

Nun's Island through the ages



In 1769, the sisters became the sole proprietors of the island. Their convent was built in 1788. (Photo : Courtesy - Borough of Verdun)

Anne-Marie Luca

Nun's Island has more than 400 years of history. Known for centuries as Saint Paul's Island, the region has passed through the hands of many owners, and its agricultural landscape has morphed into modern suburbs. Historically though, the island was not always inhabited by nuns.

From lords to sisters

In 1664, Lord Jean de Lauzon conceded Saint Paul's Island to three lords who would become the first inhabitants of the land bordering the St. Lawrence River: Claude Robustel de Saint-André, Jean-Baptiste Lavigne and Jacques Le Ber.

In 1695, Le Ber's daughter offered her inherited portion of the land to the Soeurs de Notre-Dame de Montreal, a congregation formed by Marguerite Bourgeois in mid-17th century in Nouvelle France. Jeanne Le Ber had chosen the life of a recluse some years prior.

The mission of the congregation consisted of teaching Catholicism to women and children, and to help them prosper in their new home.

In 1769, the sisters became the sole proprietors of the island. Their convent was constructed in 1788, used as much by the nuns to cultivate the land as by the residents who had settled there.

For more than 200 years, the congregation harvested wheat and oats, and raised horses, cattle, pigs, chickens, ducks, pigeons and some sheep for wool.

From sisters to entrepreneurs

Decades later, the sisters were struggling to adapt to industrialization. They began to seriously consider selling the island when construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway began in 1954. Up until then, they used a barge to cross from one side of the river to the other. The sisters did not have the means or the infrastructures to keep up with modernization.



The sisters of the congregation left definitively on the morning of May 24, 1957. Overview of part of the ruins of the old convent.

(Photo : Courtesy - Borough of Verdun)

Over several months, rumours ran rampant about the fate of the island. Discussions multiplied about annexing Nun's Island with the city of Verdun and building a bridge from one to the other, as well as erecting a bridge between Montreal and the South Shore.

The Quebec Home and Mortgage Corporation finally bought the island on January 26, 1956, for the price of \$1.3-million. The president of the company was none other than Judah Leib Gewurz, whose son Samuel and grandson Ilan presently

own real estate development company Proment, the primary residential developer in Nun's Island for the last 30 years.

Island urbanisation

Although the Quebec Home and Mortgage Corporation and the city of Verdun discussed developing their new island, it would be several years before development took off. In 1957, the corporation constructed the Champlain Bridge, which opened on June 28, 1962. It was the first key urban footprint on Nun's Island.

To accelerate urbanization, the Quebec Group allied with Structures Métropolitaines du Canada in 1965, which developed several large suburbs in the United States.

On December 1st, 1965, *Le Devoir* described the project as "A \$300-million project that will transform Nun's Island, with a surface area of over 900 acres, in a wide range . . . The project will see 15,000 homes built over a period of 15 years."

Structures Métropolitaines made a call for any businesses and contractors to develop the island, like the renowned architect Mies Van der Rohe, who designed the Esso gas station that's



Mayor of Verdun, Albert Gariépy, Mother superior, Gabrielle Massicotte, and assistant mother superior, Cécile Lanoue in 1967.

(Photo: Courtesy - Borough of Verdun)

known today as the intergenerational community centre, La Station.

This was the starting point for a suburban community now known as one of the richest in Montreal. Here one may find real estate choices that attract a mix of business people and celebrities, like Mitsou Gélinas and Isabelle Maréchal, as well as foreign buyers.

From Saint-Paul's Island to Nun's Island

Before becoming Nun's Island, the area was named Saint-Paul's Island, in honour of Montreal's founder, Paul de Chomedey.



Montreal's founder, Paul de Chomedey.

(Photo: Courtesy - Ville de Montréal)

The name Nun's Island appears in English in documents as far back as the 19th Century, in reference to the Sisters of the Congregation of Montreal.

The English name and the French, *Île des Soeurs*, are both currently used to identify the island. Since the 1950s, however, the name *Île-des-Sœurs* can be found on maps. According to the toponomy commission of Quebec, the name *Île-des-Sœurs* was made official on December 5, 1968.



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