

100 RUINES DU MONASTERE – TRAPPIST MONASTERY (GUEST HOUSE)
Architect Unknown, 1904, 1905



The former Trappist Monastery was located at an elbow of the picturesque LaSalle River in St. Norbert. The site offered privacy and sustenance to the Trappists who, as part of the Cistercian Order, had their roots in medieval Europe. They obeyed the Rule of St. Benedict, a strict code of moral and spiritual behaviour which regulates the monk's life of contemplation and labour away from the distraction of worldly pressures. Traditionally, the monks supported their community by farming; the St. Norbert monastery grew cereal crops, raised purebred horses and Holstein cattle, and sold honey and Oka cheese. The Monks raised their own food for a diet that was strictly vegetarian.

Called Notre Dame des Prairies, the monastery began in 1892 on land set aside by Father N.J. Ritchot, the influential parish priest of St. Norbert. Priests and brothers came from France to build the first house before novices could be accepted. Barns and chicken coops followed as farming operations were commenced almost immediately. In 1904, the monks laboured to build a large brick and stone church, based on plans provided by the motherhouse in France. The apse was two-tiered and semi-circular. A domed bell tower on the west elevation held two find

embellished cast iron bells. The interior walls of the apse were supported by eight columns of Ohio stone. Seven chapel alters led from the central area into the sanctuary, the main central alter for communal services, the others for private masses by the monks. To this was added the monastic wing, the actual living quarters of the community, which was completed in 1905. The two buildings were connected and constructed in similar materials, although their forms were quite different.

When the original wooden residence burned down in 1912, it was replaced by a large wood frame structure that became the guesthouse for clerics and lay visitors.

The fire also demolished the apiary, which was replaced in 1912 with two large barns. A greenhouse, cannery, bakery, shoemaker and forge all helped to make the Trappists self-sufficient. In 1921, a huge new stock barn was built, employing contracted labour for the first time, with the monks finishing the interior. As the efficiency of farms elsewhere improved, so too did the monks adopt modern methods. Their crop farm and highbred stock were always a model for local farmers and the monks published papers and attended seminars on agricultural advancement, their dairy herd thought to be among the finest in the country.

As the area around St. Norbert grew increasingly urbanized, the Trappists found it more difficult to maintain their private rural life. They sold their 1,200 acre farm in the summer of 1978, and relocated to a new monastery south of Holland, Manitoba. Many of the old farm buildings were taken down or moved. All that is left on the riverbank site are the beautiful old church, the monastic wing and the guest house. (There is also a gatehouse dating from 1946). These remain as the handcrafted labours of western Canada's first monastery.