

A CANADIAN  
EDUCATIONIST  
OF THE  
17TH CENTURY

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The Venerable  
**MARGUERITE BOURGEOYS**

Foundress of the Congregation de  
Notre Dame (de Montréal), (pioneer  
social worker and teacher of Canada)

being an appreciation of her work  
on the occasion of her

Tercentennial Anniversary  
(April 17, 1620-1920)

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## A Canadian Educationist of the 17th Century

On April 17th, 1620, there was born in Troyes of the Province of Champagne, in Old France, the first schoolmistress of Montreal, Marguerite Bourgeoys, the foundress of the Institute of the Congregation of Notre Dame de Montreal. Her tercentenary will be celebrated this year in many parts of the Dominion of Canada, and in the United States, for from her first schoolhouse on St. Paul street opened at the end of 1657, many homes of education have branched out over this continent for primary, secondary and normal school teaching, of which more than 135 exist today, with a clientele of about 41,000. Montreal should be proud of such a citizen.

### **The Call to Canada**

In 1653 Marguerite Bourgeoys was invited to New France by Paul de Chomedey, Sieur de Maisonneuve, governor of Montreal and its founder in 1642. He was then on a visit to France to obtain fresh recruits, else he would have to abandon Ville Marie, which his settlement was called, as a forlorn hope. This practical young lay woman came with the object of teaching when there should be children to direct; but truth to tell, there were none yet, for during its first twelve years of existence, the Fort Perilous of New France was no place for homemaking and child bearing, the few men and fewer women (one of whom was Jeanne Mance, the foundress of the Hotel Dieu hospital) living within the fort enclosure almost entirely, in deadly fear of the incessant Iroquois attacks.

### Pioneer Social Work

For four years Marguerite found herself sadly needed as a social worker among the bachelor artizan-soldiers of the fort and the newcomers (about a hundred) who began to take up land and build their homes on what was to be St. Paul street. Then too she had to organize the girls, who had come over with her, and to help them to manage their households. In the spring of 1657 she was helped by the settlers she had aided, to lay the stone foundations of the first Bonsecours church, which she wished to be a place of pious pilgrimage and also, according to Montgolfier, a meeting place for the young women whom she especially desired to organize. Although the work was suspended that autumn, she had the satisfaction of seeing the little shrine erected in 1675—the first stone church in Montreal—and opened as a place of pilgrimage and a chapel of ease for the Sulpicians who still have charge today.

### The Sulpician "Seigneurs"

In July, 1657, the long expected Sulpicians arrived to be the permanent resident clergy and to relieve the Jesuits, who by agreement had the care of the Mission until the congregation of priests founded in 1642 especially for the Montreal venture, by Jean Jacques Olier, at St. Sulpice in Paris, had been trained. The Abbe Olier would have come himself but he died on April 2, 1657, shortly before their departure. It must be remembered that Olier was, with De la Dauversiere, the co-founder of the Company of Montreal, whose members had maintained the upkeep of the settlement out of their private pockets, not for gain but to rear up a young church at Ville Marie which

was "to rival the fervor of the primitive church." The numbers of the original associates had been gradually dwindling in such a way that the onus of seigneurship of the island was becoming vested in the faithful Olier and his Sulpicians, who still found the funds, so that a few years later the charter of the original company passed over by special act of transfer March 9, 1663, to them in their own name. Hence it is that the "Gentlemen of the Seminary of St. Sulpice" became the Seigneurs of the Island of Montreal. They were men of vision, and steadfastness of purpose. Their advent in 1657 was practically as "The Seigneurs." Already great projects were on foot; they would build the first parish church and erect the first canonical parish, but first of all they must make provision for a parish school. This is the beginning of the well known benefactions of the Seminary for education in this city.

### **The First School in "Basse Ville"**

This was Marguerite Bourgeoys' opportunity. A disused stable was found, one of the few stone buildings of the period, and she opened it as a school on St. Catherine's day. It is commonly thought to be that of St. Catherine of Alexandria, November 25, 1657, though it may be that of St. Catherine of Sienna, April 30, 1658. Certain it is that the act of formal donation was made by Maisonneuve, acting for the Seigneurs, is dated January 28, 1658. Her own memoirs, written in her old age, tells us that "Four years after my arrival, M. de Maisonneuve was good enough to give me a stone stable to make a school of it and to lodge therein persons to conduct it. This stable had served as a dovecot

and a home for cattle. It had a granary and a loft to sleep in, to which it was necessary to ascend by an outside staircase. I had it cleared and a chimney put in, and all that was needful for schoolkeeping. I entered on St. Catherine's day. Ma soeur Marguerite Pacaud (who was afterwards Madame La Montagne) then lived with me, and there I tried to enrol the few boys and girls who were capable of learning lessons."

