

**THE ST. PIERRE RIVER: REMEMBERING A HISTORIC
MONTRÉAL WATERWAY**

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Daylighting Rivers: Inquiry Based Learning for Civic Ecology

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THE ST. PIERRE RIVER: REMEMBERING A HISTORIC MONTRÉAL WATERWAY

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Fig. 1. The St. Pierre River in 1834. Source: Carte de l'île de Montréal, 1834, by A. Jobin, BAnQ <http://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/2243990?docsearchtext=ile%20de%20Montreal%201834>

Abstract

A Montréal environmental group, Les Amis du Parc Meadowbrook, has been protecting one of the last remaining sections of an historic waterway, one that has both witnessed and shaped the development of Montréal. The recent history of this waterway, the St. Pierre River, is typical of the evolving relationship between the population and urban waterways: what was once an advantage, with these rivers providing transportation and fresh water for agricultural use and human and animal consumption, then turned into a major nuisance with increasing pollution from growing industrialization and urbanization.¹ The 19th century solution was to integrate and bury the St. Pierre River into the sewer system.

Les Amis du Parc Meadowbrook have worked to raise awareness to the plight of urban rivers both in the general public and with the different levels of government. There are also a number of

1. Deudon Laetitia, 2012/2013. Sociétés et territoires fluviaux, une approche comparative : L'Escaut à Valenciennes et la Rivière Saint-Pierre à Montréal (XVIIe - XVIIIe siècles), Université de Valenciennes (France) / Université de Montréal, Masters thesis.

daylighting projects under consideration along its course to improve flood management and water quality and maintain plant and animal habitats.

Keywords: St. Pierre River, Montreal history, Les Amis du Parc Meadowbrook, urban rivers, daylighting

Introduction

For over thirty years, the environmental group Les Amis du Parc Meadowbrook has been keeping a close eye on a small brook that crosses a disputed area in southwestern Montréal. This is the brook referred to in the name of the 57-hectare golf course called Meadowbrook Golf Club, which owners have been trying to develop for the last thirty years.²

A rich history

There is much more, however, to this mere 200-m long brook. It is, in fact, one of the few visible sections of a river that used to flow from the foot of Mount Royal—a defining feature of the Montréal landscape—all the way to the St. Lawrence River. The St. Pierre River, as it is called, was both a witness to and a factor in the development of the city.

The river was named after Baron Pierre Chevrier de Fancamp, a nobleman from Picardie, France. He was a founding member of the Société de Notre-Dame, which financed the colonization of Montréal.³

The river's source may have been on the west side of Mount Royal; it then ran west before taking a sharp turn east in Lachine, where a fur-trading post was established in the second half of the 17th century. The river then formed a shallow lake known as Lac Saint-Pierre or Lac-à-la-Loutre (now the site of the Turcot highway exchange), which dried up during work on the Lachine Canal in the 19th century.⁴ The river finally reached the St. Lawrence in the Saint-Gabriel domain of the Notre-Dame Congregation, new home of the filles du roy sent to populate New France.⁵

The St. Pierre River made it possible to cross the city from east to west without navigating the tumultuous rapids of the St. Lawrence River. To First Nations before the arrival of French colonizers, it was at once a means of transportation, a source of water for agricultural use and consumption, as and a hunting and fishing ground. French colonizers were quick to recognize its transportation potential and tried unsuccessfully to channel its waters and straighten its course; the technology of the time was not sufficiently sophisticated.⁶

Under the French regime, three flour mills were constructed along the river; by building the St. Gabriel Canal on the domain of the same name, the seigneurs of Montréal, the Sulpicians, diverted the St. Pierre River to the Petite rivière, the site of the very first French establishment in Montréal founded by Paul de Chomedey Sieur de Maisonneuve and Jeanne Mance in 1642, where the Musée d'archéologie et d'histoire de Pointe-à-Callière now stands.⁷

