

THE SQUARE MILE ~ MONTREAL 1860-1914

by Julia Gersovitz.

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*Examining our lost architectural heritage through
the hill-side mansions of Montreal's Victorian aristocracy...*

MOST Montrealers know that Sherbrooke Street is the longest road in the City of Montreal, but few realize that it once enjoyed a deserved reputation as the 'Fifth Avenue' of Montreal, and that it was the major thoroughfare of an area known as **The Square Mile**.¹

Its boundaries are generally defined in two ways. Literally, they are Pine and Cedar Avenues to the north, University Street to the east, Dorchester Boulevard to the south, and Guy Street and Cote des Neiges Boulevard to the west. Traditionally, however, they demarcate an area which is in reality a half-square mile, bounded not by Dorchester Boulevard, but by Sherbrooke Street.

The reason for this discrepancy is simple. Above Sherbrooke Street, climbing the slope of Mount Royal

were the mansions, isolated one from another by acres of garden. The area had an immediate image of exclusiveness and exclusion, of wealth and power. The area between Sherbrooke Street and Dorchester Boulevard was, with a few exceptions, built up with upper middle-class rowhouses, and so had a distinctly different and less luxurious impact.

It is difficult to believe perhaps, in surveying the architectural miscellany that comprises the district today, with its shoddy high-rise apartment blocks dwarfing the remaining nineteenth century houses, that from 1860 to 1914 the Square Mile was the most prestigious residential district in the city, indeed, in the entire country. By 1900, seventy percent of the wealth of Canada was held by the families of the twenty-five thousand individuals who lived within its boundaries.

*View of McGill campus,
after 1908*



As may be expected from this statistic, the financiers and merchants who lived there lived graciously, in opulent surroundings. Their residences were built by the leading architects of their time, and designed in the latest styles, as only the very rich can ever afford to do. Thus, an analysis of the development of the Square Mile and its architecture, provides an opportunity to study the work of the best Montreal architects, and to analyze the architectural trends that were fashionable at the time. Before tracing the evolution of the Square Mile, it is important to understand something of the geographics and economics of Montreal just prior to 1860.

In 1849, the city was in the depths of an economic depression. The population had been decimated by cholera and the 'ship fever' plague. Stores and houses were empty. The streets seemed deserted and dismal.

By 1870, the picture had changed dramatically. The city was prosperous. "Triumphs of architectural skill...were everywhere.² What was responsible for so radical an alteration? It was essentially due to technological advances that permitted the city to develop as a transportation nucleus and shipping center. These included harbour improvements, year-round rail links with the United States, and the opening of the Victoria Bridge.

The economic boom that Montreal witnessed between 1850 and 1870 was paralleled by a growth in the city limits. Prior to 1850, the population was still largely contained within an area defined by the old fortification walls - today known as Le Vieux Montreal. Within the triangle bounded by McGill Street to the west, Craig Street to the north and the river were located all the principal administrative,

commercial, financial and religious buildings as well as the homes of the ordinary citizens and the wealthy merchants.

Shortly before 1850, there was a decided residential shift out of the crowded and busy old city. The first development occurred along St. Antoine Street in the west and around Viger Square in the east. But speculators were quick to realize the potential of the area near and on the southern slopes of Mount Royal. Here was the possibility of spacious, salubrious quarters, with the added attraction of splendid views and beautiful landscapes.

In 1832, James McGregor described its rustic character: "...the mountain is about 800 feet above the level of the river; along its foot, and particularly up its sides, are thickly interspersed orchards, cornfields and villas; above which to the very summit of the



The Mount Stephen Club



'Piedmont', 1820

mountain, trees grow in luxuriant variety...".³ By 1860, the orchards were being cut down and the development that was to result in the Square Mile was beginning.

Greystone Decades 1860-1890

The first residences built in the Square Mile were randomly placed on their sites. They had little connection to the public roads, because indeed there were hardly any roads. When development began in the 1850's and early 1860's, it followed a set pattern. Building occurred after the subdivision of an existing estate, and the homologation of a street (or streets) through it, so that each individual lot was afforded on a public thoroughfare. Throughout most of the history of the Square Mile, the north-south side streets were cul-de-sacs, running up the mountain from Sherbrooke Street. This provided a quiet enclave for the residents of the area. As Stephen Leacock wrote: "...Each street was thus blind with that blindness that spells peace. Nature aided man. The elms that grow so easily on Montreal Island, thus left in secluded growth, fashioned each street into a Gothic Cathedral..."⁴

This sequence can be traced in the division and sale of the McTavish estate, the laying out of McTavish, Peel and Stanley Streets, and the construction of a number of large homes on the land. It was a time when prestigious residences were known by their names, and not their addresses. These included the 'Prince of Wales Terrace' (Browne and Footner, Architects, 1860); 'Braehead' (Andrew B. Taft, Architect, 1863); 'Thornhill' (W.T. Thomas, Architect, c.1862); 'Ravenscrag' (J.W. Hopkins, Architect, 1861-63); 'The Elms' (J.W. Hopkins, Architect, c.1862); 'Lononlet' (J.W. Hopkins, Architect, c.1865); and 'Dilcoosha' (J.J. Browne, Architect, c.1865).

