

147 BOULEVARD PROVENCHER – MAISON JOSEPH ROYAL
Unknown, 1873



At first glance, 147 Boulevard Provencher seems to be just another aging revenue house. But behind its veneer lies a rare treasure — an 1873 log dwelling built for Joseph Royal, an early champion of the rights of Manitoba’s French-speaking population.

Much remains to be discovered about the original building. What is known has been established from some pre-1900 visual evidence, plus a study of the home’s stripped interior.

These sources have revealed that the house initially exhibited a Québec style of architecture (*maison traditionnelle*) modified by a limited selection of local materials. The structure also combined two building methods, reflecting the transition from log to stud frame construction that was made possible in the 1870s by the availability of milled lumber.

The Maison Royal originally was two storeys high and in two sections. The main part fronting

on the north side of Provencher was built of hand-hewn oak logs and posts using the Red River frame method. Horizontal tongue-and-groove wooden siding provided an exterior finish. A rear service wing extended at a right angle from the east end of the house. Only one of its exterior walls remains, showing that the wing was built with vertical studs using the balloon frame method. Both sections had gambrel roofs with bellcast eaves and dormers. Brick chimneys marked the east and west ends of the log building and the north end of the service wing.

The front (south) façade and side walls of the main house were symmetrical in design. The central entrance was accented by a small shed-roof porch. To both sides were sets of tall hand-made casement (side-hinged) windows with wooden trim and peaked caps. Above the entrance was a wide, gable-roofed dormer lit by a pair of casement windows. The side or gable-end walls each had two casement windows per storey for a total of four. Another set of tall casement openings was installed on the west half of the rear elevation.

The interior had a spacious formal reception hall off which extended the stairway to the upper floor; a double parlour to the west; one or more rooms, possibly including a study, to the north; and a dining suite to the east. The latter area contained the only interior access door to the service wing where the kitchen was located. As many as six rooms may have been on the second level. Inside finishes included wooden tongue-and-groove panelling and floor boards, moulded baseboards, plaster walls and ceilings, and wooden doors of various sizes and panel patterns.

Upon completion, the Maison Royal would have been a striking example of stylish Québec architecture in a part of St. Boniface that, except for church buildings, contained mostly small, plain, gable-roofed structures.

The house has been greatly altered. In c.1903, a rubble-stone basement was installed, most of the service wing was dismantled, the roof was raised and converted to hip form to make a third floor, and the interior was duplexed, resulting in replacement of the front entrance and staircase by separate doors and stairways. Among other changes over time, windows and doors were relocated, porches and other extensions were added to the rear, the complex was faced with brick and stucco, and work was done to reinforce interior structural supports.

Despite these developments, several of the building's original elements remain, including casement windows with glazing, frames and hardware, some doors, floor boards, and remnants of baseboards, wall panelling, trim, and turn-of-the-century wallpaper.

The first occupant, Joseph Royal (1837-1902), came to Manitoba from Québec in 1870. Educated at St. Mary's College in Montréal, Royal articulated in law with Sir George E. Cartier, edited La Minerve, founded Le Nouveau Monde and wrote political histories. He was known for his commitment to the principle of Canadian duality, his promotion of justice for all, and his ultramontane views.

Once in Manitoba, he joined the first group of elected provincial legislators as representative for St. François-Xavier West. He also practised law with Joseph Dubuc and in 1871 started Le Métis. In each capacity, he sought to advance the land, language and political rights of the founding French population in a context where all aspects of life were being rapidly transformed by influxes of English Protestant settlers.

Royal held posts as speaker of the assembly, provincial secretary, minister of public works, and attorney-general. His prominence was such that the government of Premier R.A. Davis (1874-78) became known as the Davis-Royal administration.

Among other activities, Royal was the first superintendent of the Catholic section of the dual public school system established in 1871. He drafted the bill that formed the University of Manitoba in 1877 and subsequently was the university's vice-chancellor until 1888. He also was active in the provincial law society, Société de Colonisation and St. Jean-Baptiste Society.

After a split with English legislators over the issue of Franco-Manitoban representation, Royal switched to national politics in 1879. He retained the seat of Provencher in the House of Commons until 1888 when he became lieutenant-governor of the North-West Territories. He returned to Montréal in 1893 as editor-in-chief of La Minerve.

A park named in his honour exists near his former home at the northeastern foot of the Provencher Bridge.