

# Château Vaudreuil and its Architect Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry

by John Bland

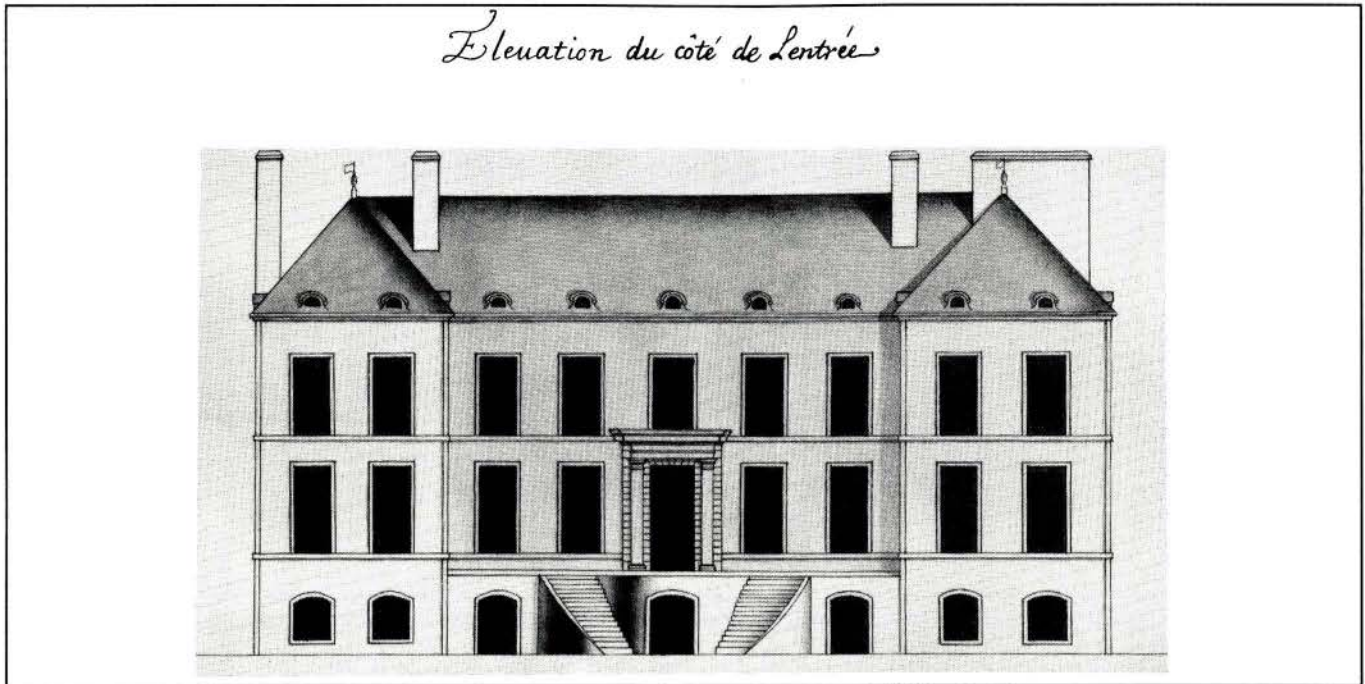


Figure 1. Château Vaudreuil, elevation to rue St-Paul in 1727, after Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry. (Photo: National Archives of Canada, National Map Collection C-37604)

The Château Vaudreuil, the Montreal residence of the Governor of New France, stood on rue St-Paul just to the west of what is now Place Jacques-Cartier. Its design has been said "to remind us that a self-conscious classicizing French tradition coexisted in New France with the more widespread popular tradition."<sup>1</sup> Yet buildings designed in this manner were rare, and the architect of the Château Vaudreuil, Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry (1682-1756) appears to have had a hand in all of them.

