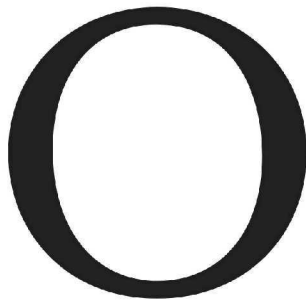


BUILT *to* INTIMIDATE

Fort Chambly was designed with one thing in mind — to keep its enemies at bay. *by René Chartrand.*



On the banks of Quebec's Richelieu River, at the foot of the Chambly rapids, stands a tall masonry fort that looks vaguely medieval. This is Fort Chambly National Historic Site, one of the most popular landmarks in Canada, not only because of its proximity to the great city of Montreal, but also because it is a truly enchanting site.

that, through a few portages south of Lake Champlain, connected the St. Lawrence River to the Atlantic Ocean, from Sorel, Quebec, to New York. Between the two was the home of the Five Nations Iroquois League. The region between Lake Champlain and the surrounding area of present-day Albany, New York, was occupied by the Agniers Nation, now usually known as Mohawk.

In the summer of 1609, a party of Huron and northern Algonquian warriors accompanied by explorer Samuel de Champlain and nine French soldiers landed south of what is now called Lake Champlain, where an Iroquois army was waiting for them. Armed with bows and shielded with wooden armour, the two opposing Aboriginal factions faced off in a clearing. Then Champlain emerged, firing his arquebus and instantly killing two Iroquois chiefs.

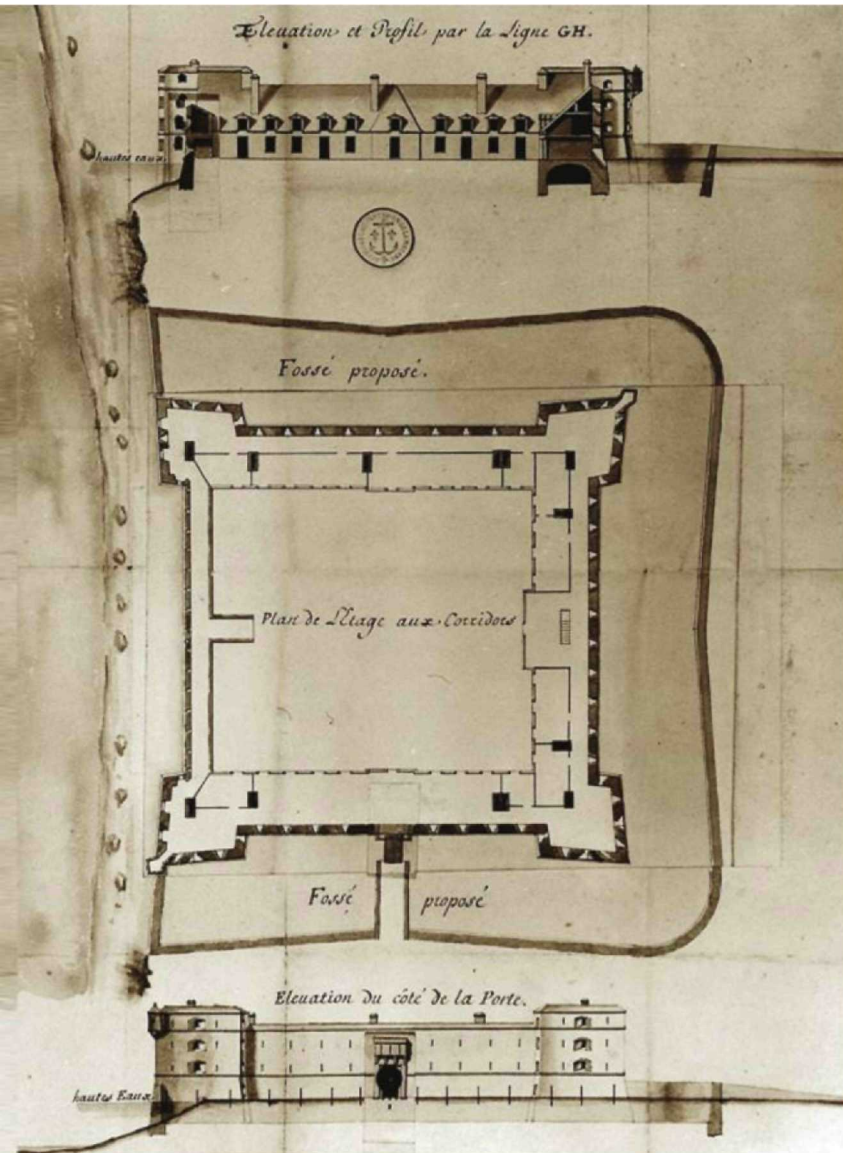
This was the start of decades of hostilities between the French and the powerful Iroquois League. The latter were eventually supplied with firearms by Dutch allies and became increasingly militant as they attempted to gain control of the fur trade. As over-hunted beaver disappeared in their territory, the Iroquois expanded northward, warring mainly with Algonquian-speaking peoples allied with the French. By the early 1650s, Iroquois warriors started attacking French colonists, who lived in terror of their raids. And by the mid-1660s, the small colony seemed endangered. That is when the young King Louis XIV intervened.

