



494 AVENUE TACHÉ

**GREY NUNS' CONVENT
(ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)**

City of Winnipeg
Historical Buildings & Resources Committee
Researcher: M. Peterson
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This building embodies the following heritage values as described in the *Historical Resources By-law, 55/2014* (consolidated update July 13, 2016):

- (a) The structure is one of the oldest and largest log structures in Winnipeg and the one of the largest log structures in North America;
- (b) The building stands as a reminder of the early development of St. Boniface and Western Canada and the importance in that development held by the Sisters of Charity, the Grey Nuns;
- (c) It was designed by L'Abbé Louis-François Richer Laflèche (1818-1898), who was working for the Roman Catholic Church in St. Boniface at the time;
- (d) It is an early, rare and large example of the Red River Frame log construction method;
- (e) It is a highly conspicuous building in St. Boniface; and
- (f) The building's main façades have suffered little alteration.

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)

The founding of a Roman Catholic mission on the east side of the Red River near the meeting of the Red and Assiniboine rivers in 1818 by Bishop Joseph-Norbert Provencher (1787-1853) was the first step in the establishment of the Francophone settlement of St. Boniface, the centre of the French culture and religion on the Western prairies.

The new mission, established for the Métis and First Nations bands that lived or traded near the confluence of the area’s two major rivers, was named for a sainted German missionary, St. Boniface (675-754), and gradually expanded with the arrival of other priests and sisters. The various orders established churches, schools, and hospitals, all among the earliest in the West. The Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, especially Bishops Provencher and Alexandre-Antonin Taché (1823-1894), worked to attract not only missionaries, but French-speaking Catholic businessmen and intellectuals from Eastern Canada to support the new settlement and firmly establish the Francophone culture. St. Boniface was incorporated as a Town 1883 and a City in 1908 and has, because of this early history, developed separately and uniquely from the larger City of Winnipeg to the north and west.

In 1844, four sisters from the Sisters of Charity of Montréal, the Grey Nuns, made the arduous journey west on the request of Bishop Provencher, to continue their work with the sick and poor. They arrived in St. Boniface and operated out of a small stone building that had been constructed ca.1829. Finding it too small to house their operations, in 1851, after six years of planning and work, the Sisters opened their large convent on the banks of the Red River just south of the Cathedral (Plate 1) on Avenue Taché.¹

¹ During construction, the Sisters occupied space in the nearby Archbishop’s Residence, 151 Avenue de la Cathédrale (Plate 2).

STYLE

The design of the building features elements of the Georgian style, commonly used by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) for its contemporary fur trade warehouses and residences with features from French-Canadian influences. Georgian style elements found on the convent include symmetrical form and fenestration, hipped roofs with dormers, ornate front (and side) entries and multi-sashed window units.²

The French-Canadian elements included the roof's steep pitch, dormers placed near the eaves-line, paired and shuttered casement windows, a central entrance, and a slightly shorter second storey.

CONSTRUCTION

This 2½-storey solid white oak log structure was built between 1846 and 1851 is one of the City of Winnipeg's oldest structures and among the largest known oak log structures in North America, measuring 30.5 x 12.2 metres.

The type of log construction is common to Manitoba and given a variety of names: Manitoba frame, Red River frame, *piece-sur-piece*, *poteaux sur sole*, *poteaux et piece coulissante* and the Hudson's Bay style.³ As some of these names suggest, the building type grew from strong French influences, but actually originated in Denmark and Scandinavia, then found favour in France.⁴ The style was introduced to North America by the settlers of New France and brought west with the fur trade.⁵ Eventually, it was adopted by the employees of the HBC. It was used to build Fort Douglas, the Selkirk settlers' first fort, and remained popular for homes, churches, stores and outbuildings throughout the area until the 1870s. An increased availability of manufactured materials late in the

² "Georgian Style," Wentworth Studio, online, <https://www.wentworthstudio.com/historic-styles/georgian/m>, 2020.

³ Jill Wade, "Log Construction at Red River" in Canadian Antiques Collector, November/December 1971, p. 36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵ The Year Past, 1982 (Winnipeg: City of Winnipeg Historical Buildings Committee, 1982), p. 37.

century made elaborate homes possible and common homes easier to build, log buildings lost their popularity.⁶ See Table One for a list of Winnipeg examples.

