

The Beaver Club (1785-1827): Behind Closed Doors

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Montreal's infamous Beaver Club (1785-1827) was a social group that brought together retired merchants and acted as a platform where young fur traders could enter Montreal's bourgeois society.¹ The rules and social values governing the club reveal the violent, racist, and misogynistic underpinnings of the group; its membership was exclusively white and male, and the club admitted members who participated in morally grotesque and violent activities, such as murder and slavery. Further, the club's mandate encouraged the systematic "othering" of those believed to be "savage" and unlike themselves.² Indeed, the Beaver Club's exploitive, exclusive, and violent character was cultivated in private gatherings held at its Beaver Hall Hill mansion.³ (fig. 1) Subjected to specific rules and regulations, the club allowed members to collude economically, often through their participation in the institution of slavery, and idealize the strength of white men who wintered in the North American interior or "Indian Country."⁴

Up until 1821, Montreal was a mercantile city which relied upon the fur trade and international import-exports as its economic engine.⁵ Following the British Conquest of New France in 1759, the fur trading merchants' influence was especially strong.⁶ Increasing affluence and opportunities for leisure led to the establishment of social organizations, the Beaver Club being one among many.⁷ The Beaver Club was founded in 1785 by the same group of men who founded the North West Company (NWC), a fur trading organization established in 1775.⁹ Some of the company's founding partners were James McGill, the Frobisher brothers, and later, Alexander Henry.¹⁰ These men were also some of the Beaver Club's original members.¹¹ (figs. 2-3) Beaver Club membership was comprised largely of those who worked for or were partners of the NWC, a company known to have profited from the exploitation of Indigenous and African peoples.¹²

To become a member of the Beaver Club, a candidate was required to spend at least one winter in the Canadian wilderness.¹³ Initially, the Beaver Club maintained a rigid exclusivity, holding only nineteen members, all of whom lived in Montreal.¹⁴ Over time, the club expanded to fifty-five members with ten honorary members.¹⁵ Meetings were held during the off-season of the fur trade (December to April) and the club's by-laws stipulated that gatherings were to only occur on Wednesdays.¹⁶ Additionally, all members were required to wear the Beaver Club medals during meetings and were fined \$1 if they did not adhere to this rule.¹⁷ (figs. 4-5) Gatherings took the form of elaborate dinner parties.¹⁸ After dinner, the meetings became more informal as the club rules encouraged men to drink as they pleased.¹⁹

The Beaver Club was distinct from other fraternal organizations in that it embodied a fascination with the "wild" and "savage," ideas that were based upon a belief in the inherent superiority of European "civilization."²⁰ Conversations revolved around reminiscing about old fur trading days and interactions with potentially menacing Natives.²¹ In addition, the men sang voyageur songs, reenacted dangerous canoeing adventures, and engaged in rowdy behaviour like breaking bottles and glasses.²² Moreover, the club's by-laws encouraged the passing around and smoking of the "calumet" an "Indian" emblem of peace, thereby appropriating indigenous practices.²³ Club meetings were a place for bourgeois men to distinguish themselves from women, the working class, people of colour, and other marginalized people while partaking in excessive drinking and behaviors typically unacceptable for elite men in public settings.²⁴

Club meetings were also a place to flaunt ones' affluence by displaying luxuries, feasting on expensive meats, and employing servants. Notably, rule twelve of the Beaver Club's *Rules and*

Regulations stated that “all unmarried Members having Servants, shall bring them to the club.”²⁵ Although the term “servant” does not necessarily mean “slave,” the terms were often used interchangeably in this era. According to scholar Robin Winks, most “servants” were slaves.²⁶ Winks notes that the tendency to replace the term *slave* with *servant* was due to a growing sensitivity to slavery as a moral and economic issue.²⁷ Moreover, Marcel Trudel’s research found that in Quebec, people were reluctant to use the term “slavery.”²⁸ For example, when priests made entries in the civil registry the term “slave” was not always used.²⁹ Alternatively, priests would note that enslaved people “belonged to a given owner,” instead of explicitly labeling them as a “slave.”³⁰ The Beaver Club, therefore, was likely encouraging and exploiting the labour of enslaved people during their meetings.

Many of the original nineteen members of the Beaver Club were either slave owners or were indirectly involved with the slave trade. According to Frank Mackey’s research, approximately half of the original nineteen members were slave owners or the employers of “servants.”³¹ Moreover, evidence shows that members of the Beaver Club supported one another in their slave owning ventures, even if they themselves were not owners.³²

West Indian merchant and fur trader James McGill was one of many slave owners in the Beaver Club, possessing five enslaved people to his name.³³ McGill was known to be an enthusiastic Beaver Club member. He partook in the singing of old boating songs and was said to have suggested locking the doors after midnight, allowing for “the rum to flow uninterrupted.”³⁴ (fig. 6) Thus, if “servants” accompanied McGill, or any other member, to Beaver Club meetings, they were most likely enslaved people.³⁵

The Beaver Club was not only founded by slave owners, but also admitted murderers as members. For example, Beaver Club member and slave owner Etienne-Charles Campion was involved in a murder of an Ojibwa man named Wawenese at Michilimackinac (present-day Mackinac Island between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan) in 1792.³⁶ Moreover, member and trader Peter Pond was also suspected of killing at least three fur traders.³⁷ The actions and character of members, therefore, had no relevance for Beaver Club membership and the criminal backgrounds of various white men were often ignored in the interest of maintaining a respectable appearance.