Few buildings in New France were designed and built in one sustained effort. Practically all were built in stages by the incremental addition of floors or wings; baroque principals of composition had little influence. Yet the opinion persisted, stimulated by at least two influential critics, Bacqueville de la Potherie and Charlevoix, that buildings intended to be palaces had to be properly composed. That is, palaces had to be balanced about an axis. If they were not, they were considered incomplete. Bishop St-Vallier's palace, Hôpital Général, and the Récollet Convent had similar compositions, but only the palace was considered incomplete. For many years Frontenac's great house, the Château St-Louis, lacked its southwest end pavilion, which greatly distressed its critics since, unbalanced, it had no proper centre.<sup>2</sup> Only the Intendant's palace really pleased the critics. It had an admirable composition, and was clearly the ideal upon which the Château Vaudreuil was modeled.

Madame la marquise de Vaudreuil placed its cornerstone on May 15, 1723.<sup>3</sup> Three years later, in 1726, it was certified complete as designed.<sup>4</sup> As the official residence of the Governor General, the house had been subsidized to some degree but, as if to avoid confusion on this matter, the plate in the corner-stone clearly stated that the house belonged to Vaudreuil. Because he intended to remain in

Canada after his tenure as Governor, the house was expected to become his principal residence. But Vaudreuil died in Quebec on October 10, 1725 and he may never have seen the completed house. His widow returned to France directly, and his Canadian interests, including the new house, passed to his fourth son Pierre de Rigaud, who leased it to the Crown for the use of the new Governor General. Years later Pierre de Rigaud occupied it himself when he became the last Governor of New France. The use of the château between 1760 and 1773 is unclear, but in July 1773 it was purchased by the wardens of the parish of Notre Dame for use as a boys' school, the Collège St-Raphael.<sup>5</sup> Finally, in 1803, it was destroyed by fire. Its ruins were demolished in 1806, and by 1815 the site had been developed for other purposes and no trace of the house remained.<sup>6</sup>

With its elevated posture, balanced composition, and monumental doorway, the Château Vaudreuil stands in the tradition of French houses of the minor nobility. At the same time, its austerity and outdated, spiky finials betray the old-fashioned training of its author and the outlandish position of Montreal in the great age of French architecture. Chaussegros de Léry is believed to have been trained in Toulon about 1700 by his father, a noted military engineer.<sup>7</sup> He would have learned the basic principles of civil architecture and, like other engineers of his day, he would have been qualified to design barracks, prisons, hospitals, garrison churches, and official residences following standard models. After some military experience in France, Chaussegros was dispatched to Canada to work on fortifications. He spent the rest of his life here in that pursuit.

In addition, he is known to have prepared the designs for several important buildings. The details of these suggest that Chaussegros may have been responsible for a number of other decorative facades

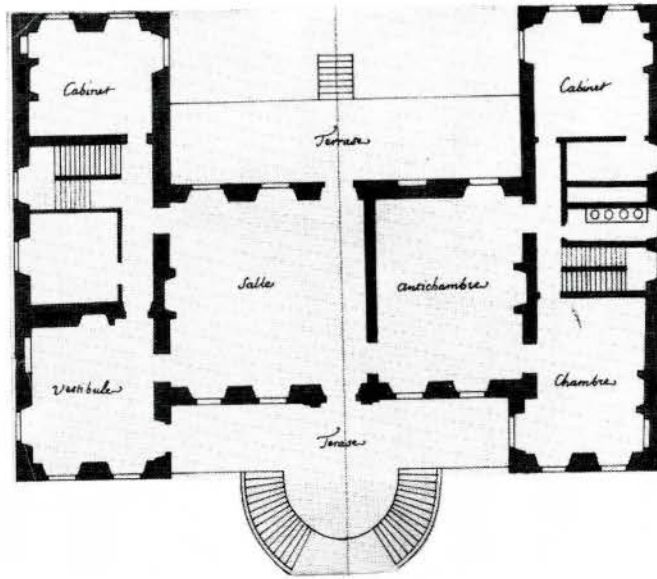


Figure 2. Château Vaudreuil, plan of main floor in 1727, after Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry. (Photo: National Archives of Canada, National Map Collection 23963)

or ornamental doorways—involving Doric or Ionic pilasters—which appeared about the middle of the 18th century. It seems, however, that his architectural experience was obtained entirely in New France. He made the “as built” drawings of the Intendant’s palace in 1718 and was responsible for its reconstruction after the fire in 1721. He was involved in surveying, repairing, and eventually completing the Château St-Louis. Both buildings, although larger in area than Château Vaudreuil, were of the same scale. The height of the principal doorway of the Château Vaudreuil, eleven feet, was the same as that of the Intendant’s palace; both were only slightly higher than the door of the Château St-Louis.