The site of the first school, 36 x 18 feet, with 48 perches of land adjoining, is today located on the south side of St. Paul street, between St. Dizier lane and St. Lawrence boulevard extension, on the ground where Middleton and Gilmour have their stores, the block immediately east of St. Dizier lane being dwelt upon by St. Dizier, her neighbor. The St. Lawrence boulevard, extended in 1912, cuts right through the later extensions on the south side of St. Paul street, but it has left the site of the school at the corner. Surely a tablet should be there placed soon to mark the site of what was probably the first stone schoolhouse in North America!

Till about 1661, when the Sulpician Souart, who delighted to style himself "Superior of the Seminary, first Cure of the town, and first schoolmaster of the district," formed a boys' school, she had mixed classes. In addition, in her home she had the care of two orphans, Jean Derochers and Jeanne Loisel, the first girl born in Montreal, to live to any age, as well as several Indian girls, whom she also mothered. Later on, after the Mountain Mission fort or reserve for domiciled Christian Iroquois, Hurons and Algonquins was commenced in 1676, she under-

took with her companions in 1680 to teach the Indian girls and instructed the women in knitting, lacemaking and the like arts. The two Martello towers on Sherbrooke street west, recall their school (W.) and their home (E.).

### “La Congregation”

Hardly had she set up classes when she began to gather the girls too old to go to school, but to whom she gave supplementary and continuation lessons, but especially forming them into a pious sodality, so that her home began soon to be familiarly known as “La Congregation,” forecasting her subsequent famous institute of today. In 1658 she went to France, returning next year with three teaching helpers, who lived with her, as lay women, but following, by mutual consent and voluntarily without canonical vows, a methodical form of life—the basis of her future religious community, which was not, however, formally and canonically recognized by the Church till 1698, forty-five years after her arrival in New France. During the long interval she gained gradually a number of other self-sacrificing associates, who taught gratuitously during the day and supported themselves early and late by external work of a humble nature for the habitants, such as sewing, tailoring, &c., for, requiring no dowry from her followers, she enjoined on them the love of hard work, and manual arts, and by rigid economy, poor food, simple clothing and the barest of lodging and household furnishing, they managed to acquire property which they were able to retain.



A contemporary, Dollier de Casson, the ex-soldier, Cure of the parish and first historian of Montreal, wrote of them in 1672 thus:

"What I admire about these young women is that, being without means, and willing to teach gratuitously, they have, nevertheless acquired, by the grace of God, and without being a charge to any one, houses and lands in the Island of Montreal."

He does not mention these, but here is a summary up to 1672:

### Pioneer Social Settlement House

In July, 1662, from Charly dit St. Ange a lot three-quarters of an arpent (c. an acre), on which there was a house. This stood at the northwest corner of St. Jean Baptiste and St. Paul streets, not far from the school-house. This house, known as "La Providence," she turned into a hostel to receive the Filles du Roi, who arrived regularly by the ships from France. They were pensioners of the King's bounty, often of good but impoverished families, living in the orphanages of Paris, and sent as willing and prospective brides to a more or less womanless colony. These Marguerite received, mothered, instructed in domestic science, prepared them for the day of their marriage and followed them in their after careers. Later on, her companions founded a "Providence" at Quebec, and continued that at Montreal till 1692, when there were others to carry on such a work, which was beginning to interfere with her more formal scholastic vocation.

In the same year (1662), on August 22, she acquired the prairie St. Gabriel, and, on October 31,



twenty perches of land to the river edge (probably near the school grounds).

In 1667, the stable-school and dwelling becoming too small, she built another on the same spot, "large enough to lodge twelve persons." The great Intendant Talon visiting it, this year, mentions in his census that there were at the Congregation "four girls ready for marriage."

### St. Gabriel Farm

In the following year (1668), on August 29, she bought the next house and grounds to the east from the widow of Claude Fezeret, while on September 21 she acquired from Francois Leber, at Point St. Charles, a land of 200 arpents in superficies, on which there was "a stone house." This is the famous St. Gabriel farmhouse, which, though added to, stands in perfect condition today, keeping most of its original features—to the delight of archeologists—so that the privileged may study the furniture, the carpentering, the oaken staircases, with never an iron nail, but oaken pins to secure them, and many other side issues which help the mind to reconstruct the social life of the seventeenth century in Canada. Opposite there is the Ile St. Paul, or Nuns' Island, lying in the St. Lawrence. The farm is in communication with that on the island; a flag being waved, a boatman rows to the mainland for visitors, messages, mail and provisions. Both of these properties are owned by the Congregation today; but St. Paul Island was not so early an acquisition.