In 1665, twenty companies of the Carignan-Salières Regiment and four companies from other French army regiments arrived in Quebec City to stabilize the situation with the Iroquois. Their top priorities were to block the Iroquois's access to the Richelieu River and to launch an offensive in Iroquois territory. Several companies of the Carignan-Salières Regiment were dispatched to build a chain of forts from the St. Lawrence River to Lake Champlain.

On July 23, 1665, Captain Jacques de Chambly was instructed to erect a fort at the foot of the Richelieu rapids. About two hundred soldiers started construction on what was initially called Fort Saint-Louis. The fort was made of wood and built in a square shape, with each of its walls having a redan — a V-shaped projection — that assured a firing range free of obstacles at all angles. Each side was approximately forty-four metres long.

It was a very simple design, but it must have seemed mysterious and unusual to the Iroquois scouts who were watching all this activity from their hiding places in the surrounding woods. By the end of August, Captain Pierre de Saurel and his soldiers had already built another fort at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River where it meets the Richelieu, while erecting yet another one named Sainte-Thérèse a few kilometres away from Captain de Chambly's. In 1666, two additional forts went up further south: Fort Saint-Jean, at what is now the city of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu in Quebec, and Fort Sainte-Anne, located on Isle La Motte at the northern end of Lake Champlain in what is now Vermont.