2. See photos of the present-day river at <http://lesamisdemeadowbrook.org/development/the-st-pierre-river/>

3. Douaire Gilles, 2009. La rivière Saint-Pierre, le canal Saint-Gabriel et la Petite rivière Saint-Pierre p. 3

4. <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/qc/canallachine>

5. <https://www.maisonsaintgabriel.ca/>

6. Deudon Laetitia op cit

7. Douaire Gilles op. cit. <https://pacmusee.qc.ca/fr/> pg. 7

The St. Pierre River played a role in Montréal's early industrialization, one linked to the fur trade. Tanneries⁸ required a great deal of water for the treatment of pelts; the river was both a source of water and a means of disposing of industrial waste after processing. Other industries soon joined the tanneries, such as tallow factories and slaughterhouses, whose residue, compounded with waste from agriculture and housing, contributed to transforming the St. Pierre into an open-air sewer. Under growing pressure linked to public health, it met the same fate as many urban rivers in the 19th century.⁹

The construction of the Williams collector in 1832 was a first attempt at canalizing and burying the river. An engineering feat in its time, this 350-m collector is now part of the Musée d'archéologie et d'histoire de Pointe-à-Callière.¹⁰ Throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, the river was progressively canalized into Montréal's sewer system, with major work being done in 1932 during the Great Depression with the construction of the St. Pierre collector.¹¹ "Drainer" Andrew Emond has explored this maze of tunnels and published astonishing photos.¹² A woonerf recently created on the collector¹³ reminds Montrealers of the presence of this invisible yet essential infrastructure. The case of the St. Pierre River is not unique: Prof. Valerie Mahaut of the Université de Montréal estimated that a mere 59 km of waterways remains in Montréal, where there may have been as many as 338 km in the 1850s.¹⁴

New threats to the St. Pierre River

There remains, however, the 200-m section of the St. Pierre River snaking through the Meadowbrook golf course. The brook was at the heart of a recent court battle in which the owners of the property, real estate developers Meadowbrook Groupe Pacific, demanded that the City of Montréal stop polluting the river on their land.

The brook is fed by the Toe Blake rainwater collector that serves a number of residential areas in southwestern Montréal. As early as 2002, the City was aware of the poor quality of the water.¹⁵ The City of Montréal did a thorough study of the collector in 2014,¹⁶ in an effort to pinpoint the source of the pollution. It showed pollution levels of 34,000 fecal coliforms per 100 mL (normal levels should be around 200). It was determined that the City of Côte Saint-Luc and the town of Montreal West, which border Meadowbrook Golf Course, were in fact responsible. The pollution is caused by crossed connections in their jurisdictions, where residential sewers have been connected to the rainwater system instead of the sanitary installations. To date, Côte Saint-Luc has found only four

8. Transports Québec Synthèse de l'étude de potentiel archéologique pg. 14

https://www.turcot.transports.gouv.qc.ca/fr/Documents/2015-09-22_AnnexeB_SyntheseDeLEtudeDePotentielArcheologique.pdf

9. Douaire Gilles op cit pg. 13

10. <https://pacmusee.qc.ca/fr/expositions/detail/collecteur-de-memoires/>

11. see photo https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89gouts_de_Montr%C3%A9al

12. see also <http://undermontreal.com/map/>

13.

http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/ARROND_SOU_FR/MEDIA/DOCUMENTS/WOONERF_PANN_EAU2_100.PDF

14. Lacroix-Couture Frédéric Environ 82 % des ruisseaux disparus de Montréal | Metro

<https://journalmetro.com/actualites-outremont-mont-royal/1055893/environ-82-des-ruisseaux-disparus-a-montreal/>

15. Réseau de suivi du milieu aquatique, 2002. Qualité des ruisseaux et des lacs intérieurs pg. 5. Presence of coliforms >600,00, phosphorus, nitrogen and heavy metals

16. Réseau de suivi du milieu aquatique, 2014. Origine de la contamination en temps sec du collectif d'égout pluvial alimentant le ruisseau du golf Meadowbrook fév. 2014

crossed connections on its territory and Montreal West 13,¹⁷ which it will repair on a priority basis as it rebuilds its underground infrastructure.

In its 2018 decision, the Superior Court¹⁸ gave the City of Montréal two years to correct the situation. In February 2020, the City of Montréal undertook to temporarily divert the Toe Blake collector during dry periods while the source of the pollution is investigated.

Methodology

With the help of another environmental group, the Société pour Vaincre la Pollution (SVP), Les Amis collected samples in October 2018 at the St. Pierre River on Meadowbrook and had them analyzed for pollutants. Results showed the presence of over 6,000 coliforms per 100 mL. SVP also used the results of the 2014 City of Montréal study of the Toe Blake collector to draw a map of the addresses in Côte Saint-Luc (167) and Montreal West (51) where crossed connections might be found. This map was shared with both municipalities. Les Amis and SVP planned to do a rhodamine test to show the problem but it was too late in the season to proceed. Les Amis were also present at city council and agglomeration meetings, pressing elected officials for answers.

