

The statue of Tabaret, builder of the University of Ottawa

By Michel Prévost, University of Ottawa chief archivist

The University of Ottawa has one of the oldest monuments in Sandy Hill. It's a statue of Father Joseph-Henri Tabaret, OMI (1828-1886), builder of the University of Ottawa. I will use this space to go over the history of this bronze work, hidden today behind the conifers in front of Tabaret Hall.

The plan to erect a statute in honour of Father Tabaret was approved in 1886 at the general meeting of the Alumni Association of the College of Ottawa. Members wanted to perpetuate the memory of Tabaret, superior of the college for nearly 30 years, from 1853 to 1864, 1867 to 1874 and, finally, 1877 to 1886. A Tabaret memorial fund committee was tasked with raising funds from alumni and friends of the College of Ottawa.

Even as the memorial fund committee was busy raising funds, it asked Msgr. Thomas Duhamel, archbishop of Ottawa and a college alumnus, to commission a six foot six inch statue for no more than \$1,500 from the same sculptor in charge of producing a monument to Msgr. Joseph-Bruno Guigues for the archdiocese of Ottawa. Guigues was the first archbishop of Ottawa and the founder of the College of Bytown, which became the University of Ottawa. And so, two bronze sculptures were moulded and cast by sculptor A. Verrebout of Paris.

While Archbishop Duhamel took care of the statue, the committee asked priest and architect Georges Bouillon, a college alumnus and friend of Tabaret's, to design the pedestal the bronze sculpture of the former superior would rest on. Bouillon is still known in the national capital region for designing Notre Dame Cathedral Basilica of Ottawa, the chapel of the College of Ottawa and the following churches: Notre-Dame (Hull), Saint-François-de-Sales (Gatineau) and Saint-Paul (Aylmer). He was also the architect of the Rideau Street Convent Chapel, which can now be viewed at the National Gallery of Canada.

The Canadian Granite Co., of Ottawa, was given the job of making the pedestal, at a cost of \$506.50. It had granite brought in from the Bay of Fundy, in the Maritimes.

The committee had the following words engraved on the pedestal: J.H. TABARET PATRI ET FUNDATORI ALUMNI UNIVERSITATIS OTTAWENSIS. The Latin inscription, which means FATHER AND FOUNDER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA, illustrates how the alumni considered Father Tabaret the true founder of the college, even if he wasn't. It was Msgr. Guigues who founded the college, in 1848, and Father Charles-Edouard Chevalier, OMI, who was the first superior. In fact, when Tabaret became superior for the first time, in 1853, he was the fifth to lead the college.

The unveiling of the Tabaret statue was supposed to take place in June 1889, during the annual meeting of the alumni association. However, the raising of the college to the status of a pontifical university February 5, 1889 led to the postponement of the unveiling due to the magnificent inauguration celebrations for the new Catholic university.

The delay allowed the memorial fund committee to raise the final funds needed to erect the sculpture, whose cost had risen to \$1,850. Among the numerous donors were alumni, including the first recipient of a bachelor's and master's from the college, lawyer Thomas Patrick Foran, as well as members of the clergy and politicians such as Sir John A. Macdonald, prime minister of Canada, and Wilfrid Laurier, leader of the official Opposition. The most generous donors were Msgr. Duhamel and priest Olivier Boucher, at \$150 each.

Unveiling

The unveiling of the statue of Msgr. Guigues, which still stands in front of Notre Dame Basilica, took place October 9, 1889, the same day that the new Catholic university in Ottawa was inaugurated. The unveiling of the Tabaret statue took place the following day, with University alumni, members of the administration and professors in attendance, along with members of the memorial fund committee and leading figures from many areas, particularly the church, represented by Cardinal Elzéar-Alexandre Taschereau, archbishop of Quebec City, Msgr. Alexandre-Antonin Taché, archbishop of Saint Boniface, and bishops Langevin of Rimouski, Laflèche of Trois-Rivières, Gravel of Nicolet, Moreau of Saint-Hyacinthe, Lorrain of Pembroke, Wadhams of Ogdensburg, Rogers of Chatham and McIntyre of Charlottetown. The presence of all of these alumni and dignitaries is a good illustration of the esteem in which Father Tabaret was held.

The ceremony was opened by Msgr. Duhamel, and the honour of unveiling the sculpture went to William Davis, chair of the memorial fund committee. Then, Judge Louis-Adolphe Olivier, president of the college alumni association, presented the statue to the University authorities. Speeches recounting the life and work of Father Tabaret were also given by MP John. J. Curran, representing English-speaking alumni, and Alphonse-Antoine Taillon, mayor of Sorel, representing French-speaking alumni.

In short, the ceremony put on by the alumni in memory of Father Tabaret was a great success. However, the day ended on a sad note, with the sudden death that evening of the president of the alumni association, Judge Olivier.

From 1889, the figure of Father Tabaret stood proudly in front of the main entrance of the University. The statue wasn't damaged by the great fire of 1903, which completely destroyed the University. Nevertheless, as the façade of the new main building no longer was facing onto Wilbrod (now Séraphin Marion), the bronze statue was moved, in 1912, to the foot of the large front steps of Tabaret Hall. In 1944, the Administrative Committee had it moved to its current location.

For more than a hundred years, the Tabaret statue has kept alive the memory of the man who can be rightly considered the builder of the University of Ottawa. Increasingly over the past several years, however, the conifers have hidden it, such that one could walk by it without noticing it. This situation could change soon, as the University is thinking of

taking advantage of festivities for its 150th anniversary, in 1998, to put it in the park in front of Tabaret Hall.

But the statue faces a threat, namely, air pollution, particularly acid rain. Like other bronze sculptures in Canada's capital and other North American cities, it's deteriorating. The statue will have to be cleaned to remove the green corrosion stains, and conservation specialists will have to apply long-term protection measures.

All in all, steps must be taken so that Father Tabaret can continue to survey, from his perch on the pedestal, the work he began in the second half of the last century.