

## **Les Amis de la résidence de Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine Montréal, Quebec**

On April 27, 1849, an angry mob of English Canadians set fire to the Parliament of Canada in Montréal. The mob was enraged because the government had granted amnesty to the 1837-38 rebels and paid compensation for property losses to the victims of the rebellions.



After they torched Parliament, they turned their wrath against the man they blamed for what they considered unjust compensation to French Canadians. He was Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine, Prime Minister of the Union of Canada, and the man who, with Robert Baldwin, had achieved responsible government for Canada. He was also the politician who insisted on speaking French in the Legislative Assembly. The mob ransacked La Fontaine's house, but left it standing.

Now La Fontaine's residence, which survived the 1849 attack, is at the heart of a conflict that has been festering for more than 20 years.

On one side is a volunteer group that wants the La Fontaine residence to be protected as a historic site. They would like it preserved as a museum and interpretive centre.

On the other side is the property's owner, who isn't interested in historic preservation. The La Fontaine residence is part of a parcel of prime real estate adjacent to downtown Montréal.

The volunteer Friends of the La Fontaine Residence think there is a way to break the stalemate, but it will take a bold political move: official federal recognition. But under law, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada is not allowed to give that recognition unless the owner of a site agrees.

In 1987, Montréal did what appeared to be the next best thing. The city recognized the residence as a historic monument. However, such protection is limited. It means only that any change to the exterior of the house must be approved by city council.

Meanwhile, both the exterior and interior of the Georgian greystone residence are suffering.

Friends of the residence have support from French and English communities, the Montréal Board of Trade, political leaders at all levels, and Héritage Montréal.

Senator Serge Joyal has been a leader of the group fighting for preservation.

"Downtown Montréal is home to three historic monuments that are at the heart of the political life of Canada," Senator Joyal explains.

The Louis-Joseph Papineau House on Bonsecours Street is a registered historic site. The George-Etienne Cartier House has the same status. The third historic monument is LaFontaine's house.

"La Fontaine's home bears witness to the struggle for responsible government in Canada. That was a struggle that took place in Upper and Lower Canada as well as in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island."



Another volunteer working with Senator Joyal is architect Dinu Bumbaru of Héritage Montréal.

In the period from 1960 to 1975, Dinu Bumbaru estimates that as many as 30,000 buildings in Montréal were lost. Many were levelled to make room for development projects and public works, like highways.

"We'd like to sort this out—sooner rather than later—because there are other pressures on real estate in this neighbourhood," he explains. "Concordia University is expanding and there is development on nearby St. Catherine Street.

Preserving this house is a fundamental thing. It is not a partisan issue," he contends.

The recent Montréal, Cultural Metropolis Rendez-vous, in mid-November 2007, brought together key political figures, cultural activists, and Montréal's Board of Trade.

Friends of the residence of Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine made their case. Now they are waiting for the city to make its move.

Senator Joyal remains hopeful that the La Fontaine Residence will get the protection it deserves. "I am a stubborn man, but I am patient," he says. He is prepared to keep fighting for the cause as long as it takes.

Les Amis de la residence Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine  
<http://www.geocities.com/residencelafontaine/home.html>

"Future of Pre-Confederation PM's Residence Uncertain"  
(*Heritage Magazine*, Summer 2006)

<http://www.heritagecanada.org/eng/news/archived/summer2006/future.html>

Héritage Montréal

<http://www.geocities.com/residencelafontaine/home.html>