Quebec
BIRTHPLACE OF NEW FRANCE
MENDEL GUIDES
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This book is the second in a series of four volumes that will provide a visual exploration of Quebec City, its history and its architecture. While the first volume, *Quebec, World Heritage City*, focused on the upper town, this one, *Quebec, Birthplace of New France*, takes us down to the lower town, where the city began early in the 17th century with the establishment of a little trading post by the shore of the St. Lawrence River. The evolution of the lower town has always been tied to the rising and falling fortunes of Quebec as a maritime city. Over the centuries, the needs of the port determined not only the size and scale of the buildings in the sector, but even the amount of land available for construction.

A brief outline of the history of each major location leads to a step-by-step exploration, in which general exterior and interior views are followed by photographs of selected objects, symbols and architectural elements. Texts have been kept deliberately short in order to provide as much space as possible for historic maps, images and, especially, Luc-Antoine Couturier’s remarkable photographs. As we will see, a wide variety of historic buildings and structures have survived in the lower town. Evidence of Quebec’s evolution as a port city remains visible at almost every corner, waiting to be discovered by the observant eye. It is a story that is told in brick and stone.
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BIRTHPLACE OF NEW FRANCE

The destiny of Quebec, founded by French explorer Samuel de Champlain in 1608, has always been tied to the city’s remarkable strategic location. The “Key to the Continent”, Quebec is situated at the head of the St. Lawrence estuary, where the river suddenly narrows to a width of only one kilometre. Here, from the natural fortress of Cap-aux-Diamants, 17th-century cannons could bar the passage of enemy ships. At first a small trading post, Quebec became the capital of New France, a fortress city, commanding the gateway between the Atlantic World and the interior of the continent.

CHAMPLAIN’S TRADING POST

Samuel de Champlain first sailed up the St. Lawrence estuary as a member of a French expedition in 1603. At Tadoussac, where the Saguenay River enters the St. Lawrence, the explorers met with the Innu, a nomadic Algonquin-speaking people who claimed control of the region. The Innu invited the French to join them in a commercial and military alliance. In return for taking up arms with the Innu against their enemies the Iroquois, the French were given permission to set up a trading post further inland. In 1608, Champlain chose a site on the shore of the St. Lawrence River known as Quebec, a name that has its origin with a word in an Algonquin language meaning “where the river narrows”. By establishing themselves at this natural control point Champlain and his men hoped to be able to stop rival Basque and the Dutch fur traders from having access to the continental interior. Moreover, by joining forces with the Innu, the French would be able to benefit from
their trading alliances with other Amerindian peoples further inland: Algonquian-speaking groups and Hurons, whose trade routes along the rivers led to the richest sources of furs.

During their first years here, Champlain and his men chose to leave their large ships at Tadoussac. Having little knowledge of the St. Lawrence River, which can be extremely difficult to navigate, they travelled up the estuary to Quebec in smaller, shallow-draught boats. By the 1630s, however, French transatlantic ships were sailing inland all the way to Quebec. Beyond that point the river became too difficult to navigate. The large ships were thus obliged to stop at Quebec to unload their cargoes.

GATEWAY TO A CONTINENT

In 1663, Louis XIV chose the strategic site of Quebec to establish the capital of New France. This fortified city and inland seaport - hundreds of kilometres from the Atlantic - would serve as a control point between the Atlantic World and the vast network of navigable rivers and lakes that would become the lifeblood of the French empire in North America. The basin before Quebec City provided water deep enough for the largest warships and merchant vessels to safely drop anchor. Beyond Quebec, smaller, shallow draught-boats were able to navigate upriver until their passage was blocked at Montreal by the Lachine rapids. Travel beyond that point was easiest by birch-bark canoe.

French expansion - along the St. Lawrence, to the Ottawa River and the Great Lakes, then down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico - has been compared to the growth of the branches of a tree. Forts and trading posts were established along the main rivers and then their principal tributaries, providing access ever deeper into the hinterland. Many North American cities that we think of today as being English, began as French forts and trading posts: Fort Toronto is now Toronto, Ontario; Fort Frontenac is now Kingston, Ontario; Détroit is now Detroit, Michigan; and La Nouvelle Orléans is now New Orleans, Louisiana.
At first Quebec’s little lower town was confined to the area where the Place Royale sector is today. Elsewhere, the shore was submerged at high tide. In order to provide more land surface for construction, the mudflats shown in this 18th-century map were gradually covered over. By the end of the 19th century, the lower town had doubled in size.

