

HISTORIC CANADA, I.

Fort Senneville—A Canadian Feu al C stle of the 17th Century.

Castles in Canada! Feudalism in America! How incongruous do such ideas seem! And yet all Canadians who are at all familiar with the history of their country know that Canada had castles and that the feudal system did exist down to comparatively recent years.

As for those Canadians who are ignorant of the history of their own country, the best thing which they can do is to study it, either in the writings of our own historians or in the fascinating pages of Parkman.

The subject of this sketch is the chateau Senneville, near St. Anne de Bout de l'Isle, the seignury to which it appertained being called Boisbriant, after and by the first grantee, Sidrac du Gué, sieur de Boisbriant.

Du Gué came to Canada as a captain in the famous regiment of Carignan-Salieres, which became identified in so marked a manner with the history and very life of the country. A mere recital of the names of the officers is sufficient to prove this. Under Colonel de Salieres were Capts. Chamby, Sorel, St. Ours, Berthier, de Contrecoeur, de la Valtrie, de Meloises, Du Gué, and Lieuts. de la Pérade, Rougemont, de Verchères, de la Mothe, etc., etc.

Du Gué having retired from active service, was granted in 1672 a "fief noble" at the head of the Island of Montreal, a place which had been set aside as a military reserve thirty years before on account of its strategic value. As the "fief" had only the very modest extent of two hundred acres, it is to be understood that it was "noble" rather in regards to rights, privileges and military duties than in intrinsic value. In addition to the two hundred acres there was a supplementary grant "of all the islands and reefs (!) in front of it and others also, in consideration of his zeal in having constructed a house." This little seignury Du Gué christened with his own title, and, setting up his stockade, built his seignorial mill and settled down with his wife to play the part of lord of the manor.

With the restlessness which was a feature of the times, Du Gué sold his seignury, after a few years' ownership, to the Le Ber family, and it changed its name as well as its master, being re-christened "Senneville." The first occasion on which the defences of "Fort Senneville" were tested was in resisting an attack by the Iroquois Indians in 1687, of which mere mention is made.*

In 1689 took place the memorable massacre of Lachine, which has recently been so graphically described by Mr. Girouard, M.P.

The savages have been bitterly denounced for their cruelty, but it is only fair to remember that the French had been guilty of brutality and treachery, and reprisals even when carried out by civilized Christian nations do not always reach the actual offenders.

Two years later Senneville was the scene of one of those episodes which were so common in the early days of our country, in which the Spartan bravery exhibited was only equalled by the laconic brevity of narration.

The following is the account given by Abbé Belmont: "On the 7th of May, 1691, the Iroquois burned the mill of 'M. Le Ber at the Rivière des Prairies; the wife of 'Gouillon, Grégoire and his wife, de Verchères, de 'Lachenaye, Goulet the farmer and several others defended a breach forty feet long against 300 Iroquois. De 'Verchères and a soldier were killed." And, as if such affairs were an every-day occurrence, the only notice of this defence in the great chronicle of the period, the "Relations des Jésuites," is this: "May 7th, 1691. Senneville was burned this day."

After the partial destruction of the original stockade mentioned above, the castle was built in stone in 1692, of sufficient strength to overawe the Indians and keep them at a safe distance ever after. Here the seigneur lived and entertained on a scale of elegance and comfort equal to that of many country gentlemen in Old France. Sometimes the guests were in the King's service, welcome visitors, no doubt, especially to the ladies of the castle. Gay, courtly, young and handsome, the heroes of many "moving accidents by flood and field," their presence would afford a flavour of the life of the Capital (Quebec) and relieve the ennui which must have sometimes afflicted their sociable spirit. That detachments of troops were needed at Senneville up to almost the very last of the old regime, we find from an account† of an attack by Mohawks on the upper end of the island in 1747, and garrisons of regulars and militia were maintained there during 1747 and 1748.

Eleven years later the battle of the Plains of Abraham changed the destinies of half a continent, and the Fleur-de-Lis disappeared from New France.