The Red River frame building started with a frame of hand-squared logs, often oak, resting on the ground or a foundation. This foundation could be built of any readily available material, which on the prairies often meant a mixture of fieldstones and mortar. Sill logs were placed atop the foundation and vertical members were tenoned at the corners and along the sill. These vertical logs were grooved in order to accept the tapered ends of horizontal logs placed between the uprights (Plate 3).⁷ Doors were often set between two minor uprights, windows similarly established or were simply cut out of the wall, with the rough-hewn window frames nailed to the free ends of the logs.

Table One – Extant Red River Frame Structures, City of Winnipeg

NAME/ADDRESS	BUILT	COMMENTS
Old St. James Anglican Church 525 Tylehurst Street	1853	Still in use
William Ross House 140 Meade Street North	1854	Museum, dismantled and moved from original site on Lombard Avenue
William Brown House 3180 Portage Avenue	1856ca.	Moved from Headingley in 1973
Pierre Delorme House St. Norbert Heritage Park	1850s (mid)	Moved to St. Norbert Heritage Park in 1982 – vacant and deteriorating
Henderson House St. Norbert Heritage Park	1850s (mid)	Moved to St. Norbert Heritage Park – vacant and deteriorating
Edmund Lorenzo Barber House 99 Euclid Avenue	1860s (mid)	Major repairs after numerous fires, day care space
Joseph Turenne House St. Norbert Heritage Park	1871	Occupied until 1971, relocated and restored by 1986
Riel House 330 River Road	1880-1881	Restored by Parks Canada after 1969 into a museum

⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

⁷ B. Hunter-Eastwood, “Report on the William Brown House,” prepared for the Historical Museum of St. James-Assiniboia, Winnipeg, 1988, Vol. II, p. 12; and Jill Wade, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

The convent is clad in vertical tongue-and-groove siding.

DESIGN

The symmetrical front (west) façade features light, vertical tongue-and-groove siding covering both floors, which are interrupted by multi-paned window units set in rectilinear openings and framed by darkly painted shutters (Plates 4-6). Centrally located is the entrance porch, with second storey deck and wood balustrade and windows with delicate wood muntin bars (Plate 7).

The north façade is a continuation of the materials and design of the front and includes a smaller entrance porch (Plate 8). The south façade also continues the material and design, although a new building was constructed close to this elevation (Plate 9).

The rear (east) façade is interrupted by a two-storey projection section (Chapel – Plate 10) which creates the “T” shape of the building. The area includes projecting areas on its north and south façades and unmatched fenestration. Windows and cladding on the main building are similar to the other elevations (Plates 11-12).

The hipped roof features gable dormers on all four slopes, brick chimneys at the north and south ends and a centrally-placed belfry (Plate 13).

INTERIOR

Much has changed since the convent was converted into a museum, but many interior elements have remained including: second floor wood partitioning and wall cladding (grass, mud, plaster and horse tails mixture), stone stovepipe thimbles on the main and second floors, window hardware, tin-clad ceilings and walls, main staircase with balustrade, beam supports in basement and exposed attic rafters (Plates 14-17). The Chapel, with a west side second floor viewing area, is an important area of the interior and includes wording of the chancel, “O CRUX, AVE, SPES UNICA” (Latin for “O Holy Cross, Our Only Salvation”) – Plates 18 and 19.

INTEGRITY

The building stands on its original site, appears to be in good structural condition for its age and exterior alterations are either significantly old (redesign of the roof to add the spire and a fifth dormer on the front slope) or have been to carefully repair or reconstruct original elements.

STREETSCAPE

Although the immediate area has suffered from the construction of unsympathetic high rises, the Grey Nun's Convent continues to be part of a group of religious structures located along Avenue Taché that include the Archbishop's Residence and the Cathedral to the north (Plates 20 and 21).