To further educate the public to the plight of urban rivers, Les Amis communicated repeatedly¹⁹ with media and posted articles on its web site.²⁰ The group also sponsored several showings of the film *Lost Rivers* by Montréal filmmaker Caroline Bacle and gave its copy of the film to Montréal's library network. Members of our group organized a bike ride along the historic course of the river²¹ and led activities during Jane's Walks held every year in honour of urban activist Jane Jacobs.²² Les Amis have campaigned for a great many years to preserve Meadowbrook and have collaborated with landscape architect Catalyse urbaine on the production of a master plan for an Urban Nature Heritage Park Accessible to All.²³

Efforts to daylight the St. Pierre River

Some thirty rivers and brooks once flowed across the City of Montréal.²⁴ There are increasing calls to daylight sections of these waterways in an effort to better manage surface water and alleviate the heat island effect. During flash floods, waste water often mixes with rain water and is sent directly to the St. Lawrence River without treatment. Municipal water collection systems are overwhelmed by the excess volume; the result is costly flooding.

17. <https://montreal-west.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/informer-october-2018-web.pdf>

18. Cour Supérieure du Québec, 2018. File no 500-17-079150-135

19. Scott, Marian, Montreal ordered to bury or divert last remnant of St. Pierre River The Gazette July 10, 2018 <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/last-remnant-of-st-pierre-river-could-be-buried/?fbclid=IwAR36EGBtXQ88JoADdTk2QtO-59MSz1UuFnBiX-enbe6-BokvzCFmhLjmkHQ>

20. <http://lesamisdemeadowbrook.org/development/the-st-pierre-river/>

21. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Community-Organization/Balade-de-la-Rivi%C3%A8re-st-Pierre-River-Ride-235288763669216/>

22. <http://lesamisdemeadowbrook.org/waterways/following-the-st-pierre-river-of-yesteryear/>

23. <https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B74sG8jw2ZKLUWN2QXloZF80SEE/edit>

24. Mahaut, Valérie, Recensement cartographique des anciens cours d'eau de l'île de Montréal et tracé des creux et des crêtes <http://hdl.handle.net/1866/16311>

The City of Montréal has looked into the feasibility of daylighting upstream sections of the St. Pierre River in the Turcot exchange project.²⁵ The Quebec chapter of the World Wildlife Federation (WWF-Canada), through its project BLEUE MTL, is also looking into the feasibility of daylighting a few sections of the St. Pierre River in the Sud-ouest borough.²⁶

Other projects fall under the category of cultural restoration, where residents are reminded through different means of the past existence of a river. A bike and pedestrian pathway at the base of the Falaise Saint-Jacques,²⁷ a 4-km forested area that stretches along what used to be *lac Saint-Pierre*, is soon to be completed, with marshes that will reconnect Montrealers with their history and geography. (The Falaise, part of the terrasse Sherbrooke²⁸ is an escarpment formed thousands of years ago by marine deposits in the Champlain Sea). Following public consultations, the Office de consultation publique de Montréal (OCPM) also submitted recommendations in the summer of 2019 for the creation of a nature park with water features, on land left over from the construction of the Turcot exchange. This new nature park would serve as a dramatic gateway to Montréal.²⁹

Discussion and Conclusion

As we submit this paper, the fate of Meadowbrook and its brook is still undecided: owners of the golf course have taken their suit against the City of Montréal to the Supreme Court of Canada. They also have a suit against the City of Côte Saint-Luc, ongoing since 2001.

Furthermore, it remains to be seen how the water level in the brook will be affected by the deviation of the Toe Blake collector and to what extent the pollution problem will be resolved. As for the daylighting proposals, they are just that: proposals. They do, however, have the potential to redefine the relations between residents and their waterways from an environmental, biological and heritage point of view.

Acknowledgment

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27. Turcot, 2018. Consultation de la bande verte https://www.turcot.transports.gouv.qc.ca/fr/info-citoyens/activites-information/Documents/VersionFinale_Cahier_Ame%CC%81nagement%20bande%20verte.pdf

28. Transports Québec Synthèse de l'étude de potentiel archéologique pg. 5
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