The chateau and seignury of Senneville must have remained in the Le Ber family as late as 1753, as there is an entry in the "Actes de Foye et Hommage" of that date recording the oath of Jean Le Ber de Senneville on behalf of his brothers, sisters and himself for their share of Ile St. Paul.

The property and title eventually passed to the de Montigny family in consequence, no doubt, of intermarriage, Mlle. Anne Testard de Montigny (a connection, if not a direct ancestor, of our present Recorder) having married François Le Ber. The de Montignys were evidently one of those old families who frankly accepted the new order of things after the cession, as we find one of them serving with distinction against the American invaders in 1775-76.

Dr. Dawson tells us in his admirable pamphlet‡ how Capts. Foster and de Montigny attacked superior forces of

Americans, defeated or captured them; advancing with audacity, striking with effect; successful and masters of the position even in retreat, they out-witted and out-generaled Arnold himself,* who took an unworthy revenge by setting fire to the unprotected castle, reducing it to ruins, as it has ever since remained.

A few weeks later (June 15th, 1776) the American troops retired from Canadian territory, leaving behind them not only the ruins of Senneville, but also the blackened walls of many a peaceful hamlet and homestead, as significant comments on the grandiloquent proclamations with which they entered the country "for the protection of the Province and for the express purpose of giving liberty and security to the inhabitants."

The last de Montigny de Senneville was Marguerite, daughter of Jean Baptiste Jeremie Te-tard, who married Dr. Forbes, of St. Geneviève. Being left a widow without children, she devised the property to her steward, Guyot, and who is thought to have been a blood relation. By this will the nearer and more direct heirs were cut off.

The next change of ownership took place when the Hon. Mr. Abbott acquired the property by purchase.

The architectural features of the castle, while very simple and even primitive compared with similar structures in Europe, were quite magnificent, if regarded in connection with the state of the country and the attacking power of the Indian enemy.

As will be noticed on reference to the plan, the building formed a parallelogram, of which the residence (G., I., K., H.) was one end, the other sides being simply defensive walls, nowhere now more than twelve feet high, pierced with loop-holes and having a gateway at E. At the angles are flanking towers (A., B., C., D.), the two first being connected by a wall (S., T.) which probably did not come much above the ground floor windows. The court-yard (N., O., P., Q.) is nearly square, measuring seventy-five or eighty feet each way. Judging by existing buildings of that period and the ruins which remain, the general appearance of the chateau must have been pretty much as represented in the sketch (No. 1) showing the water-front, looking north-west across the Lake of Two Mountains. The residential part was very like the ordinary seignorial manor house as we still have them all over the province, with a frontage of about eighty feet and a depth of thirty-five or so, two stories in height in front, but probably only one or one and a half behind (as the ground was higher inside the courtyard), with a high pitched roof, containing a double attic, and large chimneys and fire-places. The walls of the towers are strengthened by that outward spread toward the base, which was a feature of the period, as shown in sketch No. 2. These towers were not large, measuring only about twelve feet square inside, were two or two and a half stories in height, with large windows in the outer walls, and on the sides commanding the curtains or main walls are small embrasures (sketch No. 3), which were probably mounted with light artillery.

In the Natural History Museum there is a relic from this neighbourhood and, as far as can be determined, connected with the period of Senneville's prime. It is a mediæval breach-loading cannon, which was fished out of the Lake of Two Mountains, where it had probably lain for at least a hundred years. This sketch (No. 4) gives as good an idea of its appearance as would a long description. As far as I know, it is certainly the oldest specimen of breach-loading artillery on this continent. As the bore at the muzzle, it is not easy to say what was its calibre. The total length of the piece from tip of tail, or handle, to the muzzle is only 52½ inches, and the circumference at the breach is 21 inches. It would have added greatly to the interest if the breach-block had been recovered with it.

As to how and when it was lost in the lake we can only conjecture. It may have been carried off from Senneville by de Montigny when retiring before the Americans advancing from Montreal, and dropped accidentally from a boat.

The two land-ward towers (C and D on the plan) are completely destroyed down to three or four feet of the ground.

The next sketch (No. 5) is a view from the courtyard, looking out across the Ottawa river towards the railway bridge and the St. Lawrence.

