James McGill: Burnside Estate
Colin McCrossan

James McGill "accomplished many things during his lifetime," McGill University proudly declares about its founder.[1] He "carved a new life for himself in the Canadian wild while barely out of his teens," went on to become a successful "fur trader, despite tough and dangerous conditions," all without losing any of his virtue as a "husband and stepfather with a strong dedication to public service."[2] The official university history continues, of all of his accomplishments, there is one that was the most important; James McGill wrote his own will. In it, he bequeathed "in trust £10,000 and his forty-six acre Burnside Place estate on the side of Mount Royal," to the British crown's Royal Institution for the Advancement of Learning upon his death.[3] (fig. 1) McGill stipulated two conditions with his gift, a college was to be created in McGill's name in Montreal where he made his home, and "the school must be established within ten years of his passing."[4]

James McGill was born on 6 October 1744, to a well-established family in Glasgow, Scotland.[5] (figs. 2 & 3) He attended Glasgow University receiving a "sufficiently sound education," though he never graduated.[6] McGill eventually moved to the British colony of New York, though why he chose to re-locate to North America remains unclear.[7] There he began a career in fur trading, eventually moving to Montreal where he became a successful merchant through his business.[8] He built an exceptional career in a growing yet risky industry where few white men actually became wealthy.[9] McGill would go on to become a leading politician and philanthropist in Montreal, but not without his personal involvement in Transatlantic Slavery.

McGill was able to succeed and establish himself in the upper-echelons of white Montreal society in part by enslaving several people who were both of Indigenous and African descent. McGill enslaved, at different times, at least five individuals.[10] An unknown indigenous or *panis* child survived McGill's enslavement until the age of ten, dying in 1778, and another female *panise* child named Marie survived until the age of 10 or 12 in 1783.[11] McGill enslaved two women of African descent, one named Marie-Louise who died in 1789 and another woman originally named Sarah, who eventually became free and changed her name to either Marie-Charles or Charlotte Cavilhe taking the last name of a previous enslaver.[12] McGill also enslaved a man of African descent named Jacques who lived to the age of 80, dying in 1838.[13] McGill's involvement with slavery extended beyond directly enslaving other human beings. Indeed, he further entrenched his business and financial interests in the multiple industries of the Transatlantic Slave Trade as a West Indian Merchant.

McGill consistently traded in "Caribbean tropical, slave produced, plantation goods," which included tobacco, sugar, molasses, and rum.[14] His trading empire in Montreal circulated furs from Indigenous traders, British metal ware, textiles, and gunpowder, and the goods that were produced through the violent and bloody slaving regimes of the Caribbean.[15] Montreal during this time period was a key site in transatlantic colonial commerce, which facilitated and enabled McGill's business success.[16] McGill also acted as a legal representative for other white slave owners in Montreal, serving as a third party to legal proceedings that further perpetuated the institution in the city and beyond.[17] Although he signed a report in 1787 that called for the gradual abolition of slavery ironically while he was still slaving, his life, career, and wealth were enabled and based in slavery.[18]

James McGill originally lived in a stone house within the original walled settlement of

Montreal, a city built through warfare on originally Indigenous lands known as Hochelaga.[19] (figs. 4 & 5) That house featured seven bedrooms and over eleven other rooms which included a large second story "Drawing Room," and a personal "Library" on the first floor.[20] (fig. 5) Later in his career McGill purchased what would become his Burnside Estate; the property which eventually became the site of McGill University.[21](fig. 6) The land was forty-six acres, situated on the southern side of Montreal's central "mountain," and a brook or "burn" (the Scottish term McGill would have used) ran through the property. Orchards, vegetable farming, and cattle grazing characterized land use surrounding the Burnside house that was built in a Quebec style as a "comfortable country dwelling" fit for a "gentleman."[22] (fig. 6) McGill's summer residence included a ground floor with rooms and a kitchen, cellars in the back of the house, spacious rooms on the second floor with large windows facing the St. Lawrence River, and a third floor with two rooms and an attic.[23] Comfortably furnished for McGill and his wife the French gentlewoman Marie-Charlotte Trottier,[24] Burnside "made an agreeable residence."[25]

