

Montréal, Capital of the United Canada

A Parliament Beneath Your Feet

Why is this site important?

To grasp the historic significance of this archaeological site, it is important to realize that Montréal was the country's capital starting in 1844 and played an essential role – economically, politically and socially. The city was the metropolis of the United Province of Canada, or the United Canada, and the country's financial centre. It was also a commercial hub, thanks to its international harbour. The Queen of England chose Montréal as the capital, and the members sat in the former St. Ann's Market building, converted to house the Parliament, from 1844 to 1849.

Montréal went on to establish itself as the birthplace of modern Canada, and its Parliament was witness to a major chapter in Canadian history. During the 1840s, significant reforms were adopted: French was recognized as one of the official languages of the state, and the Assembly won full control over the budget. Many changes took place in the administration: for example, several ministries (Public Works, Crown Land, Secretariat, etc.) were created to meet public needs, and the legal and educational systems were improved. In March 1848, the Reform party, led by Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin, won the election and was recognized by the Governor General as a "responsible government." This local autonomy within the British Empire was an important step in the lead-up to Canadian Confederation. The Parliament of the United Canada in Montréal saw major transformations in the Canadian political system.

In 1849, a riot was sparked by the Royal sanction given to the act indemnifying victims of the 1837–1838 Rebellions. The Parliament building was burned down in tragic circumstances, and Montréal lost its status as the capital. Parliament then sat alternately in Toronto and Quebec City until 1865; Ottawa was chosen as the capital in 1857, and Parliament moved there permanently in 1866.

Did you know?

St. Ann's Market, built in 1833, was Montréal's first indoor market. It was a huge engineering and urban planning achievement for its time. The building was erected to meet the urgent need to feed the city's rapidly growing population, which skyrocketed from 9,000 in 1800 to 25,000 by 1825. By 1842, it had reached 40,290.

In 1840, there were 670,000 people in Lower Canada (Quebec) and 455,000 in Upper Canada (Ontario).

In 1843, after much debate, the parliamentarians asked that Montréal be made the capital. This was properly the prerogative of the Queen of England, under the *Act of Union*, and so marked the beginning of local autonomy from London.

In the spring of 1844, architect George William Richardson Browne converted the interior of the St. Ann's Market building to house the Parliament. The opening of the first session of Parliament, on November 28, 1844, was announced with a 21-gun salute.

Several "Fathers of Confederation" – John A. Macdonald, George-Étienne Cartier, Étienne-Pascale Taché and Alexander Tilloch Galt – were already members of Parliament when it sat in Montréal.

The Parliament in Montréal witnessed a major chapter in Canadian history: in March 1848, the Reform party, led by Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin, was elected. Many reforms quickly followed:

1. French was recognized as one of the official languages of the state.
2. The Assembly won full control over the budget.

3. The LaFontaine-Baldwin government established the principle of “responsible government.” This local autonomy within the British Empire was an important step in the lead-up to Canadian Confederation.
4. A number of government ministries (Public Works, Post Office, Education, etc.) were created to meet public needs, and the justice system was reorganized.

Montréal’s status as capital had a major impact on its architecture and infrastructure. The Corporation of the City of Montreal built Bonsecours Market between 1844 and 1846, in a monumental neo-classical style worthy of one of the world’s great capital cities. The government of the United Canada also launched an architectural competition for the construction of another imposing building, the courthouse, still standing on rue Notre-Dame, near City Hall.

Who were they?

Three political movements, one issue: support for responsible government

Reformers: Prepared to remain part of the Empire, but wanted the Legislative Assembly to be given more powers. Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin were Reformers.

Tories: Wealthy British merchants, opposed to responsible government and intent on maintaining their hold on power. Allan Napier MacNab was a Tory.

Republicans: They opposed responsible government, since it would mean remaining in the British Empire. They wanted a republic, like the United States. Louis-Joseph Papineau was a Republican.

What is a responsible government?

A government more representative of electors

1. The ministers on the Executive Council were now chosen from among the elected members of Parliament, drawn from the majority party in the Assembly. They held control over legislation and the local administration.
2. The Governor had to respect the local decisions made by Parliament.
3. The British government in London retained certain powers, in particular over international relations and the armed forces.

How did the fire in the Parliament start?

On April 25, 1849, the Governor General gave royal sanction to the *Rebellion Losses Bill* passed in March, indemnifying the victims of repression during the 1837–1838 rebellions in Lower Canada. For the Tories, this was the last straw. They were outraged, and called for protesters to assemble on the Champ-de-Mars. Over 1,500 people turned out, many of them members of the Anglophone business community.

After a number of inflammatory speeches, one of the leaders, Fire Chief Alfred Perry, called on the crowd to descend on Parliament. The protestors flocked to the building and interrupted the session in progress, yelling and throwing stones. A dozen rioters broke in and began ransacking the interior. Fire broke out and spread quickly, as the mob prevented the fire department from using its hoses. There were no deaths, but the building was a total loss.

The Parliament had two libraries, for the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council, housing 22,000 volumes. These included all the official documents of Upper and Lower Canada, some of them dating back to the days of New France. Barely 200 were saved from the flames.

What happened after the fire?

Shortly after the fire, Anglophone and Francophone Reform members of Parliament, with the support of the clergy and the press, organized public gatherings and petitions throughout the Province of Canada to denounce the events in Montréal and their support for the government and the British Crown. As the government's new powers won public approval, the Tories and Republicans were marginalized. Not long afterwards, Montréal lost its status as the capital.

1851: The ruins of the Parliament were levelled.

1851–1901: A new St. Ann's Market was built, made out of brick. Around 1925, it was converted into a municipal parking lot, and remained so until 2010.