While the Château Vaudreuil has an admirable composition, the surviving drawings show that this was not achieved easily. The main floor (figure 2) is in the form of a letter H. Although the centre portion, the *corps de logis*, has the form of a rectangle and the southwest wing containing the *cabinet* and *vestibule* is regular, the northeast wing is bent out of line by the adjoining street. The dilemma this produced may be seen from inconsistencies in the surviving drawings. The elevation to rue St-Paul (figure 1) shows that the northeast wing, to the right, pinched by the adjoining rue St-Charles, is narrower than the southwest wing to the left. This unbalanced proposal must have been unacceptable since all the plans show an alternate solution where the wings have facades of equal width. This was accomplished by allowing the northeast wing to overlap the *corps de logis*, so that only an adjustment to the centering of its openings was needed to preserve the appearance of symmetry. Perhaps a more skillful architect would have handled this problem with greater subtlety. However, it is also possible that the problem was even more complex, as the geometry of the *corps de logis* might have been established by an existing building on the site. Plans of Montreal by both Levasseur de Néré in 1704 and Gédéon de Catlogne in 1723 show a simple rectangular building in the exact location of the *corps de logis*.

A further examination of the plans shows that the architect’s con-

cern for regularity extended to the garden front and to the less conspicuous sides. Along the northeast wing the plans of the basement and principal floors show indentations in the walls marking the outlines of blind windows. These functioned solely to satisfy the eye of an observer in quest of the orderly arrangement of openings one above the other from basement to roof.

The basement windows have segmental heads to harmonize with the segmental vaults over the basement spaces. The architect provided string courses at the level of the window sills, rather than at the more traditional floor levels or at both locations. These sill level courses served equally well the purpose of marking the storeys and of tidily relating the windows horizontally. Similarly, a projecting course marks the quoins and the architraves of the openings. These allowed the walls to be neatly plastered so that there were no unprotected corners which might have allowed the soft, irregular *crepi* to break away. Small dormer windows with elliptical heads occur directly above the windows of the lower floors. This elliptical profile was ideally suited to be finished with hammered lead sheets, as required for slate roofs. Later, perhaps when the house became a college, more intensive use of the attic required the enlargement of these elegant small windows into the ungainly dormers shown in the view of the house attributed to Berczy by Morissette and Gowans, and to Duncan by Mar-<sup>8</sup>

The monumental doorway, *perron*, and horseshoe stairs are features taken directly from the Intendant’s palace at Quebec, except that at Montreal the *perron* is extended on either side to meet the projecting wings. This enables it to serve a secondary doorway in the southwest wing (figure 2). A similar doorway at Quebec clumsily required a separate set of steps. This second doorway, in the Château Vaudreuil, may well have been intended as the day-to-day entrance to the house. On one of the surviving plans of the ground floor the room it serves is labeled *vestibule*. The principal door offered direct access to the *salle*, as in the arrangement of the Château St-Louis.