The individuals that McGill enslaved were forced to work in domestic, urban settings as well as rural agricultural ones. While enslaved by James McGill, Marie-Louise would have been subjected to extreme material and social deprivation. She would have been forced to maintain McGill's twelve room mansion in Old Montreal[26] and also serve as a nurse to McGill's young stepchildren, all while trying to avoid possible sexual predation and violence from James McGill.[27] Jacques could have labored alongside Marie-Louise in McGill's house and warehouses while also being forced to tend to McGill's summer estate, which was surrounded by farmlands and orchards.[28] Sarah too, like Marie-Louise and Jacques would have been forced to take care of McGill's family and business, living under constant surveillance and scrutiny from all members of McGill's family. We know from fugitive slave advertisements posted in Montreal that these enslaved people would have been quite skilled.[29] They would have known how to make shoes, farm, work as carpenters, and perform a range of other domestic and outdoor tasks that enabled McGill's success and sustained his family.[30]

James McGill died suddenly in 1813, bequeathing in his will a sum of £10,000 and his Burnside estate of forty-six acres "towards the endowment of a college or a university, specifying that the college or one of the colleges of the university should bear the name McGill."[31] McGill's will also stipulated that the school was required to open on the Burnside site.[32] After various legal disputes between McGill's heirs, McGill University was founded in 1821 and the school began operations on Wednesday, 24 June 1829 with a ceremony in the Burnside Estate attended by leading white politicians, religious leaders, and merchants of the city.[33] The first classes were held in the Burnside mansion, which subsequently became a site used for a time as the principal's residence. McGill's "summer home" was eventually destroyed, but the land continued to be used as the site of the University.[34] (fig. 7)

McGill's Burnside Estate and the subsequent founding of McGill University is much more complicated than the current official history claims. The estate was not merely a large plot of land in Montreal that became the site of a school for all city residents funded by a brave and heroic founder. Instead, it was a physical manifestation of McGill's wealth and power derived from colonialism and slavery, a space worked and tended by enslaved black and Indigenous people. The property was where McGill brutally enslaved other human beings and profited off their labour and lives. The history of Burnside Estate with its profound connection to Transatlantic Slavery must be recognized as a microcosm of the broader unacknowledged histories of slavery in Montreal, the province of Quebec, and indeed the

nation of Canada. Far from an innocuous countryside estate where James McGill relaxed in his old age, Burnside Estate was a site of violence and unimaginable cruelty. McGill University is situated on this same land today, and even memorializes the original Burnside with another building, Burnside Hall, which opened on 21 May 1971. (fig. 8) Burnside Hall commemorates McGill's original Burnside Estate with a plaque in its lobby which claims that the James McGill's original "summer home" stood near where the hall stands today. (figs. 9 &10) McGill University was not only founded by a slave owner and man entrenched in the trades of slave-produced goods, but situated on land where slavery took place.

[1] "A University is Born," McGill University (date of last access 27 March 2020), https://www.mcgill.ca/about/history/features/founding.

[2] "A University is Born," McGill University (date of last access 27 March 2020), https://www.mcgill.ca/about/history/features/founding.

[3] "A University is Born," McGill University (date of last access 27 March 2020), https://www.mcgill.ca/about/history/features/founding.

[4] "A University is Born," McGill University (date of last access 27 March 2020), https://www.mcgill.ca/about/history/features/founding.

[5] Stanley Brice Frost, McGill University : For the Advancement of Learning, Volume I, 1801-1895, (Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980), pp. 3-4.

[6] Frost, McGill University, p. 4.

[7] Frost, McGill University, p. 4.

[8] Frost, McGill University, pp. 4-6.

[9] Frost, McGill University, pp. 1-30.

[10] Charmaine A. Nelson, Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), p. 87.

[11] Marcel Trudel, Dictionnaire des Esclaves et de leurs Proprietaires au Canada Français (La Salle: Edition Hutubise HMH Ltee, 1990), pp. 377, 108.

[12] Taking the name of a former enslaver rather than keeping McGill's suggests that McGill's enslavement of Sarah was particularly horrific and traumatic. Discarding McGill's last name may have been one way she could have exhibited a limited form of agency, Nelson, Slavery, Geography and Empire, pp. 85.

[13] Nelson, Slavery, Geography and Empire, pp. 87-90.