The boom period of the late 1850's

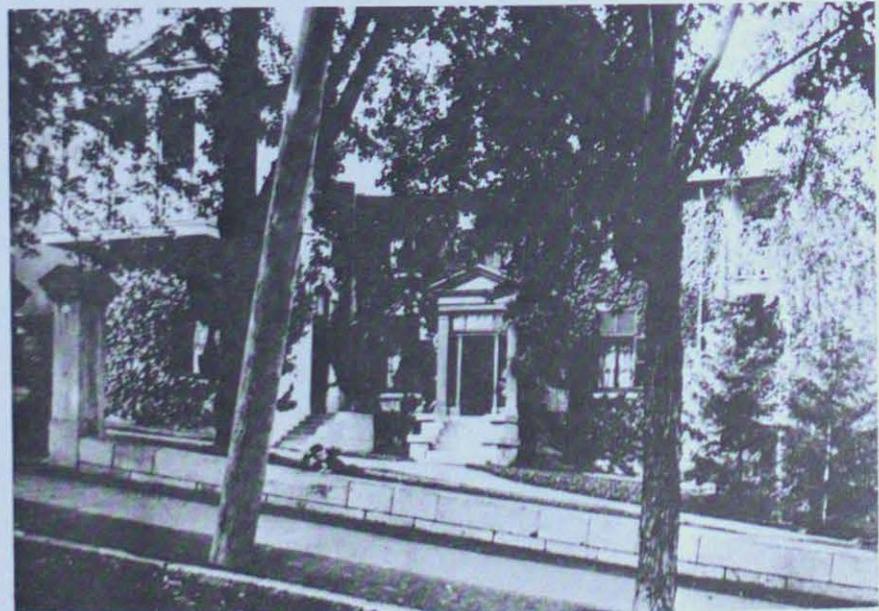
and 60's was followed by a building depression. The economic climate was poor, and the political conditions unstable. The major land assembly of the 1870's was undertaken not for development, but to ensure non-development. In 1872, expropriations began to create a public park on Mount Royal. Two years later Fredrick Law Olmstead, the foremost landscape architect on the continent, was hired to undertake the design.

The opening of the park enhanced the value of the land in the Square Mile in a number of ways. Firstly, of course, by taking hundreds of acres of potential real estate off the market it increased the worth of the remaining land that could be developed. Secondly, it added a value to the area which now boasted a natural and protected park as its own playground and backdrop. The mountain became an extension of the Square Mile, where the wealthy could retreat from

their increasing urban environment, to picnic, stroll and ride their carriages.

The decade of the 1880's, in contrast to the 70's was a period much like the 1860's, of increasing prosperity and burgeoning growth in the city's population. It culminated in a building boom between 1887 and 1890. The political climate was stable; economic conditions were good. The C.P.R. was under construction. Fortunes were amassed, and great houses planned.

One of the most elaborate of these, and the only one largely intact today, was Lord Mount Stephen's house. It was built on Drummond Street, to the designs of William T. Thomas, and was said to cost, in 1884, the princely sum of \$600,000.⁵ This statistic alone sets the house apart. But more important to the architectural historian is the fact that it was one of the last significant houses to be built in the district of the traditional



The William Workman Residence



The Prince of Wales Terrace, 1860



'Braehead', 1863

Montreal greystone.

The rockface of Mount Royal, and the bedrock of the island is a hard grey limestone, designated by geologists as Trenton Limestone. Up to the end of the nineteenth century most of Montreal's architecture was built of this greystone, cut from local quarries. The native stone is tough, and not easy to work, but it has unique properties. The following excerpt from an article about the Cavenhill Block in the January 1870 issue of *American Architect and Builders Monthly*, gives some idea of what these are:

...The material used is the Montreal limestone; and the moulded work and carving are very successful, considering it is so very hard, and with such great difficulty worked. This stone possesses one great peculiarity over every other stone with which I am

acquainted; that it becomes whiter and brighter with age; that this in a very light stone is a very great recommendation, for while dark stones are, most of them, improved with age and become mellow in tone, in white building marbles and stone almost as pure in colour when new, age only means dirt and stain....⁶

The domestic architecture of the period 1860-1890 was distinguished by several characteristics. It related to the architecture that preceded it by its continuing use of the traditional limestone, and it differed from it in its stylistic eclecticism.