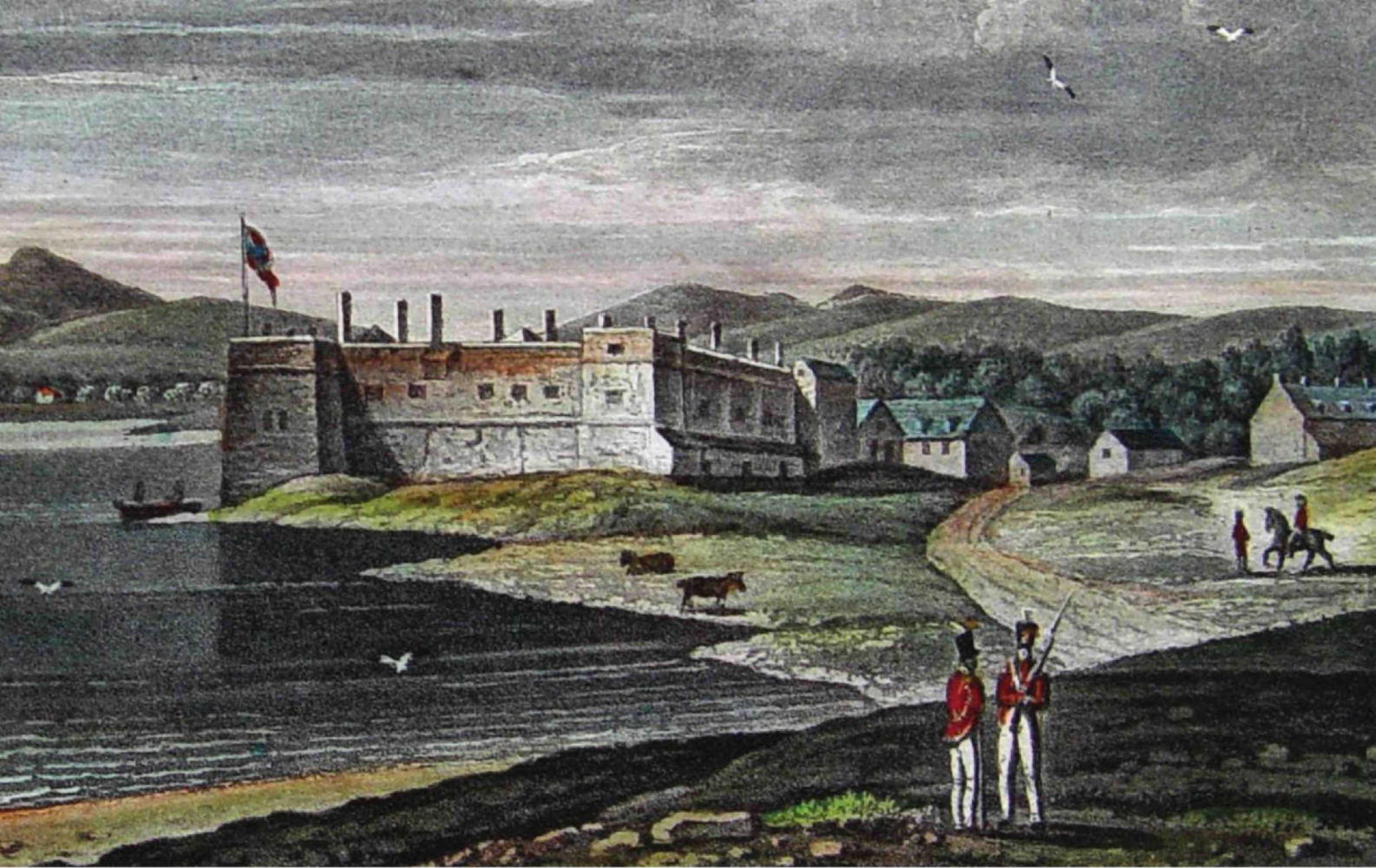
The Iroquois warriors did not dare attack the forts, which were intended to block invasions. These were also



ARCHIVES NATIONALES DU CANADA, CENTRE DES ARCHIVES OUTRE-MER (AM-EN-PROVENCE), DÉPÔT DES FORTIFICATIONS DES COLONIES.

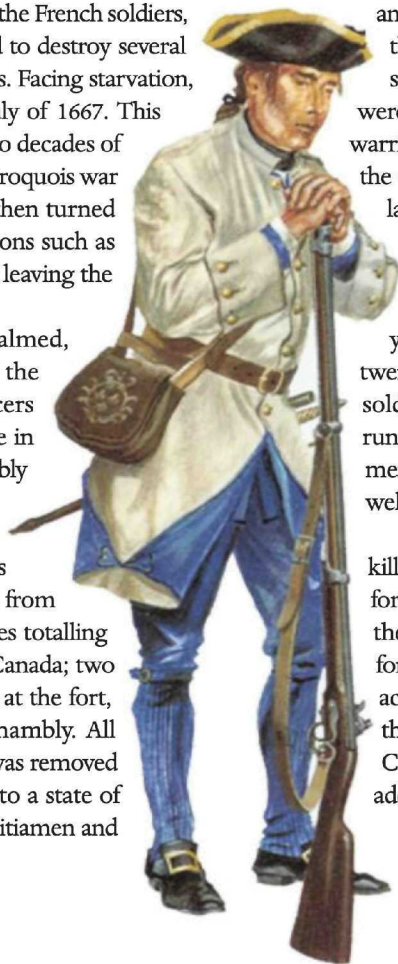
Above: Fort Chambly was the first “national historic site” and history museum funded by Canada’s federal government, and it this year celebrated its 300th anniversary as stone fort. But like all forts since the beginning of time, this one owes its existence to war. Its first conflict was with the Iroquois.