[14] Nelson, Slavery, Geography and Empire, pp. 85-86.

[15] J.I. Cooper, "McGill, James," Dictionary of Canadian Biography (date of last access 31 March 2020), http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mcgill_james_5E.html

[16] Nelson, Slavery, Geography and Empire, pp. 170-86.

[17] Nelson, Slavery, Geography and Empire, pp. 166-67, p. 190.

[18] Frank Mackey, Done with Slavery : The Balck Fact in Montreal 1760-1840 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), p. 86.

[19] Nelson, Slavery, Geography and Empire, pp. 11-14.

[20] James McGill, Plan and elevation of house, 1816, Architectural Drawing from McGill Estate, McGill University Rare Books and Special Collections, Montreal, Canada.

[21] Nelson, Slavery, Geography and Empire, pp. 86-92.

[22] Frost, McGill University, p. 55

[23] Frost, McGill University, p. 57

[24] Nelson, Slavery, Geography and Empire, pp.80-87

[25] Frost, McGill University, p. 57

[26] James McGill, Plan and elevation of house, 1816, Architectural Drawing from McGill Estate, McGill University Rare Books and Special Collections, Montreal, Canada.

[27] Harvey Amani Whitfield, North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016), pp. 55-70,

[28] Frost, McGill University, pp. 55-61.

[29] See Frank Mackey, "Appendix I: Newspaper Notices," Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal 1760-1840 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), pp. 307-44.

[30] Specifically, see ads 53, 75, 80, in "Appendix I: Newspaper Notices," pp. 328, 333, 335.

[31] Cooper, "McGill, James," http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mcgill_james_5E.html

[32] Cooper, "McGill, James," http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/mcgill_james_5E.html

[33] Frost, McGill University, pp. 58-61

[34] Frost, McGill University, pp. 77-110, 166-67.

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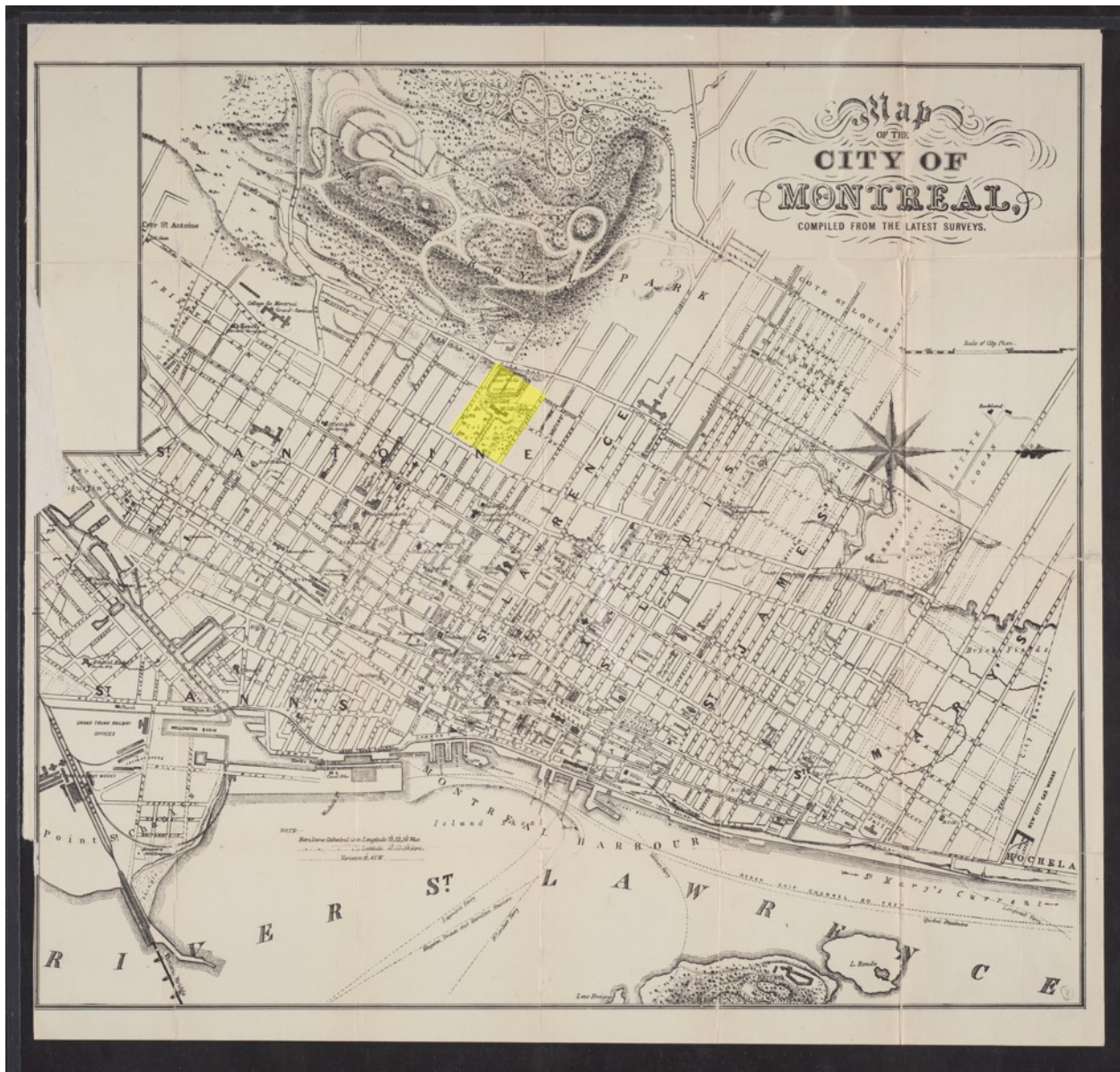
Plate List

