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/85558ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Les Éditions Histoire Québec  
La Fédération Histoire Québec

ISSN

1201-4710 (imprimé)  
1923-2101 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Fish, M. (2017). The LaFontaine House, a presentation about a thirty year campaign (to date) to acquire the LaFontaine House in Montreal so that could become a National Monument in Canada (Abstract - Résumé). *Histoire Québec*, 23(1), 34–36.

# The LaFontaine House, a presentation about a thirty year campaign (to date) to acquire the LaFontaine House in Montreal so that could become a National Monument in Canada (Abstract - Résumé)

by Michael Fish

*Michael Fish graduated from McGill's school of architecture in 1956. He ran a general practice for thirty-seven years under his own name. He became involved with social and historical preservation issues in the late sixties and remains committed to their causes. He retired from the profession in 1993 to take up a career as a volunteer builder and developer of important buildings. He helped found and administer several preservation institutions and has served on several official development committees. He is presently helping to stop a Skytrain public transit project in Montreal. He has been awarded enough distinctions to last a lifetime.*

Continuous efforts to have the Federal Government acquire the LaFontaine House in Montreal have lasted since 1985. Despite that it is the most important monument to Canada's nineteenth century political, social and constitutional history and the right place to commemorate our country's unique spirit as a sharing caring nation of many peoples, religions, and ideals. It is also the right place to commemorate the preservation of the French language in North America, and second languages everywhere. Despite unanimous massive support

of this effort in the city, province and across the country over many years, Canada has always refused to do its evident duty. This will be examined by this conference.

## **Discovery and early efforts**

The 1986 announcement that a grey stone building on a quiet street in downtown Montreal had been, for about fifteen years, during the mid-nineteenth century, the home of Louis Hippolyte LaFontaine, the first Prime Minister of United Canada, was a big surprise to history minded people across Canada in 1986. The

building is situated on a large city block that had been collected by speculators for a large multi-skyscraper residential and commercial development. Efforts to save some of the older sound buildings on the site that had undeniable economic, social and heritage values were finally defeated after fierce resistance by the speculator owners. This happened despite agreements between the city and the owners, after socio-environmental hearings, that the older buildings would be preserved and incorporated into the new plans for the block, and that particular attention would be paid to the LaFontaine house's important heritage status.

However, these agreements were broken by the owners of the site, who slowly, illegally demolished all but the LaFontaine House. Its interior, however, was unofficially allowed to be demolished as well. The obvious intention of this was that it would fall down by itself. For the next twenty-five years from 1990, various efforts by conservationists and activists also failed to move any government or administration to acquire the building. In 2014, the whole block was sold to Asiatic developers and a comprehensive plan was presented to have the federal government acquire the house as a condo on the site, rather than as a house on a subdivided lot, separate from the very large, very expensive whole block.



The LaFontaine House in 1987. Photo: Michael Fish.

The value of such an acquisition would be minimal, because its floor areas as a fraction of the permitted total floor areas to be developed in the huge buildings on the block, would be very small. The value of a subdivided lot with the building on it would be ten times this figure. Those of us presenting the plan felt that such a proposition could not be refused by any authorities which had an honest program to protect the nation's historic or environmental properties.

### **LaFontaine and Baldwin**

Many authors over the last 150 years, have written biographies that prove the importance of LaFontaine to the origins of the Canadian constitution's political, financial and social development. Apart from being important for world history, much ignored in our day, the events which made up the LaFontaine story were shared with the personality of Robert Baldwin of Upper Canada, an equivalent hero of the turbulent times from 1835 to 1854. He also had a close association with the Montreal property.

He stayed often at the home of his French speaking counterpart when he came to Montreal. The close personal bond which they forged was the key to the enduring of Union of Upper and Lower Canada and was essential to understanding the fact that both the Union and Responsible government were not reversed in the few years that followed, which was the case with every one of the other efforts around the world which overthrew autocratic regimes. If only that the Canadian is a Hell of a Good Yarn, the house deserves to become a national museum monument.

Media attitudes over the period merit mention. With few exceptions, print and electronic media supported the side of the activists. At the beginning, the war was waged on the social basis that low income people lived in all the buildings and they proved that their buildings could be saved with minimal investment as social housing

without damaging the profits that would be made with the surrounding skyscrapers. At one time, every city news paper printed editorials in support of the house's important future, urging federal authorities to act at least for the case of the LaFontaine House. Stories from media across the country all supported its future as an important monument for our country.

### **Refusals**

The basis of the refusals by the succession of Federal (and Municipal) authorities over the years had always been based on a constitutional claim that only the provincial government could purchase private property from an unwilling owner. The Province and the City, when approached, always retorted that any monument on the site, had overwhelming Federal importance.

Moreover, LaFontaine had many monuments in Quebec and Montreal. They had done enough. The ball was in the federal court. They would act, or the property would have only minor local heritage protection.

But in May of 2016, the owners of the development of the block put the building up for sale to anyone as a condo on the block. This was the exact situation that conservationists had urged the authorities to purchase over twenty-five years. The Feds now had no excuse. The constitution could no longer be used as an excuse to do nothing. Long story short, two federal ministers, after a few months, simply, blandly, refused to act. The house will be renovated from its ruined state and sold to someone on the open market. Arguably the physical embodiment of the dramatic origin of our country will become just another upscale address on a short, minor street in a North American metropolis. For one reputable conservationist who had made efforts to have the house saved, it was a 'partial victory'. "At least the house would be there....." Well.....



The House in 2015.





Baldwin-LaFontaine Monument Parliament Hill.

For those of us familiar with what all countries do to develop a sense of the history of their countries, the refusal of Canada in this case, was simply devastating. Mr. Fish will expand on the failure of this most recent effort, the heavy support that it had, and criticize his own part in this failure. He will also speak to the importance of LaFontaine for the fact that French has survived in Canada as an official language and the suggestion that a museum of the French Language had been an integral part of the several recent efforts to have the house in Federal Hands as an important Federal historic monument.

This conference will illustrate the relationship between LaFontaine and Baldwin and the events which they affected both separately and together.

It will celebrate their personal friendship and kindnesses, their political visions. We will examine the fight to preserve French as an official language of the country after the Durham Report, the story of the Rebellion Losses Bill, the burning of Parliament, and the subsequent riots including the critical standoff of the Chateau de Ramezay. The character of the Union which LaFontaine and Baldwin accepted and managed will be outlined. Its development and success will be shown in simple terms that reverberate today, unfortunately in too few of the world's nations.

This conference will refer to some other actions of recent Canadian governments that speak to endemic problems confronting the heritage movement in our country in the hope that professionals and activists will

be better armed to work better in the future, based on what has to be seen as this signal failure in Canadian social and historical preservation.

Lastly, the speaker will also address some shortcomings : in the efforts of both himself and the local conservation community over the last forty years. There were two main efforts made. One was social in character, to save good buildings that housed people of limited means who had rights in Canadian law to go on living in their homes. The other to save what was left on the block which had a high Heritage value. Both were insufficiently promoted in the circumstances. Not for a lifetime will the LaFontaine-Baldwin house properly honoured.