**CONTRASTING PATTERNS OF SETTLEMENT**

In contrast to the French, who had penetrated deep into the North American interior by the late 1600s, their principal competitors, the English, unable to expand into the West because they were blocked by New France, remained hemmed in along a narrow band of land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian Mountains. But while the English territories along the Atlantic seaboard did not allow much room for expansion, they did offer some important advantages. With ice-free seaports providing access to the Atlantic twelve months a year, and rich land for agriculture, the English population grew rapidly. The first English settlement, Jamestown (founded in 1607, one year before Quebec City), soon developed a thriving economy based on the export of tobacco. But large-scale agriculture quickly brought the English into conflict with the native peoples, leading to the first of a long series of bloody confrontations that would characterize English expansion along the North American frontier.

**ALLIANCES WITH THE NATIVE PEOPLES: THE KEY TO FRENCH POWER**

The French, on the other hand, were much more interested in doing business with the native peoples than in taking over their lands in the interior regions. Most of the French population was concentrated in the St. Lawrence lowlands, which provided enough good agricultural land for the colony of New France, with its economy based mainly on the fur trade. Beyond the St. Lawrence Valley, in the vast territories that they referred to as *le pays d’en haut*, the French never became numerous enough to impose their will on the native peoples. Instead, French policy sought, as often as possible,
Native groups began to frequent the site of Quebec at least 3000 years ago. This early 19th-century watercolour depicts a Micmac encampment on the south shore of the St. Lawrence, across the river from the city.

to establish commercial and military alliances with the Amerindian nations. Indeed, the arrival of settlers in the continental interior would have been disastrous for the fur trade. Settlers would have cut down the trees and pushed the animals out of the way, just as they would have driven away the native hunters and trappers upon whom the French fur-traders depended for their livelihood.

Pressures were mounting. By the mid 18th century there were over one and a half million English-speaking people squeezed into the narrow band of land along the Atlantic coast, facing a French population of only about 60,000 to defend the entire continental interior. The English colonies, bursting at the seams, were becoming a serious threat, both to the inland empire of New France and to the native way of life. Recognizing this danger, an increasing number of native groups chose to actually invite the French to establish forts and trading posts on their territories to help serve as a barrier to English expansion. Without the help of the native peoples, it would have been impossible for the French, with such small numbers, to exert their influence over the interior of the continent for as long as they did.

THE FALL OF NEW FRANCE

Finally, however, New France was conquered by the English. In 1763, with the Treaty of Paris, the regions to the west of the Appalachians officially became English territory. Only decades later, following the American Revolution, hundreds of thousands of settlers would pour over the Appalachians and the native tribes would be swept away. It would only be a matter of time before the fur trade started to decline as well, as the natural environment on which it had depended began to disappear.
From Furs to Wood

During the last decades of the 18th century, the economy of Quebec City was still based on the fur trade and any changes in the port area tended to be slow and gradual. At the beginning of the 19th century, however, international events would give new importance to the port of Quebec, leading to major transformations in the lower town. During the Napoleonic Wars, France cut England off from its traditional sources of wood in the Baltic region. The British then looked to the forests of Canada for new supplies, and the port of Quebec experienced a period of remarkable economic expansion. Fortunes were made here as Britain’s need for wood, and wooden ships, transformed this little colonial city into one of the greatest ports in North America. Between 1806 and 1814, wood exports from the port of Quebec increased from 100,000 to 370,000 tonnes. And that was just the beginning. A comparison of the number of ships entering the port over the years can give us an idea of the extraordinary increase in activity in the port of Quebec during this period. While during the 18th century a maximum of 80 transatlantic ships had visited the port each year, by 1811 the number had risen to 188 vessels. By the 1860s, between 1500 and 1700 ships were docking at Quebec City annually. Shipbuilding became big business. The number of ships constructed at Quebec rose from only 7 in the year 1800 to an average of 49 ships annually by 1850.