Fig. 1: Samuel Edward Dawson, <u>Map of the city of Montreal : compiled from the latest surveys (1888)</u>, Map, 49 x 54 cm, McGill University Library, Montreal, Canada.
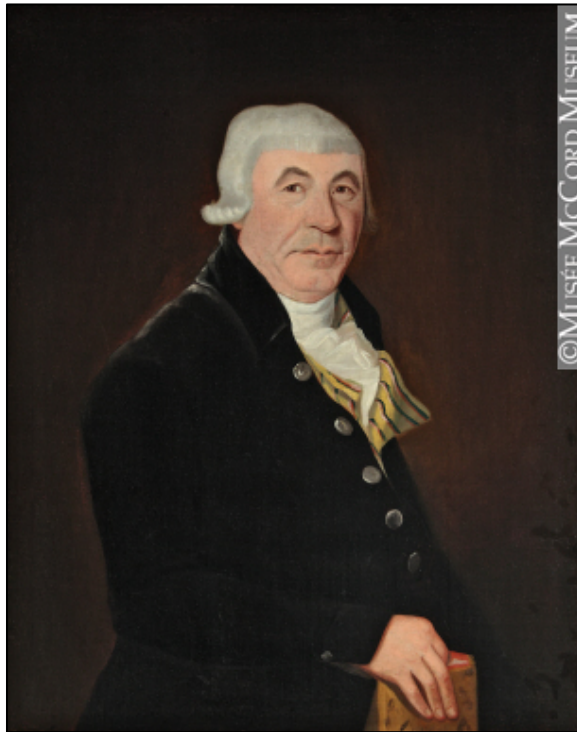
Fig. 2: Anonymous, <u>Portrait of James McGill (1744-1813), (1810-1825)</u>, Oil on Canvas, 84.3 x 68.4 cm, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada.

Fig. 3: William Berczy, <u>James McGill, 1805-1811, (1805-1811)</u>, Miniature Painting, Watercolour, gouache and Arabic gum on ivory, 6.1 x 5.3 cm, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada.

