

Space, Funding, and Heritage: The Montreal-Ottawa Conference Archives

by SUSAN STANLEY

The Montreal-Ottawa Conference of the United Church of Canada includes most of the province of Quebec, with the exception of the Gaspé region and certain northern pastoral charges, as well as the counties of Ontario located east of Ottawa and Prescott. The archives of the Conference has three locations: the City of Ottawa Archives holds the Ontario records; the Special Collections section of the Library at Bishop's University at Lennoxville holds the main collection, which includes Conference office records, Quebec church records, personal papers, photographs, and printed material; and the Church Centre at Montreal houses the Montreal-area Registers of Civil Status (baptisms, marriages, and burials).

A small room in the Church Centre at Montreal housed the entire Conference archives for a number of years leading to the mid-1970s. Apart from its inadequate size, this room was unsatisfactory because it was neither fireproof nor environmentally-controlled. In 1976, University Archivist John Andreassen's offer of space at the McGill University Archives seemed to be the ideal solution to the problem of storage. The contract between the Conference and McGill University Archives contained a clause that either party could terminate the agreement upon six months' written notice. During the following ten years, the agreement with McGill worked well: the Conference Archivist and volunteers handled the accessioning, arranging, and describing of records, as well as written inquiries and relations with church administrative bodies; the University Archives staff made records available to researchers who made personal visits to the archives, and collaborated on displays. With the retirement of Andreassen, however, the University Archives placed stronger emphasis on the records of the university itself. The Conference Archives appeared increasingly to be a drain on McGill's resources because, although it contained McGill-related material, most of its holdings consisted of church records unrelated to the university.

In 1985, the Conference Archives reached a twenty-year agreement with the City of Ottawa Archives for the storage of the Ontario records. The motives were twofold: it was felt that, by establishing a repository on the Ontario side of the Ottawa River, more Ontario churches would be willing to turn over their records; and it was hoped that the removal from McGill of a substantial part of the Conference's records would cause the university to regard the Conference Archives in a more positive light. Since the signing of the agreement, many congregations have indeed transferred records to the City of

Ottawa Archives, whose staff has undertaken considerable conservation work and has provided assistance in servicing the records.

Unfortunately, this transfer of records did not improve the situation at McGill, which in 1987 requested that the Conference Archives find new quarters elsewhere. The Conference Archives Committee and the Conference Archivist attempted to find another location in Montreal, but without success; a proposal to convert the basement of St. James United Church for the use of the archives was discontinued for financial reasons. With the deadline to vacate McGill fast approaching and the prospects for finding space in Quebec discouraging, the Archives Committee considered either storing the collection in a warehouse at Montreal, or transferring it to the General Council Archives of the United Church of Canada at Toronto.

Fortunately for all concerned, space was finally found in the library of Bishop's University at Lennoxville, which already housed collections of Anglican and Presbyterian records. This arrangement has proven to be very satisfactory, with the continuing support of the now-retired University Librarian, Germain Belisle, the present University Librarian, Bill Curran, and the University Archivist, Anna Grant. The university is now planning to construct an addition to the library which will include storage space and work areas for the denominational archives.

Although churches and researchers in the Eastern Townships and the Ottawa region have benefited from the proximity of the Conference Archives at Lennoxville and Ottawa, those in the Montreal area have felt the disadvantage of having their records so far away, and the Archives Committee is therefore still seeking accommodation to house the Montreal records safely and conveniently within the city.

Funding is a problem which has continued to trouble the Conference Archives. For example, the current budget of eight thousand dollars allotted by the Montreal-Ottawa Conference is inadequate to cover salaries, supplies, and equipment in three locations, as well as travel costs in an area covering hundreds of miles. As a result, the Conference Archives has sought and obtained other sources of financial support, notably federal and provincial grants which provided an approximate total of \$90,000 during the 1980s.

In 1980, the provincial Ministry of Cultural Affairs granted the Conference Archives \$10,000 to prepare an inventory of the records of fifty churches in the Montreal area, and renewed this support during the next two years. Coming when they did, these provincial grants enabled the Conference Archives to lay the foundation for a comprehensive guide to all the local church records throughout the Conference area. Many records were (and still are) in urban and rural churches and manses, or even in private hands. The challenge was to track down and list the records of over three hundred active churches; in 1983, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) granted the Conference Archives over seventy thousand dollars to carry out this project over two years. With eight part-time workers on salaries of one hundred dollars per day, the information speedily arrived, and the McGill Computer Centre assisted with entering the comprehensive listings into a database containing twenty main categories. The two-volume *Guide to Local Church Records, Montreal-Ottawa Conference*, published in 1986, became an invaluable research tool. The guide's detailed entries are often exactly what researchers need, and it is now possible to direct them to the exact location of records. The project was also beneficial in that it made congregations more aware of their records, resulting in the saving of material which might otherwise have disappeared through negligence.

Although publication of the guide created a flurry of interest, it became increasingly clear that financial support for the Conference Archives would have to be sought outside the United Church. In 1987, the Jackman Foundation provided a generous grant which, extended to a second year, enabled the archives to establish itself in its new quarters at Bishop's University and to cover the cost of salaries and supplies. More importantly, the grant helped to set up a capital fund as a source of on-going support for the archives, and for the preservation of historic sites throughout the Montreal-Ottawa Conference area.

Conference Archives Committees of the United Church of Canada are responsible for recommending the recognition of church buildings of historic significance, but have frequently lacked the resources to undertake this task. In the Montreal-Ottawa Conference, however, informal links between archives and buildings developed over several years during the process of provincial (Quebec) classification of churches as historic sites. Documents in the Conference Archives (blueprints, deeds, architectural drawings, building committee minutes) are essential in establishing architectural or historical significance, and perhaps in saving a building from defacement or demolition. During the past fifteen years, research prepared by the Conference Archivist has resulted in the discovery, classification, and preservation of, for example, the oldest former Protestant church still standing in Montreal, a former Congregational church in Montreal, and Plymouth-Trinity United Church in Sherbrooke.

As churches amalgamate or close and their records are transferred to the Conference Archives, the church buildings and cemeteries, important for their architectural, genealogical, or demographic evidence, are often abandoned, subject to vandalism and eventual destruction. There was an appreciation of the connection between archives and historic sites, but the possibility of uniting the two for purposes of gaining financial support did not emerge until quite recently. The Conference Archives Committee's sub-committee on fundraising, which met for the first time in the spring of 1988 at Montreal, subsequently achieved its primary goal, the creation of the Heritage Trust Fund to ensure the preservation of the heritage of the United Church throughout the Montreal-Ottawa Conference area. Each of the five Presbyteries within the Conference has been approached for special grants, and many individual congregations will eventually be asked to contribute to the fund. Moreover, fifty foundations, mainly in Quebec and Ontario, have been asked for donations, and both corporations and government agencies will also be approached. Fundraising outside the church might be viewed as inappropriate, but it is legitimate to turn to the public for support, because the church is making its records available to the public for research, and because the church's buildings are a valuable part of the architectural landscape.

The Conference Archives will benefit from the support of the Heritage Trust Fund in many areas: staff salaries, the purchase of equipment and supplies, the financing of a conservation programme, even the renovation of a church building for archival purposes should space in an academic or government institution not be available. The fund will also support such heritage-related activities as a programme of plaques on significant church properties, professional advice to congregations on property upkeep, assistance with building classification and grant applications, and (possibly) emergency repair work in some circumstances. The ultimate goal of \$500,000 is still far in the future at this time; however, the success of this undertaking should finally enable the Montreal-Ottawa Conference Archives to assume full responsibility for preserving the church's heritage.