ARCHITECT/CONTRACTORS

With assistance from Sister Marie-Louise Valade,⁸ the convent was designed by L'Abbé Louis-François Richer Laflèche (1818-1898), an ordained priest who accepted an invitation from Bishop Provencher of St. Boniface and arrived in June 1844 to help with the missionary work at the Red River Settlement (Plate 22). He remained at the Settlement only a short time, travelling west to help found the mission at Ile-à-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan in 1846. He remained there until 1849 when he returned to St. Boniface. Never in good health, Laflèche often ministered to Métis families, joining them on buffalo hunts in the early 1850s and supporting them as a member of the Council of Assiniboia. He returned to Québec in 1856, ultimately becoming the Bishop of Trois-Rivières (1867), but made numerous trips back to the Northwest in the 1880s and 1890s and was an active participant in the fight for Catholic schools in Manitoba in the 1890s.⁹ He died in Trois-Rivières in 1898.

⁸ National Historic Site Designation, Government of Canada website, <https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=7420>.

⁹ N. Voisine, "Laflèche, Louis-François," Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. XII, (University of Toronto/Université Laval), online edition, 2020.

Local builders Louis Galarneau and Amable Nault were also involved in the construction of the building.¹⁰

PERSON/INSTITUTION

The Sisters of Charity were founded in Montréal, PQ in 1737, when Marie-Marguerite d'Youville (1701-1771) formed the charitable lay association to tend to the city's sick and poor.¹¹ They took over operation of the Hôpital Général de Montréal and were officially recognized in 1755.

In 1844, on the request of Bishop Provencher, four Grey Nuns made the 58-day canoe journey to St. Boniface to assist with the missionary work at the Red River Settlement. The nuns soon organized classes for children, began catechizing adults, opened a novitiate, and tended to the poor and sick in their homes. Their scope of activity greatly expanded over the next several decades to include care of orphans, the elderly and ill, establishment of St. Boniface Hospital (1871), convent schools in Winnipeg, St. François-Xavier, St. Norbert and St. Vital, and a boarding school for girls in St. Boniface.

The Order went on to develop additional schools and hospitals in northwestern Ontario, rural Manitoba, Saskatchewan and North Dakota, plus the St. Roch facility in St. Boniface for victims of contagious diseases and a tuberculosis sanitarium in St. Vital. They also prepared sisters for missionary life in the North-West and their convent served informally as a regional mother house.

The convent building was occupied by the Order until 1956 when it was taken over by the City of St. Boniface (now the City of Winnipeg) and converted into a museum.

¹⁰ National Historic Site Designation, Government of Canada website, op. cit.

¹¹ "Grey Nuns," The Canadian Encyclopedia, online edition, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/grey-nuns>, July 25, 2019. The name "Grey Nuns" (*les soeurs grises*) was actually from the French *gris* which could mean either "grey" or "drunk" and was, in this case, used to mock d'Youville's late husband who was a bootlegger and to refer to their traditional grey habit.

EVENT

There is no known significant historical event connected with this building.

CONTEXT

It would be difficult to find a structure within the boundaries of the City of Winnipeg that was more historically significant than the Grey Nun's Convent. Its significance stems from its age, its intimate connection to the Sisters of Charity, its use (both past and present) and its place as a spiritual and health care facility for the entire region.

LANDMARK

The Grey Nun's Convent has been an integral part of St. Boniface and the City of Winnipeg for over 150 years. In recognition of its importance, it was designated a National Historic Site in 1958, a Provincial Heritage Site in 1991 and a City of Winnipeg Grade I structure in 1995.

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)