Somewhere about the above period Marguerite Bourgeoys received from

the Seigneurs of the seminary a concession of 60 arpents situated near Lake St. Joseph, to which other arpents were added by M. de Bretonvilliers, Superior of the Seminary in Paris, who was the chief Seigneur, the Montreal Seigneurs being his representatives. Thirty-five of these arpents she put under cultivation, constructing a granary and putting a farmer in charge. She also received a land called "Le Bón Pasteur," on Ile Jesus, on the Back River to the north, and furthermore the Ile Heron, at the foot of the Lachine Rapids, in the St. Lawrence. But these two lands were never acquired through the Seigneurs of Montreal, being outside their possessions.

But the nascent congregation could not employ must outside help. Sister Crolo was chief farmer. Novices like Marie Barbier led the cows to the pasturage, milked them, carried corn to the mill on their necks and brought it back in the form of flour and, says Marie in her "Memoires," she was "the laughing stock of those who have known her in the world," for she was the daughter of a notable in the city, none other than Gilbert Barbier, the carpenter-architect of the fort, its chapel and also one of the first three church wardens appointed to its successor, the first quasi-parochial chapel, on St. Paul street, known as the Hotel Dieu Chapel, where Dollard and his band met before their famous exploit at the Long Sault, in 1660. Finally in 1672, on the south side of St. Paul street, she entirely re-built an enlarged "Congregation" on the former sites and beyond, for she was, as we shall relate, beginning to receive a

meed of civic and ecclesiastical stability and the future looked indeed rosy. Alas, this stone building, an imposing monument of Montreal's progress at the time, only stood for about a decade later, for on the night of December 6-7, 1683, a terrible fire consumed the block, two of her companions perishing in the flames, one being her niece, Marguerite Soumillard.

### Second site—in "Haute Ville"

After the fire, nothing daunted, these brave women determined to leave Basse Ville, or lower town, and build in Haute Ville, or upper town, as the portion between St. Paul street and Notre Dame street, on the rising slope, now being used for homes, was called. There they would erect a more solid, more commodious and more regular community block, with a school and a pensionnat, for the best families were their patrons. So Marguerite Bourgeoys began next year, rich in hope alone, for she had not a sou, says the Governor-General de Denonville, and later with only forty, according to Madame Juchereau, of Quebec. But she had some land, as follows: There was the land bought from St. Ange in 1662 (three-fourths arpent) plus another one-quarter arpent, already acquired from his family when his two daughters joined the associates, and two-thirds of an arpent (adjoining the Hotel Dieu on the northwest), which they received from the seminary in exchange for some marshy, uncleared land near Verdun, originally acquired from the town major, Zacharie Dupuis, Sieur de Verdun. There they remained till they suffered their next

great loss in the fire of April 1, 1768. In 1693, there was added the Congregation Church, the predecessor of the famous shrine of Notre Dame de Pitie, known to so many of us. This was founded by Jeanne Leber, who stipulated that she should be allowed to enclose herself as a recluse in a portion reserved behind the sanctuary, and there she lived from 1694 to her death in 1714. but before this, in 1713, she provided funds for the extension of the pensionnat. The first chapel of Notre Dame de Victoire was erected close-by in 1718 as result of a vow to commemorate the saving of New France in 1711, by the destruction by the elements of the fleet of Sir Hovenden Walker in the Lower St. Lawrence.

### Final success as Foundress

All the above efforts to obtain property were to prove the ability of the Congregation to be self-sustaining, for there was a desire to be recognized as an ecclesiastical corporation. Already in 1669 an informal permission had been granted by Bishop Laval, which was formally ratified in 1676, when he recognized them in quality as "filles seculieres"—not as a religious organization, canonically erected, but as a teaching body of approved learning and morals, competent to extend their establishments in his diocese. In 1671 Marguerite had also received the civic charter of stability by letters patent from the King, through the intervention of Talon and the Minister Colbert, on the occasion of a special visit to France for the purpose. Thus fortified the sisters thence forward adopted the black formal dress, that is closely followed

today, and which was then worn at that period by women of the middle class in France, but in a variety of hues.

