

# Montreal Main Branch

A Canadian Landmark

## Bank of Montreal

Established in 1817 as the Montreal Bank, BMO Financial Group is Canada's first bank. It has taken part in many projects that have been key to the growth of Canada and Quebec, including the construction of their first canals, telegraphs and railways (most notably the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway), major hydroelectric projects, and the development of their energy and mining industries. It issued the country's first currency and continued to do so until the Bank of Canada, the central bank founded in 1935, took over this role. Today, BMO remains one of Canada's leading financial institutions and maintains a substantial presence in the U.S., through BMO Harris Bank, and on global markets, especially in Europe and Asia.



## Original location

The Bank first opened its doors in 1817 in rented premises on Saint Paul Street. Two years later, the Bank completed a sturdy stone building at the corner of Saint François-Xavier and Saint Jacques Streets, the site of today's Head Office building. By the 1840s, however, rapid expansion made it clear that a larger building would be needed to house its Head Office and Main Branch.

## Site

In 1642, on the northern banks of the Saint Lawrence River near what is now Place d'Armes, Paul de Chomedey, Sieur de Maisonneuve, founded the city of Montreal. On the site of the memorial directly in front of the Montreal Main Branch, de Maisonneuve and a group of French settlers battled a band of Iroquois warriors. Historical plaques in surrounding streets commemorate the accomplishments of the early settlers and explorers who once lived here, including Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac, the founder of Detroit; Daniel Greysolen, Sieur du Luth, who gave his name to the city of Duluth, Minnesota; and Jeanne Mance, Marguerite d'Youville and Marguerite Bourgeoys, who, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, founded hospitals and teaching institutions that still serve the public today. At Notre-Dame Basilica, on the opposite side of the square, Dollard des Ormeaux and his companions attended mass in 1660 before meeting their deaths at Long Sault while defending Montreal from an anticipated attack by the Iroquois. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the area now known as Old Montreal was a bustling port and commercial centre. Saint James Street, as Saint Jacques Street was then known, was the undisputed financial hub of British North America, and many of its elegant buildings date from the Victorian era.

## Montreal Main Branch

The Bank of Montreal Main Branch on Place d'Armes, in Montreal, is one of the most notable buildings in Canada. The neoclassical façade, almost unchanged since its construction in 1847, contrasts with a majestic interior inspired by the Italian Renaissance and designed in 1901 by the renowned architectural firm McKim, Mead and White. The building served as the Bank's Head Office until 1960, when the adjacent 17-storey tower was completed. Both the site and the building figure prominently in Montreal's architectural heritage and Canadian history.

## Façade

The plans chosen for the new building were those of local architect John Wells, who was inspired by the design of the Commercial Bank of Scotland building, then under construction in Edinburgh. The major difference between the two buildings is that the narrower Montréal site required a less elaborate portico while permitting construction of a dome—modelled on that of Rome's Pantheon—to balance the portico's six

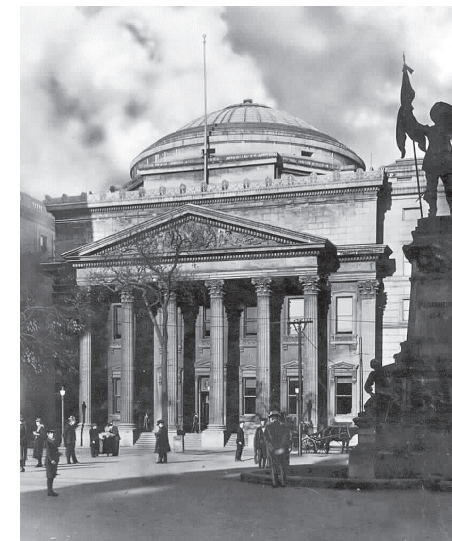
Corinthian columns. Construction began in 1845 and was completed in 1847. Made of local stone, the building gives an impression of solidity and dignity that accorded well with the Bank's public image, and the design long served as an inspiration for bank branches across Canada. Built during the 1901-1905 renovation, the rear façade on Saint Antoine Street is considered by many architects to be a masterpiece of design. It is windowless to a height of 5.2 m. Above this level, massive Tuscan pilasters and heavily grilled windows recall the palaces of Florentine bankers of the Renaissance, while carrying through the Corinthian architecture of the older Place d'Armes façade.

## Dome

The original dome, built in 1847, had to be taken down a few years later, as its wooden trusses had begun to sag. The current structure, one of the more spectacular features of the 1901-1905 renovation, is made of Guastavino tiles resting on a complex steel frame and rises to a height of 27 m above the floor.

## Pediment

In Kriehoff's famous painting of Place d'Armes, done in about 1853, the pediment of the Bank building is unadorned. The heroic statuary group we see today was commissioned in 1859 from the well-known Scottish sculptor John Steell. His composition symbolizes Canada, with the Bank's coat of arms flanked by two indigenous Canadians along with a sailor and settler who represent commerce and agriculture. Carved in Scotland, the group was installed in 1867, after being shipped in pieces across the Atlantic. It is 15.8 m long, weighs 25 tons, and remains one of the most monumental works of sculpture in Canada. At the centre of the composition are the Bank's coat of arms and motto, *Concordia Salus* (meaning "prosperity through harmony"), which are similar to those that the City of Montreal began using around 1833 under its first mayor, Jacques Viger. In acknowledgement of its close relationship with the city, the Bank also employed the coat of arms, which is now registered by the Bank with the Windsor Herald at the College of Arms, in London.