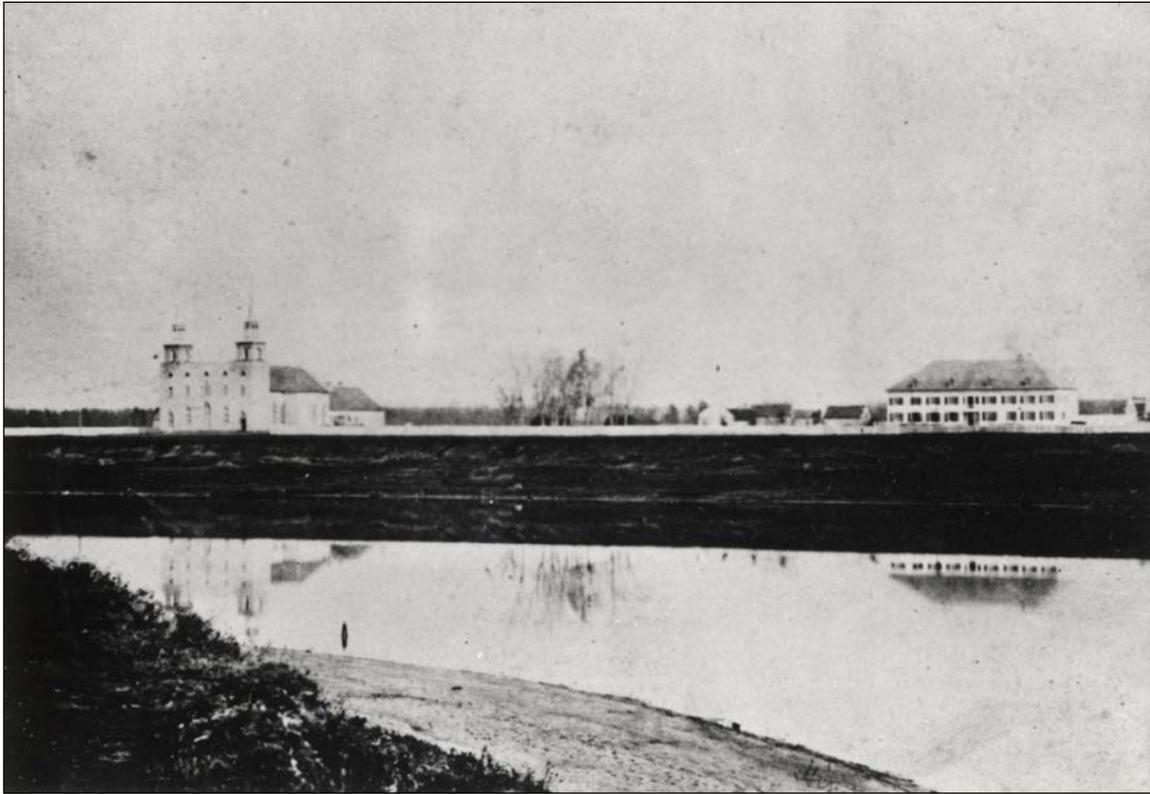


Plate 1 – St. Boniface Cathedral (left) and the Grey Nuns’ Convent (right), from the Winnipeg side of the Red River, ca.1857. Not the lack of central spire and only four dormers on the front (west) roof slope. ([H.L. Hime photograph courtesy of Western Canada Pictorial Index, A0052-01574.](#))

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 2 – This 1878 images shows, from left to right, St. Boniface College, the Archbishop’s Residence and the Cathedral. The Grey Nuns’ Convent would be just to the right of this photograph. (Archives of Manitoba, “St Boniface- College 1858- 1”, N9360.)