Long before the first European explorers named them, the Richelieu Valley, Lake Champlain, and the Hudson River held no secrets for the First Nations people. For them, these were major communication routes



important bases from which the French would organize attacks into what had been unassailable Iroquois territory, that of the Agniers Nation in particular. These missions into unfamiliar territory were difficult for the French soldiers, but Louis XIV's troops still managed to destroy several Iroquois villages and burn their crops. Facing starvation, the Iroquois chiefs made peace in July of 1667. This marked the end of the more than two decades of hostilities known as the first French/Iroquois war (1641–1667). The Iroquois League then turned its attention westward, pushing nations such as the Lakota into the Great Plains but leaving the French alone.

With hostilities temporarily calmed, French settlers began arriving by the hundreds, while soldiers and officers were given the opportunity to settle in the new country. The village of Chambly grew around the fort, populated mostly by demobilized soldiers who united their destiny with the “king’s daughters” — young emigrant girls from France. A garrison of four companies totalling three hundred soldiers was now in Canada; two of these companies mounted guard at the fort, now commonly known as Fort Chambly. All was quiet, and in 1671 the garrison was removed from the fort, which slowly went into a state of disrepair after being neglected by militiamen and merchants.



In the early 1680s, the situation deteriorated as conflicts between the French and the Iroquois again flared up over control of the fur trade. The Iroquois, now armed and encouraged by their English allies, renewed their attacks on the French colonists. By the summer of 1683, it became clear that there weren't enough militiamen to keep the Iroquois warriors at bay. As a result, three companies from the Compagnies franches de la Marine of France landed in Quebec in November of 1683. This was the beginning of the second French/Iroquois conflict (1684–1701).

Naval troops arrived during the following years, and in 1686 a small garrison of less than twenty soldiers was stationed at Chambly. These soldiers undoubtedly found the remains of a rundown fort, so, the following year, two hundred men arrived to build a new wooden palisade as well as a tower.

The Iroquois attacked during the fall of 1687, killing one soldier and a few inhabitants, but the fort stood firm. Iroquois attacks increased during the following years as the Chambly and Sorel forts were being repaired and readied for military action. Recent archaeological discoveries suggest that it was possibly around that time that Fort Chambly was enlarged and that bastions were added to wall corners.

By the early 1690s, a number of foot soldiers and Canadian militiamen had mastered the

Above: Fort Chambly circa 1814–1815. During the War of 1812, the old fort became the headquarters for British forces south of Montreal.

Left: A soldier of the Compagnies franches de la Marine, circa 1750.