The early houses in the area, like 'Piedmont' (1820) or the Workman residence, were designed in the Georgian idiom that had been brought to Montreal by the English. It was still fashionable when the McGill Arts Building was erected in 1843. By the

1860's this style was being abandoned for a variety of increasingly popular revivals that were being developed in England and the United States.

Their use in Montreal was indicative of the growing number of trained architects practicing in the city by the 1860's. Until that time, it was common practice for contractors to prepare the designs of even the most elaborate residences.⁷ McKays Directory of 1856-57 listed only nine architectural and civil engineering firms. By 1870 the list had swollen to nineteen.

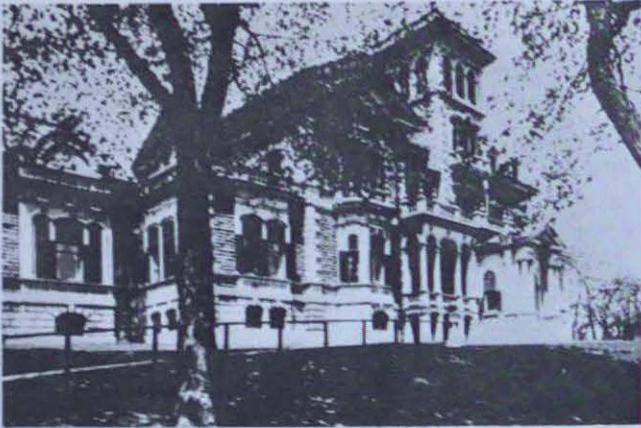
This increasing professionalism produced a more sophisticated and elaborate detailing of the limestone used as a principal building material. As time went by, the external walls were laid in regular courses of ashlar blocks, or hewn blocks furnished with cut-stone quoins, window surrounds and cornices. The carving also became more intricate and profuse. The stone work details on the Mount Stephen residence were perhaps the most complicated executed in the tough native stone.

The burgeoning eclecticism can most readily be seen in a chronological analysis of the houses built during the 1860's on the McTavish estate. The first, The Prince of Wales Terrace, was opened in 1860. It was sited on Sherbrooke Street, between McTavish and Peel Streets. The architects patterned it on the English terraces popularized by John Nash in London, and the Woods in Bath. It was thus one of the last buildings in the simple, yet elegant Georgian idiom.

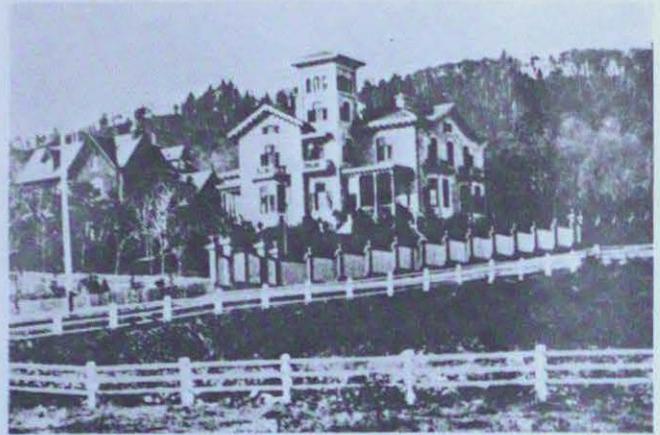
The gothic 'Braehead', its neighbour 'The Elms', and the Italianate 'Thornhill', owed much to the ideas of Andrew Jackson Downing and his theories of the picturesque which demanded asymmetry and varied massings. 'Ravenscrag', sited further up the hill, was also in "...the Italian style of architecture..."⁸ with a



'Thornhill', c. 1862



'Ravenscrag', 1861-63



'The Elms', 'Thornhill', both c.1862

sprawling plan and varied elevations, pierced by towers. 'Lononlet', on the other hand, was tightly confined by a rectangular plan, and its roof topped by a mansard. 'Dilcoosha', at the corner of McTavish and Sherbrooke, also owed nothing to the theories of the picturesque. It was very much a box, with applied Egyptian-Revival detailing.

Of all of these residences, only 'Braehead' and 'Ravenscrag' remain today. With the exception of 'Mount-View', the Linton house on Simpson, the 1870 gothic cottages at the corner of Simpson and McGregor Avenues, The Mount Stephen Club, The McGill Faculty Club, and some scattered townhouses, very little stands today from the first thirty years development of the Square Mile. We must therefore turn to an analysis of the next twenty-five years, to understand the sources of the bulk of the architectural legacy.

The Polychrome Decades 1890-1914

By the end of the nineteenth century, Montreal was the banking center of Canada. The financiers, railway barons and the captains of trade and industry sought to build homes in the Square Mile commensurate to their newly found status. Some were rich and powerful enough to assemble large tracts of land for their mansions, even going as far as to demolish existing houses to enlarge their gardens.

