



History of 1430 Chomedey Street



June 13, 2016

La Fondation du refuge pour femmes chez Doris • Chez Doris Women's Shelter Foundation

1430, rue Chomedey, Montréal (Québec) H3H 2A7 • T. 514.937.2341 • F. 514.937.2417 • information@chezdoris.org • chezdoris.org

History of 1430 Chomedey Street

The iconic red building that now houses Chez Doris women's shelter at 1430 Chomedey started its days as a showpiece for bourgeois aspirations and slowly inched towards what it is today in a series of shifts that brought it from a lofty spot for elites to its mission helping women in need.

The structure was erected in approximately 1900 when Thomas Collins imported red sandstone from Europe to build in the gap between the home of wealthy fabric importers and snowshoe champion E.W. Mudge on the north side. On the south side of the house was the home of John Moffat, the caretaker of the Douglas Methodist Church, a home which burnt down in 1977 and is now an alley-way.

Collins was less restrained in his choice of architecture in comparison to his neighbours, going to the trouble and added expense of importing red sandstone, a look designed to make the new structure stand out amid the locally hewed Greystone that characterized most buildings, while an ornamental cornice, rounded facade and balcony also added flash to the new structure. Collins' home was built in the Richardsonian Romanesque style, also known as Romanesque Revival, which hints at a medieval theme, which was particularly popular with Irish and Italian architects. The style was common in Montreal for about three decades but was rarely seen after the 1900, which makes the home among the last of its kind.

Industrial magnates preferred detached manors but the attached townhouse was a small step down and respectable enough for most bourgeois. It usually came with a standard of living that included domestic servants and proper table manners and fittingly, the Collins family occasionally made the social pages of local newspapers when hosting guests.

The home was built in a period of growth which saw Montreal's population double over two decades while motor cars, electricity, telephones and phonographs become commonplace. The Montreal Forum, which started as a roller-skating arena and later dominated the area as home to the Montreal Canadiens hockey team, had yet to be built. But the strip around the corner on St. Catherine was suddenly lively after being largely unbuilt in years prior. A dressmaker, confectioner, grocer, varnish manufacturer, canned meat store and a physician all sat around the corner from 1430 when it first opened its doors, while a baseball stadium sat where Alexis Nihon Plaza can now be found.

Dominating the area was the Douglas Methodist Church, which sat two doors down from 1430 Chomedey. The church opened in 1876 and was named after Rev. George Douglas who could still stir the faithful with rousing sermons, and attracted members of the Montreal elite including the McConnell family. In the mid-1920s the church merged with the Dominion Church and moved to the Boulevard in Westmount, whereupon the venue became a movie theatre (known as the Seville Theatre) for several decades before falling into decades of disrepair and the building was demolished in 2010 to make way for a condominium.

Thomas Collins occupied 1430 Chomedey for three decades and was joined in 1929 by gynecologist John G. Quinn, who married Collins' daughter Elaine. John Quinn and Elaine Collins raised a pair of children at the home as Quinn helped female patients at the nearby Reddy Memorial Hospital. The Quinns moved to a mansion on Summit Crescent in Westmount in 1938 and 1430 Chomedey shifted vocations away from single-family dwelling with the arrival of the Catholic the Newman House School, which had moved over from Crescent Street with the headmaster Richard Travers living at the home as well.

The school stayed for only three years and a Mrs. H. Cromwell moved in for four years from 1943. Following World War II the house did its part to ease Montreal's intense housing crisis by becoming a

rooming house under owner Joseph E. Lalonde. The building changed hands again in 1972 as Colin A. Gravenor purchased the property, which was still a rooming house. He took over a room for his office as well as a space in the back to allow him to overlook the busy parking lot across from the Forum, which he also owned. Gravenor was also known for having owned Nun's Island in the 1950s which he sold for \$2 million, soon after the Champlain Bridge was built.

Gravenor continued to oversee the buzzing rooming house, home to manual labourers, medical students and even noted actor Tony Nardi, who credits his stay at 1430 Chomedey as a life-changing experience, as he appreciated the energy Gravenor offered the constant flow of visitors, ranging from mental patients, to gangsters to local politicians.

"Self-reliance was his thing and everyone who walked through those doors could not help but leave with a sense of renewed energy and power. Nothing had changed except their opinions of themselves," says Nardi.

Gravenor died on August 25, 1993, and in 1994 his widow and third wife, Belva Horne, saddled with a \$10,000 tax bill, swapped the home valued at \$300,000, for the Chez Doris' building at nearby 2196 de Maisonneuve valued at \$195,000. Chez Doris paid \$115,000 for the house. In 2004, thanks to a federal grant, Chez Doris extended the building to provide for the increased number of destitute women seeking help. The building, measuring more than 7,000 sq. feet, and the land, are currently valued at \$2 million.

Chez Doris will have to raise funds to ensure the durability of the building which is in need of significant repairs. The costliest and most urgent repairs will be the underground masonry. Chez Doris has a pledge of \$150,000 for the masonry work, but must raise another \$150,000 in matching grants.

This piece was written by Kristian Gravenor, who is a journalist and writer and son of Collin Gravenor, and once lived at 1430 Chomedey.