

John Ostell - Making it Big

by Stefan Wisniowski.

British North America in 1831 was a land of opportunity, and it was then that a young and energetic John Ostell came to Montreal to seek his fortune. The 18 year old Englishman, trained in surveying, architecture and engineering, sensed the potential that the growing city held and adopted it as his home. Here he was to serve as inspector of roads, land surveyor, perhaps the first lumber miller in Lower Canada (in 1848) and in 1860 the owner of a door, sash and blind factory. He was also a director of the Montreal & New York and the Champlain and St. Lawrence Railroads, the Montreal Gas Company and the Royal Insurance Company. Perhaps most importantly, he became instrumental in introducing Architecture into this city, which was at that time generally composed of rough stone houses and in which the British influence was only beginning to manifest itself, some 70 years after the Conquest.

For several decades, few Englishmen had settled in Montreal. However, by the time that Ostell arrived there were more English than French-speaking people in Montreal. Settlers were pouring into the hinterland beyond Montreal, and the city was their only link to Europe and to civilization: passing raw goods from the West to London and to Europe, and funnelling manufactured goods into the West.

This environment presented many opportunities to the newly arrived Ostell.

Schools were needed for the youth of the burgeoning English population, the overloaded judiciary needed new facilities, more and larger churches and seminaries were needed to accommodate the growing population, and by 1835 the harbour had developed to the point that it was declared an official Port of Entry into British North America, requiring a Customs House for inspection of the incoming cargo. The self-assured John Ostell took advantage of these opportunities to become the dominant Montreal architect of the mid-19th century, starting with his first major commission: the Customs House.

Finished in 1838, Ostell's small Customs House not only became a symbol of the British presence in Montreal, but also a monument to the growing importance of the merchant class in Montreal life. It fronted on the former **Vieux Marche**, which was subsequently opened to face onto the harbour to create one of the most striking locations in Montreal. Ostell had left England at a time when the concern for Antiquity was at a high level and was anxious to demonstrate his familiarity with the classical language of Architecture. Much of Ostell's style is captured in this elegant little building, with its numerous references to the original Renaissance sources passed down through British tradition by architects such as Inigo Jones, Sir William Chambers, Robert Adam, and James Gandon.

The Customs House was Georgian in its massing and composition, graced with a central pediment carrying the arms of the British Empire, console-surmounted windows, and a *piano nobile* with applied Tuscan pilasters - all resting on a strongly rusticated base. A one-storey portico supported on paired Tuscan columns and engaged antae (pilasters) completed the elegant facade greeting ships arriving at the port. All of these high-relief elements characterized the elevation facing the open **Place Royal** and the harbour beyond, as Ostell, who had always been concerned with the profile and the formal image that his buildings projected, had designed this facade to be read and appreciated from a distance.

The city elevation, facing St. Paul Street, was experienced from much closer range, and its surface treatment and detailing were subtler, even while the giant order pilasters made it visually more dramatic to compensate for the fore-shortened view.

The building was enlarged to its present

size in 1864, when Ostell moved the front facade 26 feet closer to the waterfront and infilled the extension behind it.

In 1837, Ostell married Eleonore Gauvin and began to integrate himself into French Canadian society, perhaps forming the connections which helped him win the commission to complete the twin towers of the French Catholic Notre Dame Cathedral, delayed due to a lack of funds when the church was built in 1824 by the Irish American architect James O'Donnell. Ostell respected the original plans, except that he replaced the planned pitched roofs with castle-like crenelations to cap the towers.

At that time the Sulpician Order wished to enlarge the facilities of their Seminary next to Notre Dame. Ostell was asked to propose a new Seminary to replace the ancient edifice of the early 1700's, though only half of his reconstruction was completed when in 1854 it was decided to build a new Seminary on the site of the **Fort de la Montagne**, above the present-day Sherbrooke Street, fortunately leaving much of the original Seminary



intact, with its traditional construction in striking contrast to the Ostell wing.

Inaugurated in 1857, Ostell's **Grande Seminaire** is a simple yet pleasing composition. Its overall horizontality, emphasized by a string course at each level, is neatly offset by the vertical expression of the rusticated quoins and by the proportions of the projecting central bay.

Ostell proceeded to execute many works in the Bishop's employ, among them several churches, a home for the aged, and a Bishop's Palace which combined Grecian porticoes with a Gothic chapel and a dome taken from St. Peter's in Rome. The Palace was an example of Ostell's adaptivity in working with a demanding and stubborn client, Bishop Bourget.

Meanwhile, the rapidly expanding English community lacked a centre of higher education in their colony, and one of Montreal's leading citizens, James McGill, therefore willed his land and a sum of money for a college. After much delay over the disputed will, four architects entered a competition for the college buildings. The schemes of George Brown, John Wells, H.B. Parry, and John Ostell each had certain merits and weaknesses, and after resubmissions, Ostell was retained to again revise his plans, incorporating the best features of each scheme into a final design.

