

**265 PROVENCHER BOULEVARD – BERNIER HOUSE**  
*Aimé de Keroack, 1882*



The eclectic style and ornamentation of 265 Provencher Boulevard continue to give visual prominence to what was once a centre of political and social life in St. Boniface.

For more than 70 years, this structure housed members of the Bernier family who were, or became, active in politics, education, religion, law and international development.

The patriarch was Thomas-Alfred Bernier, a Quebec crown attorney who relocated his extended family to a large farm near Ste. Agathe, Manitoba in 1880. His agricultural career was short-lived as he soon assumed a series of public offices, supported by Archbishop Taché who considered him to be a champion of French Catholic rights in the West.

Among his posts, Bernier became superintendent of French Catholic schools, registrar of the University of Manitoba (1882-1893), reeve of St. Boniface (1883-1888), French clerk of the Manitoba Legislative Assembly, chairman of the Eastern Judicial District Board, and senator (1892-1908).

He assisted with the founding of a French settlement at Fannystelle in southwestern Manitoba, and bitterly opposed the Greenway government's abolition of separate schools and French as an official language in the province.

The Bernier family moved to their new home on the north side of Provencher Boulevard across from St. Boniface College in 1882. Thomas-Alfred, his wife Malvina and their seven surviving children maintained a household known for its social events and out-of-town guests from the arts, politics and public administration.

Their house was designed by Aimé Lebrice de Keroack, Bernier's cousin who moved to Manitoba from Quebec in 1881 and established the West's first French bookstore. He was not known as an architect or builder but may have used plans from contemporary house pattern books or building magazines to design the occasional structure.

The two-storey Bernier House suggests influences from the Picturesque Movement, in particular the Italianate style which was popular in Canada from 1840 to 1885. It utilized square plans, towers, gently sloping roofs, bracketed eaves, bay windows and porches — elements that were found in the original design of 265 Provencher.

The most striking feature is the tower on the west side of the front façade, with its ornate dormer windows, brackets and a finial. Its design recalls the romantic towers of Loire Valley chateaux. To the east is a large gable with gingerbread detailing in the more rounded shapes favoured by Quebec artisans. The original front also had a screened central porch and upstairs balcony. These elements subsequently have been enclosed and a door from the porch to the tower has been removed.

Among other alterations, the clapboard siding has been covered with stucco; a large veranda along the west side of the house has been removed; also gone are a bay window from the front gable, most of the window surrounds, and an attached rear shed.

The first floor of the original 18-room interior had two elegant front salons separated by an archway. The dining room was on the west side with doors that opened onto the veranda. A breakfast room, kitchen, maid's quarters and office/library also were on this level.

In 1911, part of the east side of property was used for construction of a house at 259 Provencher for the Berniers' daughter, Rachel, and her husband François Deniset.

Malvina Bernier remained in the family home along with other relatives for 18 years following her husband's death in late 1908. Three of the children entered religious orders; another became a judge.

The public profile of 265 Provencher was sustained by the eldest surviving son, Joseph, who was a lawyer, member of the legislature elected five times between 1901 and 1927, and provincial secretary from 1913 to 1915 before the Roblin cabinet fell during the Legislative Building scandal. Joseph also was co-editor of the Conservation organ, Le Manitoba, with his brother Noel and became the first francophone to be appointed a County Court judge (1932).

Joseph's son, Robert, and adopted son and nephew, Maurice Deniset-Bernier, both entered the priesthood. The former became a noted sociologist and international development expert; the latter, an educator and author of children's stories.

The Bernier House remained in the family's hands until it was sold in 1951 following Joseph's death.