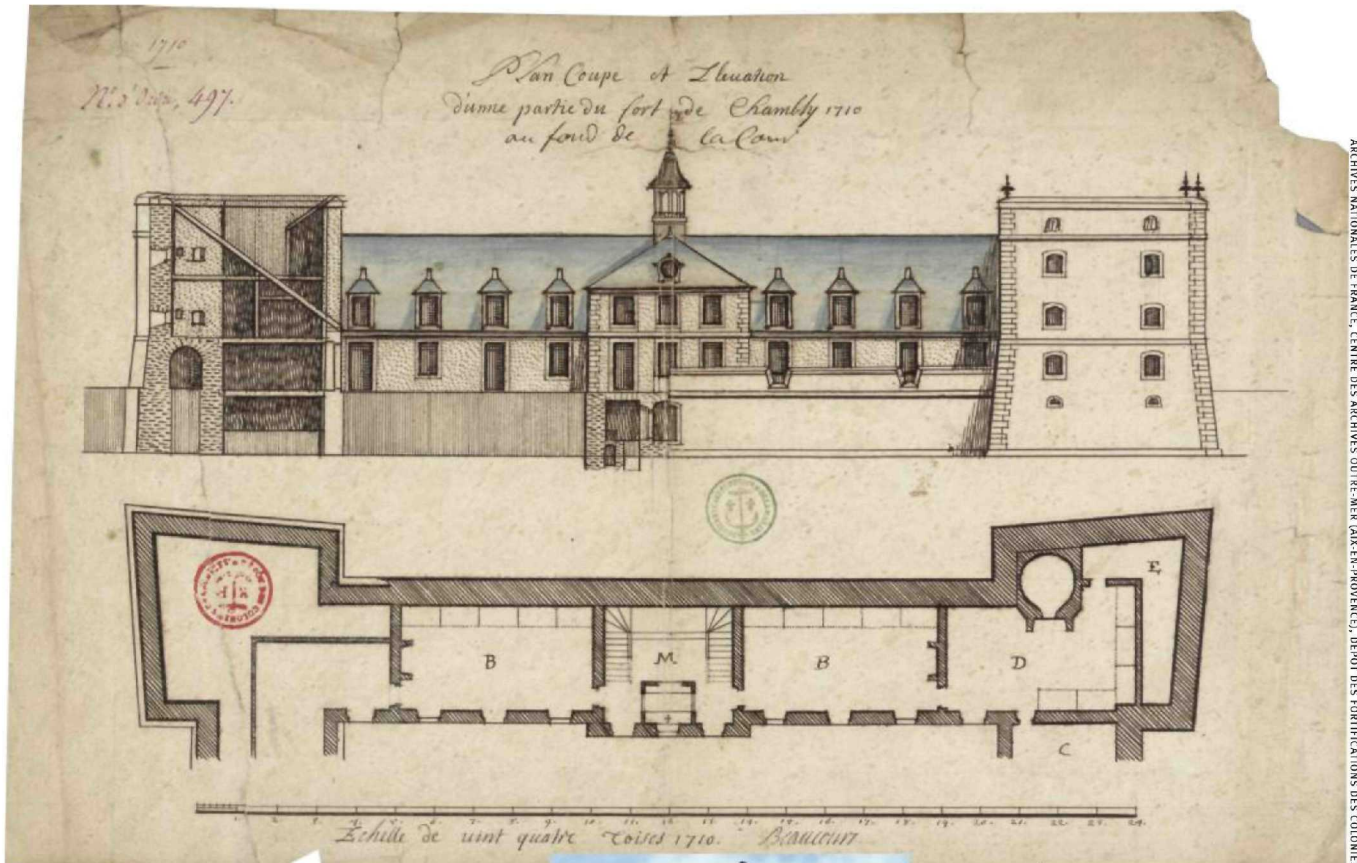
First Nations style of warfare, which was characterized by quick stealth attacks under the cover of the forest. Combining their new knowledge with their organizational skills and European-style discipline, this new fighting force became invincible. Over the next decade, the Iroquois and all other Aboriginal enemies of the French were routinely defeated and in some cases nearly annihilated. In August of 1701, almost all the Indian nations of the northeast, including the Iroquois, rallied for a “Great Peace” as proposed by the French in Montreal.

This peace treaty proved lasting, but the French colonists soon had another enemy to contend with — the English.

Montreal, improving transport and communications.

Although the region had been quiet since 1701, the threat from the south was growing. In 1709, a powerful army mustered south of Lake Champlain with the grand objective of invading Canada. However, it was decimated by smallpox and dysentery, brought on by poor conditions in the camps as the soldiers waited all summer for a Royal Navy fleet that never arrived. But the New Englanders vowed to try again.