One of the World’s Great Ports

By the middle of the 19th century, Quebec City was doing more business than the port of Boston, and only New York City and New Orleans handled more tonnes of cargo. Quebec also became one of the most important ports for immigration from the British Isles to North America. Ships that were used to transport wood to Great Britain returned to Quebec City with a poverty stricken human ballast of English, Scottish and Irish immigrants hoping for a better life in the New World. By the 1830s an average of 30,000 people were disembarking in Quebec City annually. At the time of the great famine in Ireland, in 1847, almost 90,000 people landed on the docks of Quebec - this at a time when the permanent population of the city was only about 45,000! In that year, only New York City received more Irish immigrants than Quebec. Most of these immigrants continued on to other destinations further west, or in the United States, but the pressures on Quebec City must have been enormous. The upper town offered some room for expansion but the port area quickly became built up and solutions had to be found to compensate for the limited land surface that was available. Land reclamation efforts that had begun slowly during the French regime were accelerated to meet the needs of the expanding port, and by the end of the 19th century the lower town had doubled in size.

The Lower Town Evolves with the Port

During the 17th and 18th centuries, minimal port facilities had been required to export furs and receive supplies for the small population of the colony. Indeed, until the end of the 17th century the city did not have any docks at all. Large sailing ships were obliged to anchor out in deep water, where small boats went out to meet them to load and unload their cargoes. The little boats were simply beached on the shore. Wooden enclosures were constructed along the shoreline, to protect the labourers handling the cargoes from the waves of the St. Lawrence and the rising tide. At the turn of the 18th century, these wooden structures were replaced by stone walls equipped with iron mooring rings to allow boats to tie up alongside at high tide. Although these stone quays served as docking facilities, they were not located in water deep enough to accommodate large vessels. In the early 19th century, individual property owners began to construct long wooden wharves, projecting out into deep water so that big ships could dock directly beside them, even at low tide. These structures reached out into the river like a series of long fingers, with each wharf named after its owner: Grant’s Wharf, Hunt’s Wharf, etc. To provide storage space for the greater volume of cargo now being handled in the port, large warehouses, called “stores,” were constructed on the merchant’s private wharves. A good example of one of these early “stores” is the Chillas warehouse, built in 1822, which is now part of the Auberge St. Antoine. Toward the end of the 19th century much bigger warehouses were being constructed. On nearby Rue Saint Pierre other large buildings were constructed to house banks and other enterprises that served the needs of the growing port.

During the first decades of the 19th century, well-to-do merchants continued to reside in the port area, despite the increasing noise and activity.
ABOVE: This romantic view, painted by George Heriot, depicts sleighs gliding over the frozen St. Charles River in 1805, with Quebec City in the background. – BELOW: In the 19th century it was no easy task to transport passengers and the mail over the icy waters of the St. Lawrence River. Today, an ice canoe race, held each year during the Quebec Winter Carnival, evokes the days when this strenuous activity was a necessity rather than a sport.
However, when in the 1830s and 1840s immigrants arrived bringing cholera and typhus which killed thousands of local citizens, the merchants began to move away from the lower town. Many established themselves in the upper town, or built villas in the countryside, to move their families as far as possible from the port, where deadly diseases arrived with the ships. This was the beginning of a gradual reorganization of the city into business, manufacturing and residential districts.

**THE SEASONS, THE WINDS AND THE TIDES**

In the days of sail, almost every aspect of life in Quebec was affected in some way by the town’s relationship with the water. Visitors arrived by ship, as did correspondence and news from afar. Most people depended on the river for their employment. They found jobs in the fur trade, shipbuilding, the timber trade and the many other businesses related to the life of the port. Many activities had to be scheduled in relation to the
realities of river life - the seasons, the winds and the tides. For example, sailing vessels had to time their arrivals and departures to take advantage of favourable winds. They used the rising tide to go inland and the falling tide to head out to sea. Farmers travelled by boat to deliver their produce and firewood to riverside markets, such as the Marché Champlain, seen in this photograph (below), taken around 1880. Animals were slaughtered on the Island of Orleans at the beginning of winter, so that the frozen meat could be delivered to market by sleigh over the frozen river, via the “ice bridge”. The river was shallow enough between the island and the north shore to ensure that it would freeze solid each winter. In front of the city, however, the St. Lawrence is much deeper and an ice bridge could only form when the weather was particularly cold. When the river was not completely frozen, boatmen hired their services to transport passengers and goods across the river - over and between the moving ice floes - no easy undertaking (see page 13). In ways that are hard for us to imagine today, Quebec was truly a maritime city.
DECLINE... AND RENAISSANCE

Quebec’s time of prosperity and expansion as a great 19th century port city, however, was to be short-lived. By mid-century, a shipping channel had been dug in the St. Lawrence, deep enough to allow the passage of transatlantic vessels all the way to Montreal. Quebec thus lost its exclusive status as a great inland seaport linking the Atlantic Ocean with the western interior. A new era of iron, steel and steam sounded the death knell of the age of sail. Steam-powered vessels could now navigate the shipping channel up the St. Lawrence to Montreal much more easily than sailing ships, which were dependent on the changing winds. Railways now made it possible to bypass the ice-filled river in wintertime, connecting Montreal with an ice-free port in Portland Maine, while the port of Quebec was stuck in the ice.

