

THE ST. LAWRENCE SHIP CHANNEL, 1805-1865

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THE SETTING IN 1800 : CITY AND RIVER

Montréal, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, was a rapidly growing cosmopolitan city. Bouchette¹ in 1815, termed the city handsome, and another traveller in 1819 noted that his first impression of Montréal was very pleasing.² On approaching the city from Québec, strangers were impressed with the turrets, spires and steeples whose tin roofs glittered in the sunshine. If the entrance to Montréal was made from the Lachine road they were impressed with the fine view presented of the city surrounded with green fields and orchards, with the mountain as a backdrop.

The harbour

The harbour at this time was very simple. There were a few private wharves jutting out into the river, but generally the ships anchored by the shore and unloaded their goods onto the bank. The river between Market Garden Island and the town was particularly good anchorage, being protected from the currents. Canoes and *bateaux* were generally pulled up onto the beach for unloading.

The state of navigation

The government of France had decreed that the city (then referred to as Ville-Marie) be built « as high up on the St. Lawrence as it were possible for vessels to go by sea ».³ In choosing the site of Montréal this command was complied with in the strictest sense.

The Saint Mary's current passing before the city made it difficult for craft to enter the harbour area. As a rule ships could only progress as far as Hoche-laga at the foot of the current, about two miles below Montréal proper. To reach the harbour it was necessary to be towed up the current by ten to sixteen oxen, depending on the size of the ship and the direction of the wind.

The channel of the river itself was sufficiently deep for the craft navigating it. But Lake Saint Peter, even then, was considered shallow and hazardous.

¹ BOUCHETTE, J., *A topographical description of the province of Lower Canada*, London, 1815, p. 41.

² SANDHAM, A., *Ville-Marie, or sketches of Montreal*, Montréal, 1870.

³ WELD, I., *Travels through the states of North America and the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada*, London, 1800, v. 1, p. 309.