



From the Archives

March 31, 2026

The long, convoluted history of St. Ann's Boys' School

By JOHN KALBFLEISCH,

Freelance January 28, 2012

Among the many schools whose names are of long association with the city of Montreal, that of the St. Anne's Boys' School on Young St. is one of the most locally famous.

It would be churlish to question the late John Loye's grasp of Griffintown's history. The neighbourhood was the heart of Irish Montreal for more than a century, and in Loye, who died in 1962, it arguably has had no more ardent a chronicler.

That said, a January 1944 story he wrote for The Gazette about St. Ann's Boys' School undeniably plays a little loose with dates.

Loye leads readers to believe that the school had "now come to the turn of a century since its foundation," presumably dating from the opening of two classes just off Notre Dame St. on Feb. 1, 1844. Yet elsewhere in that account, Loye also traces the school's origins to the opening of three smaller classes the previous year, or perhaps even to another school temporarily set up in 1837.

Suffice it to say that, with St. Ann's Boys' School, the turn of its century was a slow and stately one.

That 1837 school was established by the Frères des Écoles Chrétiennes, a French order also known as the Christian Brothers, who had come to Montreal under Sulpician sponsorship. The times were "troublous," Loye notes, and the brothers were forbidden to wear the three-cornered hat of their order because the style was also common among the rebelling Patriotes. In 1842, the times less troubled, they resumed wearing their traditional headgear.

On Sept. 18, 1843, the brothers began teaching Irish boys at the corner of St. Paul and St. Henri streets, in what even then was known as Griffintown. "And so came into being the first St. Ann's School for boys," Loye writes.

But Irish immigration was accelerating, and in early 1844 the school had to move to the Récollets monastery on Notre Dame St. Even this space proved too small, however, and by 1847 the school was back in expanded quarters at the Griffintown location.

Yet the school's wanderings would continue. In 1861, with the United States threatening to invade Canada, the school and adjacent buildings held by the Sulpicians were taken over as a barracks for British soldiers rushed

here to bolster this country's defenses. In January 1862, St. Ann's School found itself several streets away at the corner of Wellington and Nazareth.

Its wanderings finally came to an end three years later. In May 1865, the building that would accommodate it for the rest of its days opened on Young St., behind the site of today's École de Technologie Supérieure. It cost the Sulpicians more than \$19,000 to erect.

John Loye's 1944 story is unstinting in its admiration for the school: "Whether within its classrooms or on its dramatic stage, or on its platform in convocation, declamation or debate, ever there was to be found the true expression of the highest culture and character of the Irish community of Montreal."

In her 1998 book *The Shamrock and the Shield*, Patricia Burns records the memories of her father, who entered St. Ann's in 1909.

"This school. was a three-story building with a stone front," Jimmy Burns said. "The first two levels were devoted to classrooms, and the top floor was a meeting hall where dramatic productions were put on and political meetings were held.

"The school was run by the Christian Brothers. Were they strict? Well, they had to be (laughs). In Griffintown they had to be."

Just three months after Loye's *Gazette* story appeared, merest chance prevented a catastrophe for St. Ann's. On April 25, 1944, a *Liberator* bomber from Dorval Airport lost power over Mount Royal and crashed into Griffintown, barely a short block from the school.

"We were just coming in after recess," Frank Doyle, then an 11-year-old pupil, later recalled. "We heard this big noise, zoom, it shook the place. Brother Edward, the teacher, said, 'Stay here and pray.' " To this day, many believe God listened and saved the schoolchildren. Nonetheless, nine nearby residents, including a two-year-old baby, a policeman on the beat and all five aviators died.

In succeeding decades, people began drifting away from the Griff as the area became increasingly industrialized. Construction on the Bonaventure Expressway, which began in 1965, slashed through the neighbourhood's heart. By 1966, St. Ann's Boys' School was gone, replaced by a vacant lot.

Today, little is left of the old Griffintown. Even the name has been replaced, at least on official maps, by Faubourg des Récollets.

lisnaskea@xplornet.com

© Copyright (c) The Montreal Gazette