

Lévesque on Rue Buade: 'This time I'm positive'

LETTER
FROM
QUEBEC CITY

CANADA

Searching for the grave of Champlain

Oblivious to an icy April wind that scours the cobblestoned streets of Quebec City's historical district, René Lévesque stands impatiently on the curb of Rue Buade waiting for yet another lumbering tourist bus to pass. When the narrow street near the Château Frontenac clears, the 70-year-old Lévesque—who says he was a personal friend, but no relation, of the late Quebec premier of the same name—steps gingerly onto the road and plants his feet on the asphalt a few feet away. "Champlain is buried right here," he says emphatically. It isn't the first time the former Catholic priest and self-taught archeologist has made such a declaration. In fact, in the 40 years he has spent searching for the remains of Samuel de Champlain, Lévesque has come up with no less than 14 different theories about where the celebrated "father of New France" lies buried. Undaunted by criticisms of his methods and speculation about his motives, he is now seeking a municipal excavation permit to test his latest hypothesis. "This time," Lévesque says as he retreats to the curb to avoid an oncoming car, "I'm absolutely positive."

Whether he is right or not, Lévesque's efforts are helping to sustain interest in a mystery that has become part of Quebec City lore. Public fascination over the location of the 17th-century explorer's grave began in the 1860s, when a crypt from the

One man's quest for 'the father of New France'

New France era was uncovered during work to lay the city's first water lines. Since then, endless speculation by a number of Champlain hunters has led to two official and several clandestine digs. In recent years, the search has narrowed to the vicinity of the Quebec Basilica, a city landmark bordered by the Rue Buade that is believed to be built on the site of Quebec's first church. Historians now agree that Champlain was laid to rest under a chapel there after his death on Christmas Day, 1635. Unfortunately, the church, the chapel and most records relating to the exact location of Champlain's grave perished in a fire in 1640. Knowledge of the site faded over the next 200 years, a period during which the church grounds were used as a parish cemetery.

In 1977, a provincially appointed team of researchers combed through old city maps and property deeds searching for clues to



the Champlain mystery. They concluded that his grave may have been uncovered in 1843 by workers who, according to newspaper reports of the day, found a vault containing the remains of some of the earliest inhabitants of Quebec City while building a wall between the Basilica and the expanding Rue Buade. The group's theory was debunked, however, during a 1992 excavation to clear the site for a new chapel. "We found the 1843 wall and 35 skeletons, but there was no crypt," says Quebec City archeologist Bill Moss, who led the dig. For Michel Gaumont, a retired historian who was part of the 1977 research team, continued efforts to find Champlain's grave "are a complete waste of time."

Not surprisingly, the soft-spoken but fast-talking Lévesque disagrees. With the same enthusiasm he displayed in the 1950s as a young priest looking for Champlain among the old ruins under the Basilica—when the boom of his sledgehammer drew complaints because it disturbed confessions upstairs—he now argues that the absence of a crypt at the 1992 site simply means it is located further along the 1843 wall. "We've got to open the Rue Buade and take a good look," says Lévesque, who left the priesthood in 1969 and worked as a provincial civil servant until his retirement in 1993. But according to Moss, it would cost up to \$100,000 to satisfy Lévesque's curiosity. "The bottom line is that the search for Champlain's grave is far from being an archeological project," says Moss. "It's become more a story of one man's passion."

Many archeologists do indeed question both the value of unearthing Champlain's remains and the motives behind Lévesque's relentless—some say obsessive—quest. "Champlain's writings tell us much more about life in New France than his bones ever could," says Marcel Moussette, a professor of archeology at Laval University. "The continued search for his grave is really a kind of hero worship, and archeology is not about the veneration of relics."

Lévesque simply shrugs and smiles. "My goal is to keep people talking about the greatest explorer of the 17th century, a man who crossed the Atlantic 29 times, walked and paddled through much of Canada and the United States, founded Quebec and stood on Plymouth Rock 12 years before the Mayflower landed," he says. A longtime member of the ultra-nationalist St-Jean Baptiste Society who favors Quebec independence "in the event Canada pushes us away," Lévesque nonetheless considers Champlain to be the definitive Canadian role model. "As the founder of New France, Champlain is the cornerstone of the French presence in North America," he says. "And that, in my opinion, is Canada's last rampart against American culture."

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