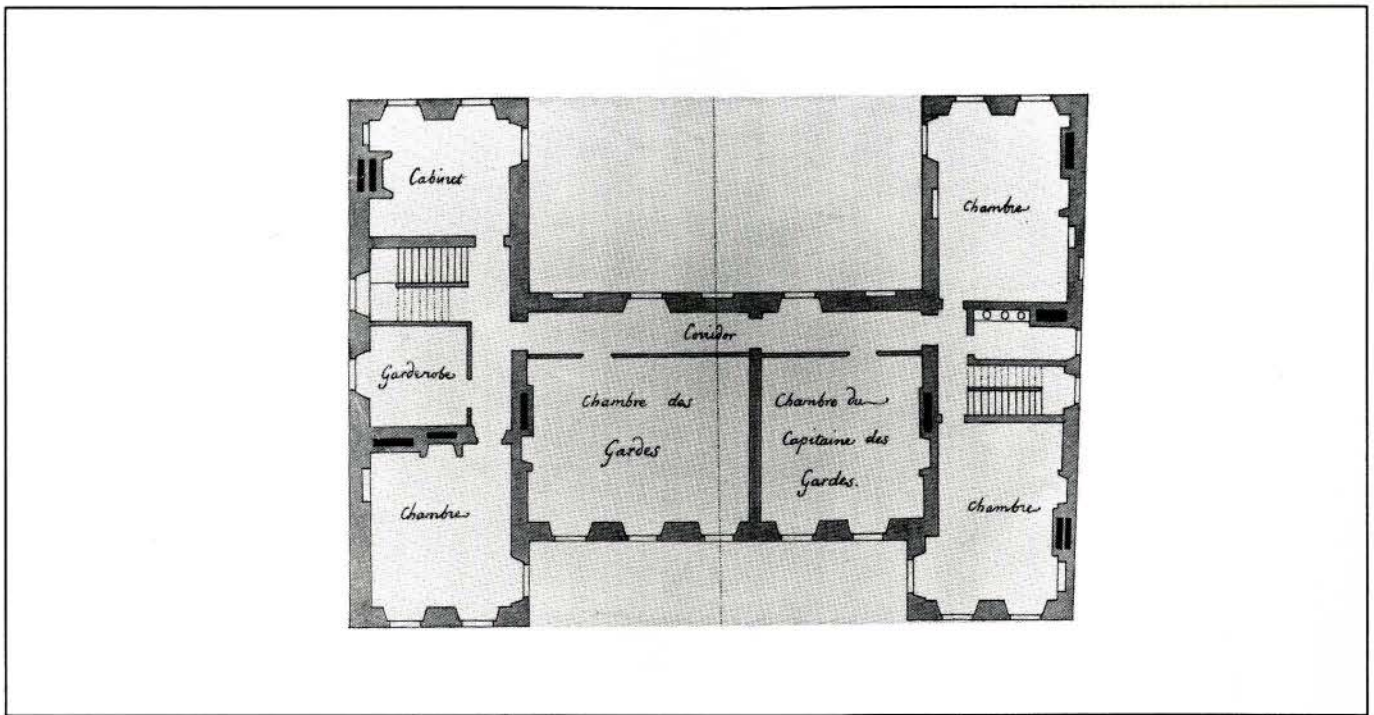


Figure 3. Château Vaudreuil, plan of first floor in 1727, after Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry. (Photo: National Archives of Canada, National Map Collection C-60867)

Like the great house in Quebec, the door between the *salle* and the *terrace* was on axis with the principal entrance. In Quebec, the famous terrace overlooked the river and a vast landscape; in Montreal, the terrace overlooked a walled *parterre* and beyond to an orchard with Mount Royal in the distance. In Quebec it was customary for the Governor's visitors to wait on the terrace until he was free. The same procedure may have been intended in Montreal. The doorways of the four principal reception rooms were arranged *enfilade*, as they were in the Château St-Louis, providing equally handsome views and clear routes from room to room. Corridors on the main floor were minor and served only the stairways and rooms in the wings. *Cabinets*, likely intended as the offices of the Governor's principal secretaries, occupied the ends of the wings. The garden terrace was probably made of wood, as is often the case in Canadian houses. The entrance terrace—the *perron* and steps—was built of stone on a base, penetrated only by vaulted entrance vestibules leading to the basement rooms fronting rue St-Paul. This was a pattern used in the design of large stone houses in Montreal throughout the 19th century.