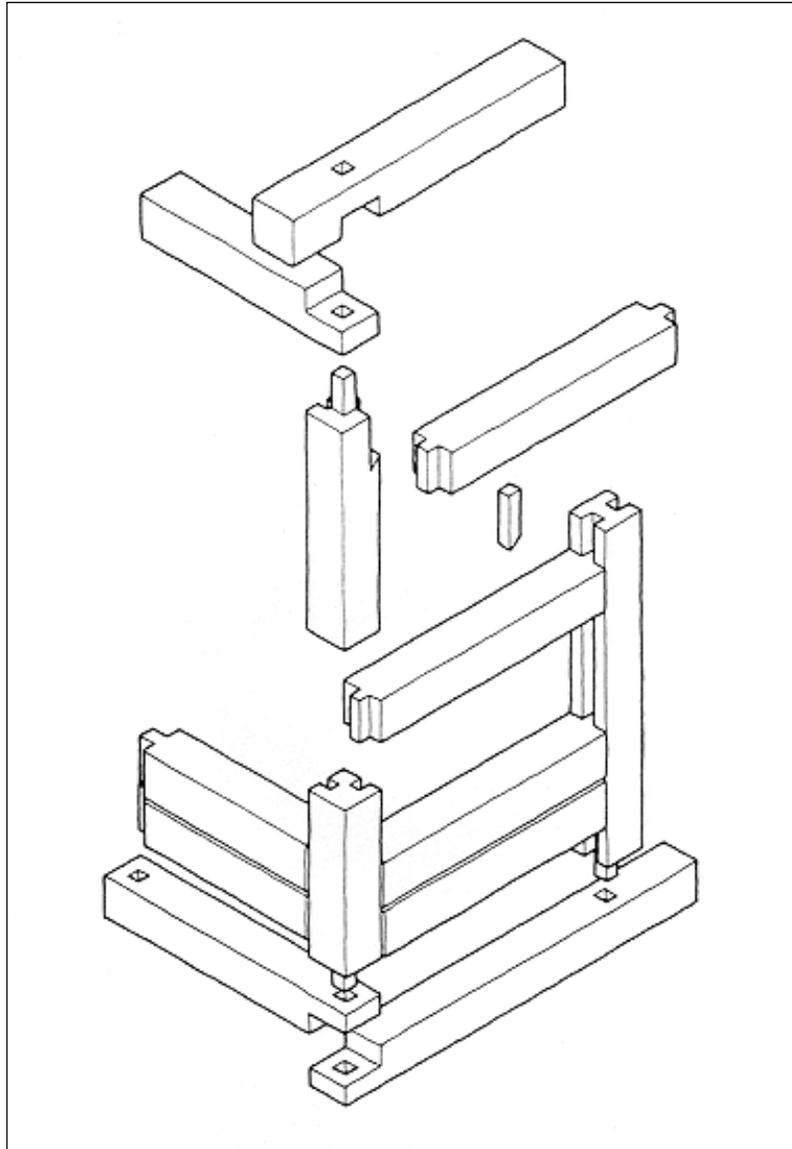


Plate 3 – Red River frame construction. (Reproduced from Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Department of Culture, Heritage and Recreation, Archway Warehouse, Jail and Powder Magazine, Norway House, p. 7.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 4 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), front (west) façade, 2020. (M. Peterson, 2020.)



Plate 5 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), detail of front (west) façade, 2020. (M. Peterson, 2020.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 6 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), window, front (west) façade, 2020. (M. Peterson, 2020.)



Plate 7 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), main (west) entrance, 2020. (M. Peterson, 2020.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 8 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), north and north end of rear (east) façades, 2020. (M. Peterson, 2020.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 9 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), south façade, 2020. (M. Peterson, 2020.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 10 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), rear chapel section, north façade, 2020.
(M. Peterson, 2020.)



Plate 11 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), north end of rear (east) façade, 2020.
(M. Peterson, 2020.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 12 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), south end of rear (east) façade, 2020. (M. Peterson, 2020.)



Plate 13 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), belfry, 2020. (M. Peterson, 2020.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 14 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), original basement wood beam, 2005. (M. Peterson, 2005.)



Plate 15 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), stone stovepipe thimbles, 2005. (M. Peterson, 2005.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS' CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 16 – Grey Nuns' Convent (St. Boniface Museum), main staircase, 2005. (M. Peterson, 2005.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 17 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), museum space, 2005. (M. Peterson, 2005.)



Plate 18 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), Chapel, eastend, 2005. (M. Peterson, 2005.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 19 – Grey Nuns’ Convent (St. Boniface Museum), Chapel, west end, 2005. (M. Peterson, 2005.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 20 – Aerial view, ca.1950, of St. Boniface east of Avenue Taché. Building include: 1. Archbishop’s Residence, 151 Avenue de la Cathédrale, built 1846; 2. St. Boniface Cathedral, 190 Avenue de la Cathédrale, built 1908, prior to its destruction by fire in 1968; 3. St. Boniface Home for Aged and Infirm (l’Hospice Taché), 500 Avenue Taché, built 1911- demolished; 4. Grey Nun’s Convent, 494 Avenue Taché; and 5. St. Boniface College, 200 Avenue de la Cathédrale, built 1910-1912. (Archives of Manitoba, “St. Boniface 29”.)

494 AVENUE TACHÉ – GREY NUNS’ CONVENT (ST. BONIFACE MUSEUM)



Plate 21 – Avenue Taché during the 1950 flood. The Grey Nun’s Convent is on the right side of the photograph. (Winnipeg Public Library, Martin Berman Postcard Collection, Binder 4B.)

