

## COUNTY-SEAT

How are we to explain the fact that contrary to the other suggestions in this report, not only did the recommendation for the establishment of the County-seat at Gaspé remain a dead letter, but it was actually Percé which became the County-town in 1867? Would it be because Robert Christie, who was at that time the representative for Gaspé at Quebec, and who favoured Gaspé, was not persona grata with the Government? We know that before that Union he was expelled five times from the Assembly. Is it not reasonable to believe it to be simply the consequence of the fact that there were at Percé at that time a Court of Sessions and a prison?

This prison situated then as we have said, upon the site of the former residence of the Lieutenant-Governor, property at present in the hands of the Bleu-Blanc-Rouge, had been built in 1811, enlarged by the addition of a court-room in 1817, and completed in 1828, thus giving effect to a Government Act approved on November 15th, 1809. This prison had been located at Percé because of the bad reputation of its inhabitants. This institution was later to be of considerable strategic importance as we shall see. Thus is good sometimes derived from evil. Several documents, dated in 1828, describe this building in the following terms: "a stone house, recently purchased." Would the first Court-house have been built of stone?.

This prison served its time. As 1860 rolled around the need began to be felt for a new building. Thomas Pye of Gaspé took advantage of his report of 1866 on the state of affairs in Gaspé to sound the alarm. "The Court House and the prison" says he in his chapter on Percé, "are under the same roof and constitute a disgrace to the province." And as it was important to prepare public opinion without any delay. Pye artfully insinuated: "The Court House and prison of Percé being in a condition of dilapidation it is very probable that new building will be erected at Gaspé Basin which will then become the county-seat.

2

Thus the prison is not to be built at Gaspé as a consequence of the county-seat being moved there, but Gaspé will become the county seat because the prison has been built there. This was a skilful and deliberately proposed imitation of the procedure which had been followed at Percé. Petitions to the governmental authorities, statements to the newspapers, personal delegations; all were put into play by the citizens of Gaspé.

As one can well believe an equal reaction was not long in coming from Percé. Dire evils call for drastic remedies; to catch a wolf send a wolf and a half. A concerted defensive movement was cleverly unleashed. A wag from Ste-Anne-des-Monts who was an amused witness of this little war put in his little grain of salt: "The papers prove" wrote he, "that the war of pen strokes continues between the Basin de Gaspé and Percé. Both sides allege the most convincing reasons Both sides cry victory. No matter, the basin will be divorced from Gaspé There is incompatibility of humour, you see.

The issue appeared the less favourable for Percé. in that the Lieutenant-Governor for Quebec (the first under Confederation) was related to the Belleau family of Gaspé. Moreover, following the skilful manoeuvres on the part of the champions of Gaspé the County Council pronounced itself on January 15, 1867, by a vote of six to three, in favour of the transfer, at the same time as it declared itself in favour of the immediate choice of Gaspé as the meeting place for the County-Council and of the nomination of a secretary who should reside there. In fact the two following sessions of March 20, 1867, and of February 5, 1868, met at Gaspé. It was even discovered suddenly what unpardonable negligence it is to preserve archives in building which can burn. Thus it is when the sacred fire of civic zeal becomes involved.

As a consequence of the marked advantages so abundantly demonstrated in favour of the transfer of the County-seat, a law was voted to this effect during the course of the Provincial session of 1868.

On the other hand, there were in the very claims of Gaspé, a fundamental element of variance, bearing upon the site to be chosen at Gaspé for the Court House. The Municipality of Gaspé Bay South claimed this honour on the ground that it was an older community, and it did in fact obtain a favorable vote. It undertook, besides, to donate the land required for the building. All this, it goes without saying, was detrimental to Gaspé Basin. This explains why, once the first effervescence had passed, the Basin Council seeing itself frustrated, grew cold towards the project. In fact, on December 9, 1868, before anything could be done about putting the law into effect, the County Council passed a new resolution declaring those of the previous year to be illegal and re-establishing Percé as the meeting place of the Council and the residence of the Secretary.

Meanwhile, during the course of the summer of 1868, after much worry, the Parish Priest, Father Guilmet, succeeded in obtaining permission to go personally at the expense of the Municipal Council and present a petition to the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Narcisse Belleau. In the meantime the Municipal Council undertook to donate the land and to defray half the cost of construction, if only the law would be repealed and Percé chosen as the site of the new building. To conclude, the law was not repealed but the Court House was rebuilt at Percé in 1870 and the representative from Gaspé was reelected in 1871.

The years passed. Steps were again taken in favour of transferring the County-Seat to Gaspé. It would be too long to retrace all the details

But a fatal stroke awaited Percé, at the Provincial Session of 1944, when a law was passed providing not only for a new building in Gaspé but also for the transferring of the County-seat.

The elections were near, and the work on the new Court House began immediately. The hour of the elections sounded and the representative who had pushed on the project was not re-elected. From this we see that old objects, like old people, enjoy a veneration which it is dangerous to shove aside, and that a psychological moment exists for the condemned when popular sympathy turns towards them. To speak literally, in the matter of the County-seat, the spirit is conservative.

Again the County Council took a hand on the occasion of its meetings of September 13, 1944, and of March 14, 1945. At the second of these meetings it passed the following resolution: "Whereas at its session of last September, this County Council was opposed to the transfer of the County-seat of the District of Gaspé and of the Registry Office of the division of Gaspé, urging that there was no serious reason for this change, that the money involved in erecting a new building, could be more advantageously applied to urgent needs in the region and that the Council was satisfied with the actual location of the County-seat.

Whereas the District of Gaspé has for several years been divided for judicial purposes, the Northern Section having its Court of Justice and Registry Office and consequently the section of the District interested in the County-seat is that which is comprised in the provincial county of Gaspé-South which county includes twenty-seven municipalities.

Whereas, by resolution of their Council fifteen of these municipalities have declared themselves against this change and these municipalities represent a majority both in population and in assessment.

Whereas this Council is still of the opinion that there is no reason to make this change;

These reasons moving us thereunto, this County Council meeting in regular session re-iterates its opposition to the transfer of the County-seat and of the Registry Office of the District and requests the Government of this province to refrain from doing this.

The vote was ten to two in favour of the resolution.

And thus it is that the County-seat, the Registry Office and the Court House continue to belong to Gaspé, by law, and yet remain in Percé in fact.

It is clear that a serious motive, if not the only one nor the principal one, of this stubbornness in requesting the transfer of the County-seat, had always been the bait of social prestige, of multiform officialdom, and of desirable revenues which go with it. Protonotaries, sheriffs, gaolers, wardens, justices of the peace, court-criers, constables, bailiffs, judicial and civic officials of all kinds, necessarily constitute a class decently remunerated and respected. Judges, lawyers, jurors, and witnesses establish their quarters there at regular intervals. Hotel-keepers, drivers garage men, merchants, purveyors of all kinds, aides, belonging to all categories, find their profit there. **There it is!**

Until 1844, the Registry Office of the whole judicial District of Gaspé containing Bonaventure and Gaspé was at New Carlisle. The organization of the judicial system in 1844 brought with it the establishment of a second registry office at Percé for the District of Gaspé proper. Since then a third Registry Office has been established at Sainte-Anne-Des-Monts in 1860.