

QUEBEC

Port Royale: cradle of history

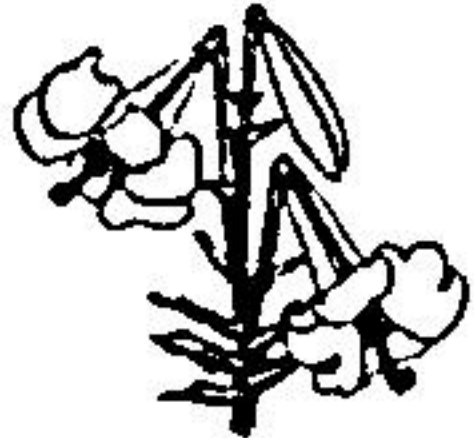
by Mary Charters

On a rocky point jutting out into the St. Lawrence River, Samuel de Champlain constructed his fortified Habitation in 1608. Since then Place Royale, in Québec City, has been razed by fires, bombarded by cannon balls, lined with lavish Norman houses of successful merchants, and abandoned for the city's fashionable Upper Town. It has been a thriving marketplace and the place of execution for criminals.

Today that part of Lower Town is in a state of transition. Some buildings have been faithfully reconstructed; others lie untouched, awaiting their return to splendor thanks to a multi-million-dollar restoration project directed by the Québec Ministry of Cultural Affairs and largely funded

by the federal government. Despite destruction of many historic buildings, Lower Town still represents the greatest concentration of 17th and 18th century stone structures in North America. When renovations and reconstruction of Place Royale and surrounding streets are completed, more than 80 buildings will have regained their original exteriors. Unsightly afterthoughts will be removed. Hydro lines have been put underground and pavement will be replaced by stone slabs of irregular shapes.

General aspect of the area will be 1760, one year after the third siege of Québec by the British when Place Royale was mutilated by 50,000 cannon balls in a three-month span. Some buildings destroyed in the battle of 1759 then rebuilt in the 1760s,



have remained intact for the past 200 years. Other parts of Place Royale are 19th century. They have nearly completed the Batterie Royale, which was the only fortified place in the area. When finished, possibly by 1985, the area will be a museum of architecture although that's not the main intent. Place Royale is already inhabited and will accommodate, eventually, about 100 families, and service stores including the neighborhood barber shop. In addition the area will be dotted with museums containing artifacts of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, along with 20th century disco-bars, restaurants and souvenir shops. On the outside Place Royale will be one of the continent's historical showpieces; on the inside, a contemporary city.

The ambitious project, begun in 1970 after fires had destroyed 15 buildings in the late 1960s, is well underway and several buildings are now restored. Focal point of Place Royale is the small, open square bounded on one side by Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, one of Québec's oldest stone churches which was left an empty shell after the battle of 1759. The church, constructed in 1688, has a long architectural history, punctuated by repairs, bombardment and restorations. Although its medieval appearance has been altered, the church still retains its original dimensions. Prior to massive changes at Place Royale, the little church was dwarfed by buildings that had reached twice their original height. The cold, grey stone was hidden under a brown deposit and the church, like the whole area, had suffered from what observers called a "century of bad taste".

Notre-Dame-des-Victoires stands on the site of the first building in Québec City, the king's store of Champlain which was demolished in 1629 during the first English occupation. Excavation is carried out next to the church to find the king's store and turn it into another historical site. In the centre of Place Royale is a statue of Louis XIV, a gift of the French government, placed

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