This design consisted of a porticoed central block with wings and pavillions to either side, with a one-storey Grecian portico over the main entrance to his central block. The design was later ammended, though, by the addition of a third storey and a two-storey portico which would in Ostell's words: "produce that varied line to the horizon (which I conceive of importance in architectural composition)". (McGill University Archives, A.447/52).

The facade treatment of the Central block, now known as the Arts Building, recalls Ostell's earlier Customs House with its engaged pilasters flanking a central bay surmounted by a pediment, all resting on a rusticated lower storey. The profile again follows the familiar Georgian lines, except for the wooden lantern probably borrowed from George Brown's scheme to provide Ostell's "varied line to the horizon."



McGill College
c. 1865

The East block, now known as Dawson Hall, recalls the central bay of the Customs House's St. Paul Street facade, with its double-storey engaged Tuscan pilasters, framing three bays of windows piercing a smooth, unrusticated wall surface, and with its original horseshoe-shaped staircase - which has since been replaced on both the Customs House and Dawson Hall.

Financial difficulties of the fledgling university proved very frustrating for the conscientious Ostell, whose two-storey portico was never to be constructed. In 1860 a graceful, **one-storey** wooden portico was built by J.W. Hopkins, and was later replaced during extensive renovations in 1925 by the squat and ungainly stone portico that McGill University has now grown accustomed to. Note the second-floor central window, situated above the present portico: its detailing echos that of the entrance way directly below, suggesting its intended function as a doorway onto Ostell's portico, and along with the antae on the second floor remains to remind us of his original double-storey design.

John Ostell's last major commission also experienced the misfortune of having an ungainly addition imposed upon it. Working with his nephew and partner, Maurice Perrault, Ostell won a competition for a new Court House in 1849. This was an important project, and the Quebec Bar Association insisted on a majestic portico, modelled on that of the earlier Bank of Montreal building built in 1842 by John Wells on **Place d'Armes**. Though Ostell's Ionic portico does not rival Wells' Corinthian masterpiece, the Court House was successful as an elegant composition. The greystone facade featured high-relief classical elements such as the giant-ordered portico which, capped by a triangular pediment, met the face of the building to rest on Tuscan antae, a familiar device of Ostell's. Although the overall composition of the building was especially pleasing, with the horizontality of its massing accented by its vertical constituent elements: windows,

columns, and projecting wings, resting on a strong and satisfying rusticated base, the excitement that it produces largely arises from its detailing.

The windows in the central block of the **piano nobile** are capped with pediments in the Italian Renaissance style. The strongly projecting frames of these windows, with the balustrade-like elements applied on the facade above



*Court House
detail*

them, and with the astoundingly sculpted keystone on the rusticated East facade base, form a rich vocabulary which generates patterns of light and dark on the facades, creating an undulating wall-surface effect, and which is almost Mannerist in its exaggerated denial of structure.

Unfortunately, the plan did not work as well as the elevations did, perhaps due to the constant interventions of the Bar Association. The judicial departments were short of space and the Court House had severe functional problems. It depended upon the still primitive science of building ventilation and warming, and its interior was said to be dismal and

Court House



humid. In fact the death of a well-known lawyer, J.A. Perkins, in 1875 was blamed on the building, whose drains allegedly released a pernicious gas of fatal character, perhaps caused by impurities in the cast iron pipes.

With the need for expansion critical, the Bar Association in 1890 demanded the addition of a further storey to the Court House. Maurice Perrault, by then practicing without his 87 year old uncle, designed the unfortunate additions visible today: a fourth storey, a fifth on the central block, and a mammoth wooden dome. The grace of Ostell's original design is now virtually impossible to picture when confronted with these heavy-handed additions. Poor Perrault suffered the ironic misfortune of destroying the beauty of a design which he had helped to originally create.

John Ostell was Montreal's most prominent architect at a time that Architecture was being introduced into the increasingly sophisticated city. His work can be traced back to British roots, following in the Palladian traditions of architects greater than he, such as Sir Charles Barry, whose Traveller's Club had just been completed when Ostell left London. But it was the boundless energy of John Ostell and other "pioneers" like him who helped to develop Canada in its early days, and who have contributed so

greatly to our architectural heritage. From the time that he had arrived in 1831 to his death in 1892, Ostell had seen the architectural transition of Montreal from its indigenous French found-stone construction to a Victorian city of commercial and public buildings of various classical styles. British architectural fashion was by then in the hands of the Gothic Revivalists, though the battle of the styles was to be short-lived, as the new technology of iron frame construction was already springing up in the search for a truly appropriate style for the new age. □

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