

494 AVENUE TACHE – GREY NUNS' CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)
L'Abbé Louis-François Richer Lafleche, 1845



At first glance, the nearly 150-year-old, solid log structure at 494 Avenue Taché seems to belie its central place in Winnipeg's -- and prairie Canada's -- religious and social development. The building's dignified but unassuming appearance gives little hint of the whirl of activity that accompanied its multiple roles as the West's first convent, a schoolhouse, infirmary, refuge for orphans and the elderly, and training ground for missionaries.

Yet, the Sisters of Charity or Grey Nuns' Convent was all this and more during its first century. Within its walls, charitable works were undertaken that meant much on an individual level, but also led to larger institutional legacies such as the nearby St. Boniface General Hospital and Taché Nursing Centre.

The Grey Nuns were organized in Montréal in 1737 by Marie-Marguerite d'Youville. The religious order agreed in 1843 to a request from Bishop Joseph Norbert Provencher to assist with educational and social services provided by the Roman Catholic mission at the Red River Settlement. The following year, Sister Marie-Louise Valade and three other members travelled west to establish a convent.

The nuns soon organized classes for children, began catechizing adults, opened a noviciate, and tended to the poor and sick in their homes. Their scope of activity greatly expanded over the next several decades to include care of orphans, the elderly and ill, establishment of St. Boniface Hospital (1871), convent schools in Winnipeg, St. Francois-Xavier, St. Norbert and St. Vital, and a boarding school for girls in St. Boniface which was the forerunner of l'Académie Taché.

The nuns went on to develop additional convent schools, Indian schools and hospitals in northwestern Ontario, rural Manitoba, Saskatchewan and North Dakota, plus the St. Roch facility in St. Boniface for victims of contagious diseases and a tuberculosis sanitarium in St. Vital. They also prepared sisters for missionary life in the North-West and their convent served informally as a regional mother house.

Sister Valade and her companions initially were based in a stone building erected in c.1829. They later moved into Bishop Provencher's residence while the former structure was demolished to provide material for the foundation of their new convent located on the east bank of the Red River south of the Bishop's Palace and St. Boniface Cathedral.

Various mishaps interfered with the construction schedule. The start of work was delayed from 1845 until 1846. When the sisters occupied the site in December 1847, the building was far from finished. Indeed, it took another four years to complete the two-storey oak facility with a split-level attic and hipped roof.

The designer, L'Abbé Louis-François Richer Lafleche of Quebec, worked as a missionary in the West from 1842 to 1854, then later became Bishop of Trois-Rivières. Known builders included Louis Galarneau and Amable Nault, also from Canada.

Lafleche's plan combined the Georgian or British classical tradition commonly used by the Hudson's Bay Company for its contemporary fur trade warehouses and residences with features from the French-Canadian "la maison traditionnelle," modified by Palladian influences. The British classical style was represented by the convent's symmetrical rectangular plan, hipped roof and chimneys at both ends of the hip, while French elements included the roof's steep pitch,

dormers placed near the eaves-line, paired and shuttered casement windows, a central entrance, and a slightly shorter second storey.

As well, the building's Red River frame structural system was based on the "piece-sur-piece" method which prevailed in the St. Lawrence Valley from the late 17th to late 19th centuries and was brought west by fur traders. This meant the white oak timber frame was composed of a series of widely spaced grooved posts into which were tenoned or slotted squared horizontal logs that had been floated downstream from Pembina. In addition, each floor was supported by 27 beams spanning the building's approximately 12.4-metre width and stiffened by a central partition. The roof was formed of treed rafters with hips and jack rafters.

The original nine-log front (west) façade was clad with vertical tongue-and-groove boarding. Its central entrance was flanked on both storeys by sidelights and four paired windows along each wing. Subsequent alterations resulted in rearrangement of the front dormers and an increase in their number from four to five. As well, a belfry, porches and brick chimneys were added, then in 1888-89, the rear chapel was modified and extended eastward one storey to give the entire structure a more distinctive T-shape.

Along with the chapel, the interior initially held classrooms, dormitories for orphans and boarders, an infirmary, rooms for the elderly, plus a kitchen, community rooms, refectory and bedrooms for the nuns. Functional changes led to numerous alterations over the years. In 1911, the sisters moved their residence and orphanage to l'Hospice Taché and converted the convent to a seniors' residence. Then in 1923, the nuns and aged switched quarters, followed in 1954-56 by the nearby development of a new provincial house, completion of which resulted in the sisters vacating their original convent for the last time.

In 1958, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) recommended that 494 Avenue Taché be declared of national importance because of its architectural and historical interest. To preserve and adapt the building as a museum, the City of St. Boniface in 1963 entered into a 99-year lease with the owners, Les Soeurs de la Charite de l'Hôpital Generale de St. Boniface, plus an intergovernmental cost-sharing agreement to cover consolidation and

restoration of the facility. A second cost-sharing arrangement for additional work was made in 1970. Upon formation of Unicity in 1971-72, the City of Winnipeg became responsible for the site and financial support of the St. Boniface Museum.

The early conservation work stabilized some of the building's structural problems, but also led to the loss of some original materials and alterations to historic fabric of the foundation, walls and roof. In addition, the convent has experienced subsequent physical deterioration. In 1988, the HSMBC reconfirmed that it considers the building to be of "exceptional" national significance and recommended that federal aid again be provided for restoration through the Canadian Parks Service's National Cost-Sharing Program.

Subsequent planning by representatives of the three levels of government and the museum, with concurrence from the Grey Nuns, resulted in a \$1.264 million proposal to rehabilitate the building (\$930,000), upgrade certain contemporary elements such as accessibility and the sprinkler, electrical, ventilation and humidity control systems, and prepare a long-term museum development plan. Canada and Winnipeg are the main sources of project financing, with additional contributions from Manitoba and various fund-raising activities by the museum.