British preferential tariffs that had protected the timber trade were abolished and wood exports from the port of Quebec plummeted. Then, when the British began to build metal ships at home, the market for the wooden ships constructed at Quebec collapsed completely. By the turn of the century, many workers who had lost their jobs in the port were looking for new employment in the factories of the St. Roch district or had left Quebec City altogether to seek work.

Great efforts would be required to revive the fortunes of Quebec’s port. The harbour was dredged and more deep-water docking facilities were constructed at the mouth of the St. Charles River, where a grain terminal was established by the Bassin Louise. Much of the development, however,
would take place far from the original lower town, as the port expanded along the shoreline to Anse-au-Foulon in the 1930s, and on the Battures de Beauport in the 1960s. As a result, the old port and business sectors were gradually abandoned and many buildings in the lower town were demolished or left to deteriorate.

With cars and highways dominating daily life, and access to the dock areas forbidden, most local citizens lost touch with their maritime heritage. Then, in 1984, the waterfront was opened up to the public, with fine brick-paved promenades beside new deep-water docking facilities, where cruise ship passengers could step out directly into Quebec’s historic waterfront sector. In the years that followed, the lower town experienced a renaissance, with the opening of the Musée de la civilisation, in 1988, the conversion of old warehouses for residential use, and the establishment of fine boutique hotels, shops and restaurants.

The port as a whole, now accessible in winter thanks to ice-breakers, has undergone a renaissance as well. Today, as vessels become ever larger, Quebec’s natural deep-water port offers considerable advantages once more. With expanded facilities able to accommodate Panamax and even Capesize vessels, which can carry cargoes of as much as 150,000 tonnes, Quebec City has been able to reaffirm its traditional role as a great inland seaport, providing a deepwater connection to the Great Lakes and the interior of North America.
The old Post Office is one of the most imposing buildings in Quebec’s historic district. Constructed in 1871 according to the plans of architect Pierre Gauvreau, then enlarged in 1913, the Post Office was re-named in 1984 to honour the memory of one of the city’s most distinguished citizens, Louis S. St. Laurent, prime minister of Canada from 1949 to 1958. Although the building no longer serves as the city’s central post office, it still provides postal services for customers in Quebec’s upper town. Today, most of the build-
ing is occupied by the regional offices of Parks Canada. The 1913 enlargement, which greatly enhanced the dignity of the edifice, is crowned by a monumental copper-roofed dome, seen here on a winter’s night from a room in the nearby Chateau Frontenac hotel.

The same enlargement included a new façade, graced by massive columns and a triangular pediment, facing Côte de la Montagne. Although somewhat difficult to see from the streets below, the new additions made the building very impressive when seen from a distance – especially for visitors arriving by ship (see page 21). Prior to the construction of the Post Office building in 1871, the site was occupied by one of the city’s largest 18th-century houses. Known as le Chien d’Or, the old stone house (see next page) had first served as a private residence, then as an inn, as a Masonic Hall and as a post office, before being finally demolished to make way for the present edifice.
Quebec, founded by Samuel de Champlain in 1608, became the capital of New France in 1663. This fortress city and inland seaport served as a crucial control point, linking the Atlantic World with the vast network of navigable rivers and lakes that were the lifeblood of the French empire in North America.

This is the second book in the Mendel Guides series, a richly-illustrated collection of volumes that offers an inspiring new vision of Quebec, declared a World Heritage City by UNESCO in 1985. After exploring the upper town in the first volume, QUEBEC, WORLD HERITAGE CITY, architectural historian David Mendel and photographer Luc-Antoine Couturier now take us down to the lower town, to discover a wealth of history, architecture and art in the port sector, by the shores of the St. Lawrence River. Evidence of Quebec’s evolution as a maritime city remains visible at almost every corner, waiting to be discovered by the observant eye. It is a story that is told in brick and stone.