Like all our older buildings, Senneville was remarkably well built; the materials were rough boulder stones with cut stone jambs, lintels, sills and fireplaces, and such mortar as is not made nowadays—that department of construction seems to be a lost art. One can see places where the stones dropped out, owing to their round shape, when those just below had been removed, but the mortar has retained its shape and hardness though exposed for more than a hundred years to all the changes of our variable climate.

In addition to the castle proper, there were outworks which served more than one purpose. A few hundred yards back from the river the ground rises to a little height, forming quite a commanding position, being crowned by a fortified windmill. These fortified mills were a marked feature all through New France, and have done good service not only against the Indians, but even against the more civilized invaders of the United States.

The mill of Senneville, in addition to being loop-holed for musketry, has a rather unusual feature, namely, a hooded door, as shewn in the sketch (No 6), and which served the same purposes as the machicolations of a mediæval castle. The tower was at least three stories in

height and measures 15 feet inside diameter, the floors having been supported by strong oak beams. The chimney was simply a flue in the thickness of the wall, opening to outer air just below the second storey ceiling; the hood opened above the floor of the same chamber. The roof was doubtless of conical form, covered with shingles, as are some other towers of the same date in this city. These wooden roofs were always points of weakness in time of attack.

The present owner of the seignury has restored the original name, Boisbriant, in remembrance of the first seigneur.

A beautiful spot is the old "fief noble" to-day. In front is the Ottawa, with its picturesque and fertile islands; a little to the north-west the river expands into the Lake of Two Mountains, with the Two Mountains themselves in the hazy distance beyond. Around and behind the castle is rich rolling land, with groves and copses of stately trees; lawns, meadows, tilled land and gardens in charming combination. The old courtyard is now a croquet ground, being hardly large enough for tennis. The click of ball and mallet is heard instead of that of the flint-lock, and the flash of rapier and pike-head is replaced by the sparkle of bright eyes—perhaps no less dangerous.

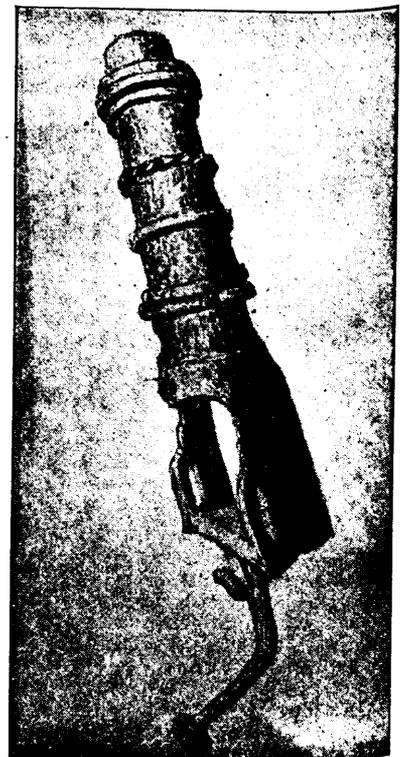
And now, before we turn from Senneville and its story, has it no lesson for us? Are not those battered walls, firm and strong even in their ruin, silent witnesses that the present peace and beauty have come down to us from the trial and conflict, the courage and endurance, of those who have gone before? They may well remind us that neither men nor nations can become great on material prosperity alone, "like cucumbers on a dunghill," as one of the British poets* has said.

Though time and distance may soften the old animosities, as the wild vines try to cover the wounds in these old grey and red-brown walls, Canadians should not forget that they may again have to face trials, as their fathers have done; that self-denial and self-sacrifice may be called for in defence of flag and country.

But we will hope, in view of what Canadian patriotism has already accomplished, that, should dark days come again to Canada, there will be found men, and women, too, to "defend the breach" as bravely and as successfully as did that little handful of men and women at Boisbriant two hundred years ago.

ROSSELL C. LYMAN.

*Gerald Massey.



No. 4.—Old French breach-loading cannon recovered from Lake of Two Mountains, probably from Chateau Senneville.



No. 3.—Embrasure.

*Paris Documents.

†Paris documents.

‡"The Massacre of the Cedars," S. E. Dawson, LL.D.

*The American general commanding.