

Workers restore  
Fort Chambly.



## Fort Chambly saved from ruin

As a manager of interpretation products for Parks Canada, I really owe my career to Joseph-Octave Dion, the first custodian of Fort Chambly. Were it not for his determination to persuade the Government of Canada to save this important monument to our past, the fort's old stones would have been used to build a wharf on the Chambly Canal, and I would never have become a guide/interpreter at Fort Chambly National Historic Site in 1981.

Dion was born in Chambly, a village on the shore of Quebec's Richelieu River, in 1838. The fort, which was rapidly deteriorating as local residents carried off its stone and wood to build houses, became Dion's life passion. After fifteen years of lobbying, he was in 1882 given \$1,000 by the Department of Public Works to restore the structure and supervise the work. Dion made his home inside the fort and organized patriotic pilgrimages from Montreal. He continued to lobby for restoration funds and lived at the fort until he died in 1916.

In 1920, less than ten years after the establishment of the Dominion Parks Branch, Fort Chambly was designated a National Historic Site. A museum was installed inside the fort to house an exhibit set up by Marius Barbeau, a renowned ethnologist with the National Museum of Canada. At that time, the fort was a bucolic ruin, graced with a small flower garden, trees, and benches beside the Richelieu rapids. In the 1960s, the exhibit was updated and a slide show was added.

In the 1970s, Parks Canada launched a major overhaul of Fort Chambly, restoring it to what it looked like at the end of the French regime. It was a huge challenge: The three surviving curtain walls had to be stabilized; spaces walled in during Dion's time had to be opened up; and the north wall and the four buildings adjacent to the curtain walls had to be reconstructed.

An investment of more than \$8 million supported the restoration project from the fall of 1980 to the summer of 1982. Missing stones were replaced by new ones from the Montreal region. The fort, as well as the buildings bordering the interior courtyard, were returned to their 1750 exterior appearance.

Nonetheless, to clearly indicate that it was a reconstruction, modern materials used inside three of the wings of the fort were made obvious. Only the south wing, the one that includes the chapel, was returned to an eighteenth-century look with wooden beams and floorboards and diamond-paned windows of old glass. The chapel bell is an exact replica of the bell once located in the bell tower of the Fortress of Louisbourg in Nova Scotia.

On July 1, 1983, I was proud to be present for the inauguration of the new Fort Chambly as a young guide/interpreter. Thanks to the pioneering work of Dion and the efforts of Parks Canada, Fort Chambly is today one of Canada's most visited National Historic Sites.

— André Gousse