The southwest wing of the basement plan beside the service courtyard (figure 4) comprises what appear to be two kitchens. This was not uncommon in houses with numerous staff (the Intendant's palace had two huge kitchens). The smaller of the two kitchens, labeled *office*, contained a big hearth for roasting, a bake oven that extended out into the yard, and a separate range of five charcoal burners. The larger room, labeled *cuisine*, contained an even bigger hearth and a separate range of eight burners. It had large windows on both rue St-Paul and the service yard. Between the two kitchens was the *garde manger*, the stairway to the house above, access to the court, and the *cave*, which occupied the whole space below the *salle*. The uses of the rooms within the northeast wing are not so clear. The slope of rue St-Charles and its proximity to the house likely prohibited windows, and this made the rooms less habitable. Only the front room, with windows looking on to rue St-Paul, had a fireplace. With a separate vestibule and direct access to the street, this room may have been used

as an administrative office. The remaining rooms in this wing were used for storage.

On the first floor (figure 3) all the rooms were separate, not interconnected as on the main floor below. Thus, a corridor was required across the *corps de logis* connecting the stairways in the wings. Similar to the arrangement in the Château St-Louis, this corridor was on the north side; the *chambres* were on the sunny side. Curiously, the two major rooms on the first floor were set aside for official service, *chambre des gardes* and *chambre du capitaine des gardes*. This seems an intrusion at this point in the house and leads one to wonder whether the subsidy, referred to above, might have been based upon the area and prominence of rooms devoted to official purposes. One notes a similar discrepancy in the unlikely placement of beds in the plans of hospitals whose grants depend on their count.

The château had outdoor privies, but it also had indoor arrangements on both principal floors. These consisted of seats over wide flues located directly above a pit in the basement (labeled *fosse*) which was vented as a chimney. Properly built and maintained, these facilities were probably not unsatisfactory and were perhaps an improvement over arrangements in the houses of officials in Quebec. The latter were usually found in separate towers, splendidly ventilated but desperately cold.

The roof of the château is unusual in that it had two different angles of inclination. Over the *corps de logis* the wide span had a lower slope than over the narrower wings. This permitted all roofs to have common eaves, a common ridge, and, moreover, to appear to have consistent slopes, since only the roofs over the wings could be seen in profile. This arrangement appears to be similar to a system used in Quebec churches, where transept roofs were raised to interrupt and conceal the differences in roof slopes over wide naves and narrow chancels. These differences had hitherto caused weird situations when

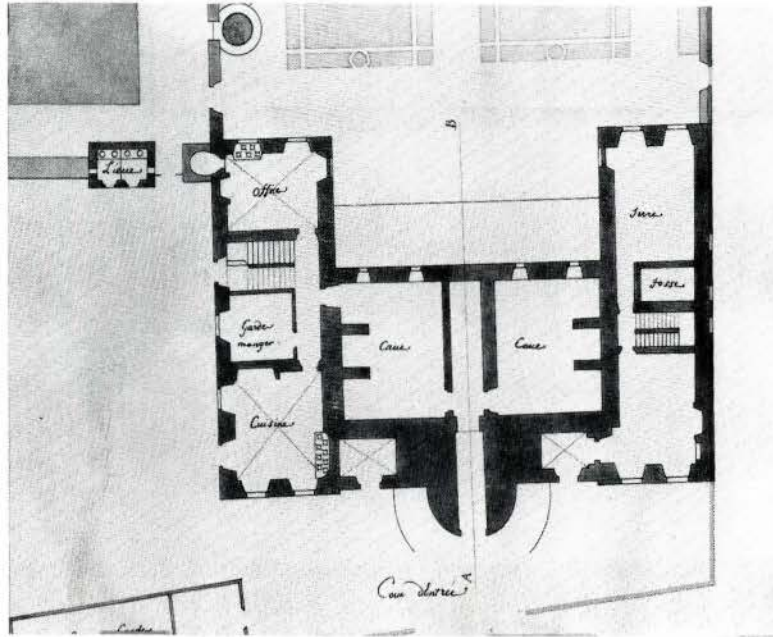


Figure 4. Château Vaudreuil, plan of basement in 1727, after Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry. (Photo: National Archives of Canada, National Map Collection C-60866)

regular roof lines were desired. But there is no evidence that Chaussegros de Léry played any part in this, possibly parallel, development.