Fig. 4: Henry Richard S. Bunnett, <u>House of James McGill, Notre-Dame Street, Corner of Jacques Cartier Square, Montreal</u> (1885), Oil on canvas, 30.8 x 40.4 cm, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada.
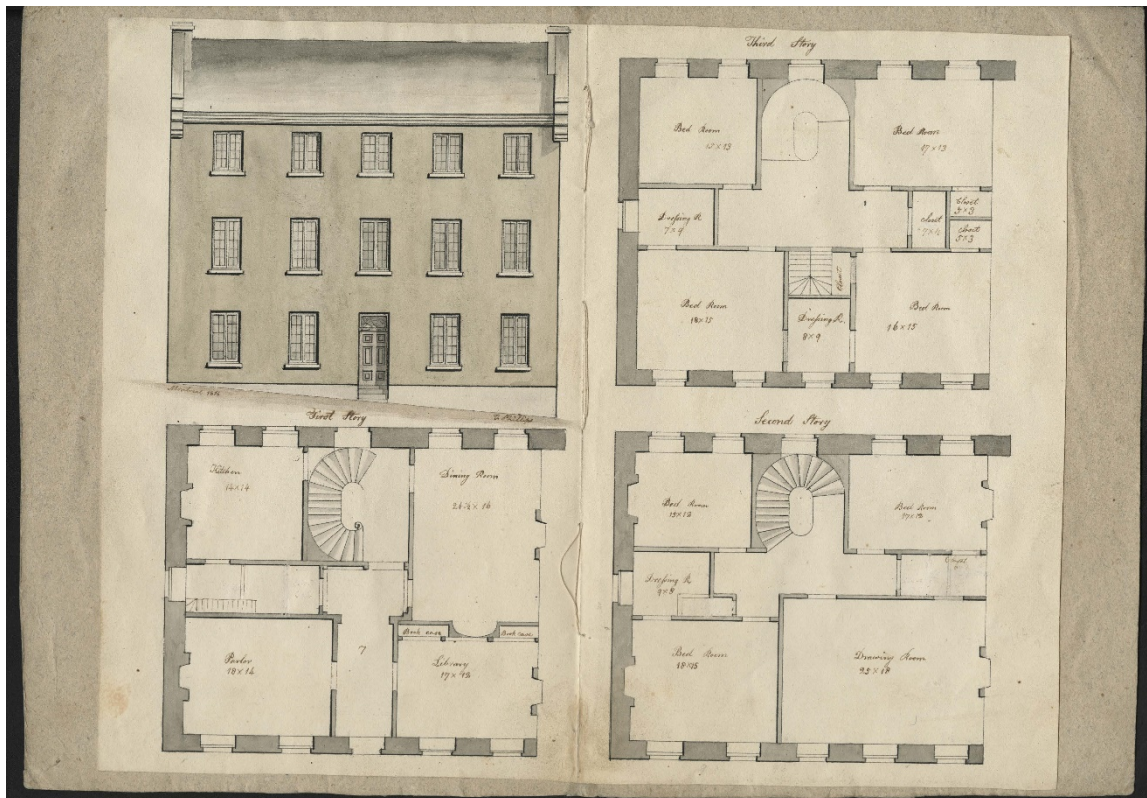