But for most the approach was more low-key. The available, unbuilt-upon land was scarcer, and more expensive. Even when the houses were large, they were restricted to much smaller lots than previously. By and large, this meant that they were more closely aligned to the street. The early houses were set back from their streets by gracious expanses of lawn and drive. As the lots became shallower, the homes moved forward, to accommodate stables and service yards at the back.

The general reduction in the scale of the buildings that began in the 1880's continued over the next thirty years. There was a finite amount of prime real estate, and a growing upper middle class that aspired to a residence on the slopes of Mount Royal. Not only were more and more rowhouses built up Peel Street, McTavish Street, and along the south side of Sherbrooke Street, but, for the first time, there were semi-detached residences built. Finally after 1900, a number of apartment houses for the affluent appeared in the Square Mile.

Although the houses that lined the streets of the Square Mile began to present a more uniform alignment to the passerby, there was a new architectural development that tended to work against this uniformity. The architects of the Square Mile were turning away from the traditional local greystone in favor of imported coloured stones. In this, they followed

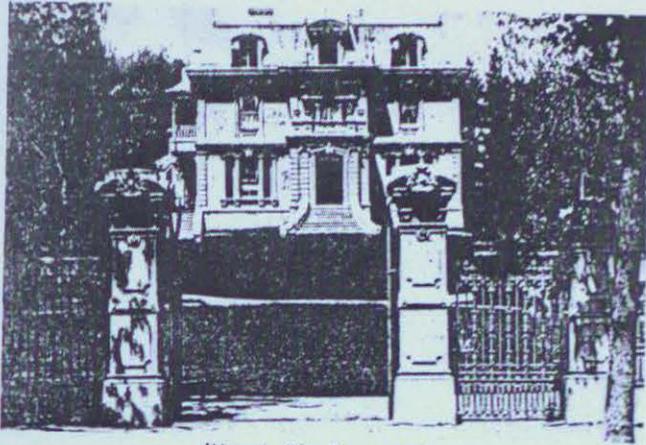
a trend begun in 1884 in the financial district of the old city with the Standard Life Assurance Building, and then the New York Life Insurance Building.

There are a number of reasons for the decline in the popularity of the native stone. Advanced methods of transportation by rail and steamship facilitated the use of imported stones. Foreign architects, chiefly from the United States, were coming in increasing numbers to execute prestigious commissions in Montreal. They tended to specify materials already familiar to them, that could be cheaply imported into the city. There were also stylistic considerations. The major buildings of the late 1880's and 90's had elaborately carved decorative elements. The Montreal limestone was ill-suited to intricate working, much more practical were the softer Indiana and Ohio limestones and sandstones. As well, it was an age when buildings



'Dilcoosha', c.1865

The Square Mile



'Mount View', c.1870



The Gothic Cottages, 1870

glowed in colour. Polychromy was popular, both for the interior and the exterior. It is no wonder that in an age which revelled in russets, deep greens and rich browns, the pale soft grey of Montreal limestone was discarded in favor of the more interesting palette offered by other stones.

New styles were also being introduced into the Square Mile. From the United States came the Romanesque of H.H. Richardson, and the Francois I Chateau popularized by Richard Morris Hunt. From England came the detailing and massing of the Queen Anne Revival. By 1900, the chastly pale, severely cubic form of the Classical Revival appeared.

It is important to emphasize that the stylistic characteristics of each of these Revivals were never just brought into the Square Mile, and applied unaltered. The exigencies of the harsh Canadian winters meant that

they had to be modified. As Percy Nobbs wrote in 1914: "...In recent domestic work of the better class...we may see the beginning of a new and really Canadian architecture with a rational relation to English traditions and Canadian conditions".⁹

By 1914 the Square Mile had already begun to experience the beginnings of the two trends - high-rise construction and demolition - that were ultimately to destroy it. The end of the First World War also meant the end of the era of the great mansions. The sons of Square Milers who came home moved to smaller houses in Westmount. Ten years after the end of the war, the stock market crashed, and with it the sheltered and carefree life that had been so carefully nurtured in the Square Mile since the 1860's.

Sherbrooke Street became increasingly commercial. Houses were split up into boutiques. Throughout the 1950's

and 60's, speculators bought the remaining mansions, and cleared the sites for apartment houses. As to their architectural merit, one might best quote Percy Nobbs: "...After the war, we had to forget architecture and content ourselves with accommodation engineering...".¹⁰ The towers, grossly out of scale with their surroundings, were designed by balance-sheet calculations and 30-year depreciation schedules rather than by the architects themselves.

Today, very little of the glory of the Square Mile is evident. Corporations like Alcan and Corby's Distillers are to be commended for their preservation efforts. One can only hope that McGill University, the largest property owner in the area, will continue to be encouraged and funded to protect what remains of our Victorian architectural heritage ●

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