Taking the threat seriously, Quebec began construction of a new Chambly fort in the fall of 1709, completing it two years later. The new structure, all in masonry, was radically different from all that had been



ARCHIVES NATIONALES DE FRANCE, CENTRE DES ARCHIVES OUTRE-MER (AIX-EN-PROVENCE), DÉPÔT DES FORTIFICATIONS DES COLONIES.

Above: In the North American colonies, the longtime rivals were at odds in what was known as Queen Anne’s War, which lasted from 1702 to 1712.

Fort Chambly replaced the wooden structures that first went up in 1665. Fort Chambly was the first French post encountered when heading up the Richelieu River from New England. It was therefore of great strategic importance. But, being made of wood, it was also vulnerable. On a cold night during the winter of 1701–1702, a fire started in the chaplain’s quarters and quickly spread to the other buildings, killing the chaplain and a few soldiers. A new fort was constructed in 1702, which was also made of wood and also laid out in a square with bastions as well as a masonry tower inside. The following year, a road was built between Chambly and



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built in Europe and Canada until then. The engineer, Josué du Boisberthelot de Beausecours, agreed with brilliant military engineer Marshal Vauban, who had said that forts with “simple walls with towers like the ones in our French villages and towns” were strong enough for Canada’s defence.

The stone fort that was erected between 1709 and 1711 was as impressive as the one we know today. Its walls were nearly ten metres high and one metre thick. With its four bastions and high masonry walls, Fort Chambly was similar to the forts of medieval castles. The wall facing the river was pierced with six canon-firing slits, and up to forty canons could be set up in the fort if needed. The main housing, also in masonry, was

against the inner wall and included a chapel.

It is obvious that Fort Chambly — then the southern gateway to New France — was built to impress. Visitors could admire the King of France's coat of arms as soon as they passed through the doors, and they could see soldiers in white and blue uniforms all over the premises. Back then, there was nothing in the southern English colonies that compared to this fort. And no one attacked it for almost fifty years.

Fort Chambly's strategic importance changed in the 1730s, when the French pushed into territory south of Lake Champlain and constructed Fort Saint-Frédéric at present-day Crown Point, New York. Still, Chambly remained an important link in the French defence network south of Montreal, serving as a depot for ammunition and food. In 1744, the fort's six canons were sent to Saint-Frédéric.

The struggle between France and England for control of the continent resumed with the start of the Seven Years War in 1755. On September 4, 1760, a large number of British regulars and New England militia on their way to Montreal approached the fort. The heavily outnumbered French garrison fired a few shells before surrendering — very likely they feared for the lives of the women and children living outside the fort, who were at the mercy of the enemy. The surrender of Fort Chambly cleared the way for the English attack on Montreal. British redcoats replaced French soldiers inside the fort.

Fifteen years later, the British would be the ones to surrender Fort Chambly to the Americans during the American Revolution. But this state of affairs did not last long. The Americans evacuated the fort the following year upon the arrival of British reinforcements.

After that, all was quiet until the War of 1812. With its strategic location, Chambly became the headquarters of the British army in the Montreal area. An imposing military complex, made up of over forty buildings, was constructed. It was from here that a British contingent departed with the goal of stopping the American army from attacking Montreal. On October 26, 1813, a detachment of soldiers and Canadian militiamen pushed back American soldiers approaching Canada's metropolis.

Over the years, the aging fort deteriorated. It was finally abandoned in 1869, and the government prepared to demolish it. That is when the fort's saviour, Joseph-Octave Dion (1838–1916) providentially stepped in. A journalist, Dion was passionate about advocating for Fort Chambly's preservation and tried to restore it. His calls were heard, and the ruins were stabilized. In 1885, a historic museum was built inside the fort, and Dion became the site's curator.

The creation of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in 1919 further ensured its preservation as a National Historic Site. Major restoration work took place during the 1980s, returning one of Canada's most beautiful historic monuments to its former glory. 🍷