Fig. 5: James McGill, <u>Plan and elevation of house</u>, 1816, Architectural Drawing from McGill Estate, McGill University Rare Books and Special Collections, Montreal, Canada.
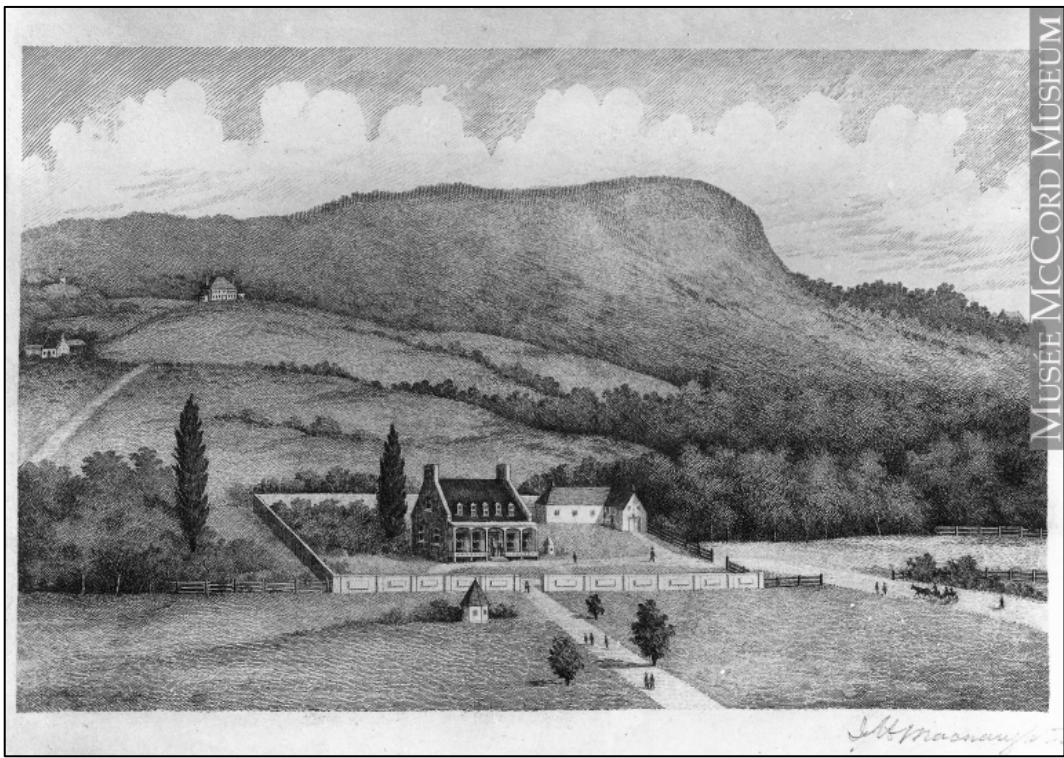
Fig. 6: William Notman and Son, "Burnside," residence of the Late James McGill, Montreal, QC, 1842, engraving by John H. McNaughton, 1842 copied ca. 1950 (1925), Photograph, 19 x 24 cm, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada.
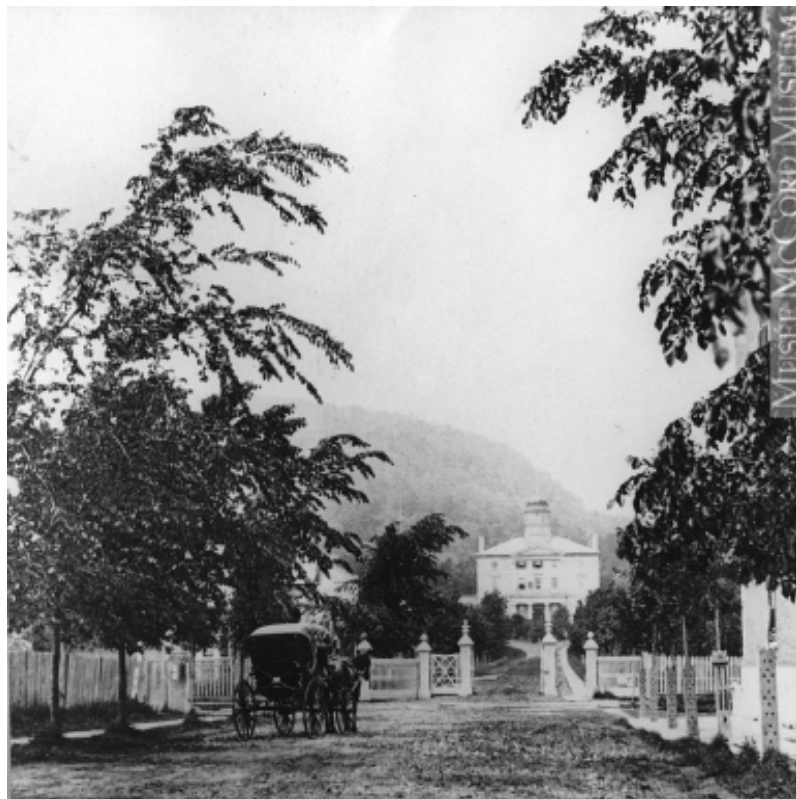

Fig. 7: Alexander Henderson, Gates to McGill University, McGill College Avenue, Montreal, QC, 1869 (1869), Photograph, 10 x 8 cm, McCord Museum, Montreal, Canada.

Fig. 8: Colin McCrossan, <u>Burnside Hall on McGill's Campus</u> (2020), Photograph, Private Collection.

Fig. 9: Colin McCrossan, <u>Plaque inside Burnside Hall Lobby</u> (2020), Photograph, Private Collection.

Fig. 10: Colin McCrossan, <u>View from Burnside Hall</u> (2020), Photograph, Private Collection.