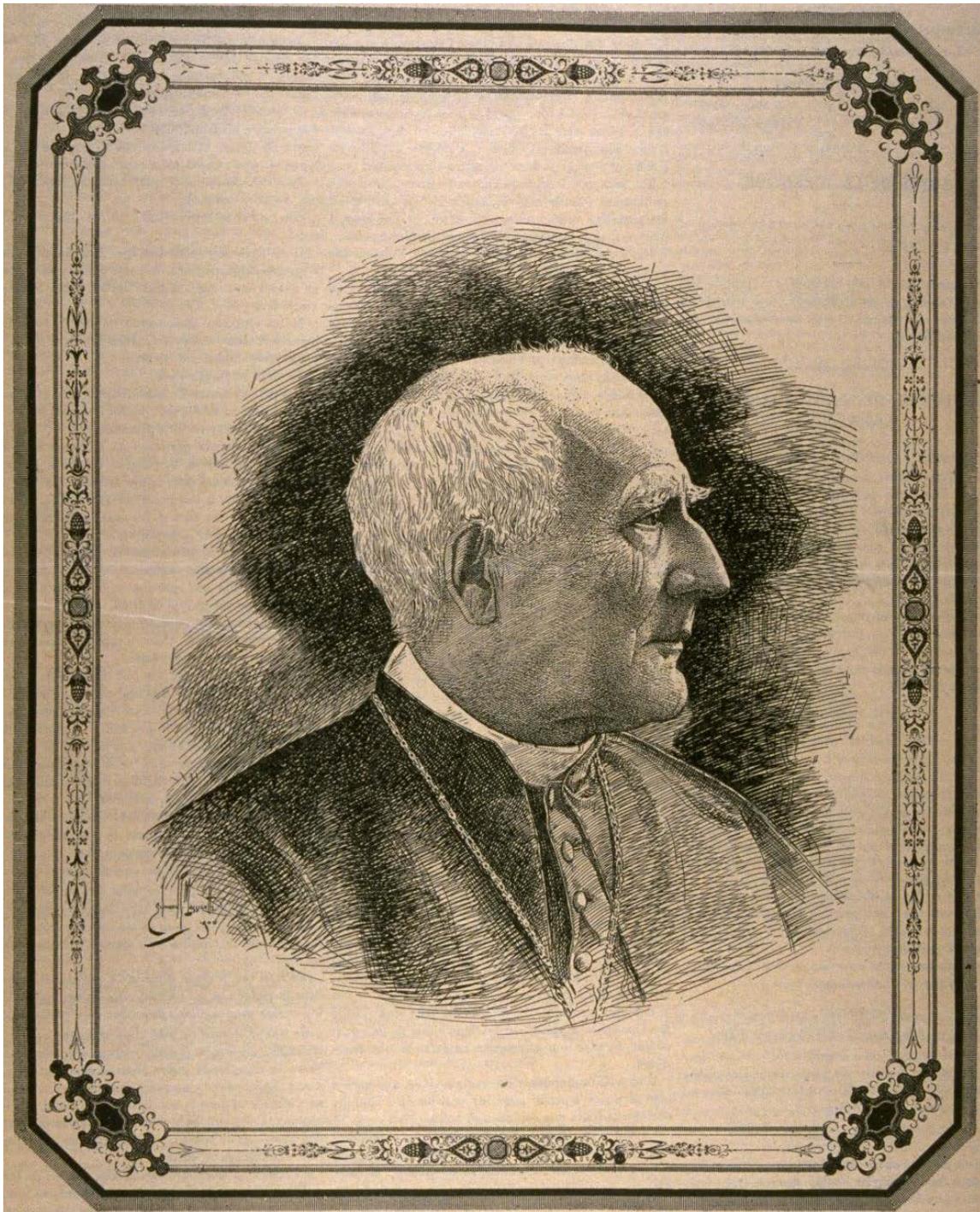


Plate 22 – Mgr. Louis-François Laflèche, date unknown. (Reproduced from The Dictionary of Canadian Biography, Vol. 12 [online edition], Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec/52327/2074187.)