## Interior

Visitors entering the Montreal Main Branch are immediately struck by the magnificence and luxuriance of the interior, whose spacious dimensions and clever interplay of colour and light form a marked contrast with the austere neoclassical exterior. What we see today is the result of a massive renovation carried out between 1901 and 1905, when it became apparent that the small building designed by John Wells could no longer house the expanding Head Office or handle the growing volume of business at the Montreal Main Branch. The New York firm of McKim, Mead and White, one of the most respected in North America, was called in. The original building was gutted, a move made necessary by its deteriorating condition, and the space enlarged with a large addition to the rear, expanding the building all the way to Saint Antoine Street. The limits of the old building extend only to the middle of the hall connecting the older and newer buildings. The floor of this room is actually a bridge, supported by massive steel girders, over the public thoroughfare known as Fortification Lane that runs beneath the centre of the building. A walk along the exterior on either Saint François-Xavier Street or Côte de la Place d'Armes will confirm this fact. The architects were inspired by the great churches of Santa Maria Maggiore and San Paolo fuori le Mura in Rome, whose basilica style had in turn been inspired by ancient Roman public halls. In accordance with the classical model, the interior is divided into three architectural units, with the main banking hall measuring 52.4 m by 25.6 m, and the ceiling 17 m above the floor. At the time, architects described it as “probably the largest, and architecturally the most monumental, bank building in the world.”



## Statue of Patria and Anniversary Tablets

The central hall is dominated by the statue of Patria, a memorial to honour the sacrifices made by employees during World War I. The marble statue was sculpted by American artist James Earle Fraser. The figure represents Victory, with her arms folded over a sword covered with palm fronds. A contemporary critic remarked that the figure appears to be “meditating not upon the thrill of battle, but upon the cost of peace.” More than

2,800 Bank of Montreal employees served in the two world wars. Of these, 314 lost their lives, 313 were wounded and 40 were made prisoners of war. Many employees served with great distinction, with 273 being decorated for bravery. The names of those who made the ultimate sacrifice appear on the east wall of the hall.

Displayed on the west wall are the names of the men and women who have led the bank over the years. The installations were unveiled to mark the Bank's Centenary and Bicentenary, respectively.

## War Memorials of the Merchants Bank of Canada and Molsons Bank

In the main banking hall are war memorials, in the form of tablets, that honour employees of the Merchants Bank of Canada and Molsons Bank who served in

World War I. These two financial institutions once had their head offices on Saint Jacques Street and were acquired by Bank of Montreal in 1922 and 1925 respectively. After the acquisitions, most of their employees continued to work for Bank of Montreal.



## Bas-relief Panels

On the wall of the passageway linking the Montreal Main Branch and Head Office buildings are four terra cotta bas-reliefs symbolizing Agriculture, Navigation, Arts and Crafts, and Commerce. These panels graced the façade of the Bank's first building, constructed at the corner of Saint François-Xavier and Saint Jacques Streets in 1819 and demolished to make way for a post office in 1876. The four panels

were based on designs by the artist John Bacon (1740-1799), who drew them in 1778. His sketches were then used as models by chief sculptor Joseph Panzetta and chief designer Thomas Dubbin of the Coade Stone Manufactory.

## De Maisonneuve Building

The De Maisonneuve Building is located on the very site where the Ville-Marie settlement once stood. Named in honour of Montreal's founder, it was constructed in 1913 by the renowned architectural firm McKim, Mead and White. Renovated in 1983 at a cost of more than \$4 million, the building blends perfectly with the adjacent Montreal Main Branch. During its restoration in 1984, state-of-the-art security and energy conservation systems were installed, while respecting the style and architecture of this historic building. In December 1985, the De Maisonneuve Building won the Orange Award for the quality of its renovation which, as Sauvons Montréal noted, allowed a part of Montreal's architectural heritage to be kept intact. Bank of Montreal won a second Orange Award in 1988 for the major work carried out to repair the façade and replace the copper roofing of the Montreal Main Branch dome. All the work was done in accordance with trade practices, while maintaining the original architectural design.

## Place d'Armes Complex

In 2007, BMO Financial Group invested more than \$2.6 million to maintain and restore the Place d'Armes Complex, which comprises the 17-storey Head Office building, the De Maisonneuve Building and the Montreal Main Branch. The masonry was totally redone, the entrance steps were replaced and the rear façade grillwork and windows were restored. In addition, the top cornice and decorative pediment were cleaned in accordance with conservation standards. Over the past 30 years, the Bank has spent more than \$20 million to restore and renovate its Place d'Armes Complex. This investment demonstrates the Bank's desire to preserve Montreal's architectural heritage and maintain its historical presence in Montreal. In 1847, Bank of Montreal President Peter McGill articulated his vision for this stately new building: “The Edifice, as a whole, [will] be creditable to the Stockholders – to the Architect and Artificers employed in its erection, and will, I hope, be an ornament to the city for generations to come.”

## Bank Museum

The Bank Museum is located in the passageway connecting the Main Branch and Head Office buildings. Open Monday through Friday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., it features a replica of the Bank's first office; a model depicting early Saint Jacques Street; displays of bank notes, coins and tokens; a collection of rare mechanical piggy banks; and many other interesting banking memorabilia.