

A page in time: Once a parking lot, now a park

By Michel Prévost, University of Ottawa chief archivist

A beautiful green park today graces the front of Tabaret Hall, the symbol of the University of Ottawa for over a century. It wasn't always so, however — prior to 1967, the space was a large parking lot for staff and students. The wrought-iron fence opposite Tabaret on Cumberland Street was wide open, and drivers could park right up to the foot of the giant front staircase. Drivers appreciated this lot, because in a matter of minutes, they could be inside the central administration building or any of the neighbouring buildings.

However, maintenance staff did not share this enthusiasm. On rainy days, and whenever there was a thaw, the unpaved lot would turn into a veritable swamp. The floors of Tabaret Hall would quickly become a mess, with people entering with their dirty footwear. What's more, the parking lot did nothing to highlight the exceptional neoclassical stone building, built between 1904 and 1931.

Fortunately, things changed in 1967, Canada's centennial year. To mark the 100th anniversary of Canada in a lasting fashion, governments and institutions all over the country launched extensive beautification projects. At the University of Ottawa, that meant replacing the huge parking lot with a green park and trees. A concession was made to cars: a row of parking spots was reserved for senior management and visitors along Séraphin Marion. The entrance gate on Cumberland Street, though, was closed permanently.

Since 1971, the park, which properly showcases the regal appearance of Tabaret Hall, has carried the name of 19th-century Oblate Father Joseph-Henri Tabaret, considered the builder of the University of Ottawa.

It's clear looking back that the administration showed great vision and foresight in 1967 by reducing the number of spaces reserved for cars. At the time, urban planners were destroying entire neighbourhoods in Ottawa and Hull to widen roads and make travel easier for cars and trucks. In addition, in keeping with the beautification program of eminent city planner Jacques Gréber, the national capital region's railroad tracks were disappearing in favour of scenic routes for cars.

Under the circumstances, then, the University administrators' decision to ban cars in front of the administrative building provoked harsh criticism from drivers, who were losing the privilege of parking only a few steps from their offices or classrooms. Nevertheless, when we look today at the attractive oasis of greenery right in the heart of the University's historical sector, we can say with certainty that it was the right decision.

What beautification projects does the University of Ottawa have in store for us to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Canada in 2017? It's already time to start planning. Drivers, make the most of your parking spaces—they too could disappear in the years to come.