In 1693 Marguerite Bourgeoys, now advanced in age, resigned her superiority to Marie Barber, the first Canadian member of her organization, but she still fought for the final official status from the Church, and in particular to stave off the purpose both of Laval and his successor to make the congregation an enclosed nunnery and a branch of the teaching Ursulines of Quebec, at this period ecclesiastical approbation being seldom fully given to bodies of women living among the people. In fact the Congregation was one of the first pioneer institutions to receive it, which came at last when Bishop St. Vallier accepted their rules and formally and fully recognized it in 1698. Having accomplished her life vocation, the foundress died at Montreal on January 12th, 1700, her funeral orations being pronounced by two historians, Dollier de Casson, the aged octogenarian, and his successor at the seminary, Francois Vachon de Belmont, author of the small, but important History of Canada. The "Venerable" Margaret Bourgeoys left a reputation for heroic virtue. This has been confirmed by Rome in its decree of June 10, 1910. The process for that of "Sanctity" is now before the Ecclesiastical Curia.

### The Verdict of History

Her success as an educationist may be gauged, by relying on the safe judgment of Francois Xavier Charlevoix, the historian, facile princeps, of New France. By order of

the King he visited the French colonies of the Western hemisphere for several years. On returning he made his report, but his book, the "Histoire et Description Generale de la Nouvelle France," did not appear until 1744. There (Livre VIII., Vol. 1, 343), he says:

"A city (Montreal), began to grow, the foundation of which constitutes one of the fairest ornaments of New France. Montreal owes it to Marguerite Bourgeoys. With no other resource, but her courage and her trust in God, she undertook to afford all the young persons of her sex, no matter how poor or destitute, an education which many girls, even of good families, do not receive in the best ordered kingdoms. She succeeded to that degree, that you constantly behold with renewed astonishment, women in the very depth of indigence and want, perfectly instructed in their religion, ignorant of nothing they should know how to employ themselves usefully in their families, and who by their manner of expressing themselves and their politeness, are not inferior to the most carefully educated amongst us. This is the just meed of praise rendered to the sisters of the Congregation by all who have made any stay in Canada."

This tribute from a French scholar from France, together with his well known testimony to the excellence and purity of the French tongue as used in this colony under the French regime, is a severe indictment against those thoughtlessly presuming to stigmatize it, and its descendants as lacking in education and refinement.

Of the success of the teaching ability of the daughters of the Congregation of today, let the tens of thousands of their pupils on this continent testify.

As the Congregation of Marguerite Bourgeoys was efficient in her day, so are those of the present institution which is but the lengthened shadow of a great name.

### Extensions after Fire of 1768

NOTE.—After the fire of 1768 the "Congregation" was rebuilt, and entered the September of the same year. The chapel of Notre Dame de Victoire being rebuilt in 1769, stood until the beginning of the twentieth century; the church reconstructed at the same time was rebuilt in 1856 to receive the famous statue of "Notre Dame de Pitie," and this shrine, quaintly picturesque, was a delight to the citizens till 1912, when the vandals destroyed another old link between the French and English regime. This was when the St. Lawrence Boulevard was extended through the "Congregation grounds" to the river. It could well have been left standing, as an island shrine, breaking the monotony of the boulevard. The history of the mother house and pensionnat down town (formerly upper town) is as follows: They stood, being occasionally remodelled or enlarged, notably in 1845, till recent times. In 1654 a second pensionnat was added on the mountain slope at Villa Maria, formerly "Monklands," the residence of the Governor-General, Lord Elgin, the down town pensionnat being removed in 1860 to Mont Ste. Marie on Guy street, after it had been used previously as St. Patrick's Hospital, a branch of the



Hotel Dieu, and before that as a Baptist College, being now a boarding and day school conducted by the Congregation Sisters. In 1880 the old mother house was transferred near to Villa Maria, but their magnificent structure was burned down in 1893, when they returned to the old home down town. There also was housed in 1899 the Normal School for girls, opened that year by the sisters and conducted by them for the Government of the province.

#### **Present Mother House and College**

In July, 1908, the magnificent romanesque group of buildings on Sherbrooke street, at the west corner of Atwater avenue, were opened for the mother house and temporary home of their Notre Dame College, for the higher education of young women, receiving their degrees from the University of Laval and now from that of Montreal. On January 14, 1914, the Normal School down town was transferred to a similar imposing, though smaller, edifice, on the opposite side of Atwater avenue. The work of demolition on the ancient site was then quickly completed. But not a tablet is to be seen in the vicinity recording the sites of two historic shrines, of the settlement house, "La Providence," or of the original first stone stable-school house or its successors, extending over a period of 250 years of pioneering educational work by Marguerite Bourgeoys and the institute she founded for Montreal!

*William Henry Atherton*