Chaussegros de Léry died in 1756, but that did not save him from becoming a scapegoat, along with Pierre de Rigaud and others, three years later. Many people were blamed for the loss of New France. Those who lived had a chance to defend and gradually regain their reputations. But those who were dead had no defense. As a military engineer, Chaussegros was popularly condemned as incompetent, as an architect mediocre. Even two centuries later, Ramsay Traquair's assessment, quoted by Chaussegros' biographer F. J. Thorpe, seems unnecessarily harsh: "If the front of Nôtre Dame is to be taken as a good example of his quality as an architect, his knowledge and designing abilities were very slight indeed."<sup>9</sup> Traquair had little appreciation for self-conscious classicizing ideas in architecture. A craftsman's eye drew his attention to skilled masonry, carpentry, joinery, and well-wrought iron; exquisitely carved pine furniture and fittings were what he most enjoyed. Moreover, the palaces, the châteaux, and, one must add, the facade of Nôtre Dame had long disappeared when Traquair explored the architecture of Quebec. And what is most important, Chaussegros de Léry's drawings have only recently appeared.

Now seems the time for a more generous view of Chaussegros de Léry, accepting that he was neither highly trained nor especially experienced, and that he worked in isolation. One must give him due credit for stressing simple principles of order in prominent buildings and, where appropriate, using a little classical ornament to civilize them.

## Endnotes

- 1 Christina Cameron, "Housing in Quebec Before Confederation," *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, Vol. VI, No. 1, 1982, pp. 1-34.
- 2 Claude Charles Le Roy Bacqueville de la Potherie, *Histoire de l'Amérique Septentrionale* (Paris, 1753, reprint of 1722 edition), Vol. 1, pp. 233-234. La Potherie called the Bishop's palace a great building in which the chapel ought to form the

centre. He added, almost subconsciously, that few episcopal palaces would be its equal when finished. Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North America* [in English] (Dublin, 1766), Letter III, Quebec, October 28, 1720, p. 31. Charlevoix complained that although the Château St-Louis was a fine building, it was intended to have advanced pavilions at both ends, but only one had been built.

- 3 Robert Lahaise, *Les édifices conventuels du Vieux Montréal*, p. 302, note 26, "l'inscription trouvée le 15 mai 1806, sous le première Pierre de l'angle sud-est de l'ancien château Vaudreuil:

Cette Pierre  
a este posee par Dame Louise-Elizabeth Jouabere  
Femme de haut et puissant Seigneur  
PHILIPPE DE RIGAUD  
Chevalier, Marquis de Vaudreuil,  
Grand Croix de St-Louis,  
Gouverneur  
Lieutenant Général pour le Roi de toute la  
Nouvelle France Septentrionale  
en 1723, le 15 may  
Sept maison appartient a Monsieur le  
Marquis de Vaudreuil."

- 4 Certified survey of house and grounds, Archives Nationales C7 No. 340 Dossier Vaudreuil (author's translation): July 17, 1726, we, Jean-Baptiste Angers and René Berouagne, land surveyors appointed by M. Lepré representing the King: we visited the house and grounds of M. le Marquis de Vaudreuil located in Montreal; we found the area was 1211 1/4 toise, including courtyards, flowerbeds, fruit gardens and kitchen gardens; and the other site, a dependence of the property opposite the house on the St. Lawrence River side, we found to be 124 toise: all corresponding to the plan we have drawn and certify to be true, in witness whereof we have signed on the above date at Montreal.
- 5 Robert Lahaise, p. 302, note 25.
- 6 See Joseph Bouchette's plan of Montreal, 1815.
- 7 For information about Gaspard-Joseph Chaussegros de Léry see the biographical essay by F. J. Thorpe, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. III, pp. 116-119.
- 8 See Gerard Morissette, *L'architecture en Nouvelle France*, pl. 35a; Alan Gowans, *Building Canada*, pl. 24; Jean-Claude Marsan, *Montreal in Evolution*, pl. 8.
- 9 F. J. Thorpe, *DCB*, Vol. III, p. 118.