The Beaver Club had no permanent headquarters, although it often gathered at the Beaver Hall Hill mansion, also known as Joseph Frobisher’s mansion.³⁸ (figs. 7-10) According to Stanley Brice Frost, McGill “prized his membership in the Beaver Club and frequently dined in the Frobisher mansion,” implying a connection between the Beaver Club and Beaver Hall Hill mansion.³⁹ Moreover, in Frobisher’s diary the entry on 10 March 1810 reads “Dined at home. Beaver Club. Major Loyd and Mr. Burke guests” and on the 24th of the same month, “Dined at home. Beaver Club.”⁴⁰ Although the language in these entries is cryptic, one can deduce that Beaver Club meetings took place in Frobisher’s home at least on two occasions. Additionally, the private space of a home allowed for members to indulge in excessive drinking and partake in behaviors outside the confines of “bourgeois civility.”⁴¹

There is also documentation that the club moved meeting locations to various bars and hotels until its demise in 1827.⁴² According to Lawrence J. Burpee, there is no evidence about where the Beaver Club met before 1807.⁴³ In 1807, however, the Beaver Club’s minutes’ document club meetings at the City Tavern, the Mansion House Hotel, and Richard Dillon’s numerous establishments.⁴⁴ (fig. 11) Although the Beaver Club did not have a permanent location, it is evident that the club spent considerable time at Beaver Hall Hill mansion.⁴⁵ Due to a fire in 1847, the Beaver Hall Hill mansion was destroyed.⁴⁶ The Bell Telephone building was erected in

its place. (Fig. 12) Today, at 1085 Beaver Hall Hill there is a commemorative plaque that indicates the location of Frobisher's former Beaver Hall mansion.⁴⁷ (fig. 13)

Regardless of direct ownership of enslaved people, all members of the Beaver Club had ties to slavery and other exploitive or misogynistic practices. Private spaces, such as the Beaver Hall Hill mansion, were imperative to the Beaver Club because they allowed for members to expose their true natures outside the confines of "bourgeois civility." While court houses, jails, and even printing offices are commonly recognized as institutions that supported slavery, it should not be forgotten that clubs like the Beaver Club also served to facilitate the behaviors, decisions, and actions of pro-slavery ideology of the white male elite in cities like Montreal.

¹ Carolyn Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism: Fur Trade Masculinity and the Beaver Club, 1785-1827," *Race and Gender in the Northern Colonies*, eds. Janet Noel (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000), p. 53.

² Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism," p. 54.

³ L.J Burpee, "The Beaver Club: Reports of the Annual Meeting," *The Canadian Historical Society*, vol. 3 issue 1, (1924), p. 83.

⁴ Jennifer H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), p. 44.

⁵ Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism," p. 54.

⁶ Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism," p. 55.

⁷ Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism," p. 55.

⁹ L.J Burpee, "The Beaver Club: Reports of the Annual Meeting," *The Canadian Historical Society*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1924), p. 73.

¹⁰ Stanley B. Ryerson, *The Founding of Canada: Beginnings to 1815* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1975), p. 244.

¹¹ W. Gray, *Rules and Regulations of the Beaver Club: Instituted in 1785*, (Cihm/Icmh Microfiche Series = Cihm/Icmh Collection De Microfiches, No. 55316, Montreal, Canada, 1819), p. 13.

¹² Stanley B. Ryerson, *The Founding of Canada: Beginnings to 1815* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1975), pp. 246-48; Frank Mackey, *Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), p. 54; Trader and Beaver Club member Alexander Mackenzie observed that the Native people who hunted and gathered for the NWC suffered "intolerable fatigue" and "innumerable hardships, and were sometimes starved to death." Regarding provisions given to the Natives, Mackenzie remarked they had "no other allowance than Indian corn and melted fat." The Company's partners engaged in extravagant luxuries, such as Beaver Club feasts, but refused to properly compensate the Native men who sustained the trade. Further, per Frank Mackey's research, as a cooperation, the NWC owned at least one enslaved person. As most Beaver Club members once took part in the NWC and were thus economically and socially connected to one another, all members were guilty of exploitation by association.

¹³ Charles B Reed, *Masters of the Wilderness* (Chicago Historical Society. Fort Dearborn Series. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago press 1914), p. 66.

¹⁴ Reed, *Masters of the Wilderness*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Reed, *Masters of the Wilderness*, p. 66.

¹⁶ Reed, *Masters of the Wilderness*, p. 67.

¹⁷ W. Gray, *Rules and Regulations of the Beaver Club: Instituted in 1785*, (Cihm/Icmh Microfiche Series = Cihm/Icmh Collection De Microfiches, No. 55316, Montreal, Canada, 1819), p. 5.

¹⁸ Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism," p. 54.

¹⁹ W. Gray, *Rules and Regulations of the Beaver Club: Instituted in 1785*, (Cihm/Icmh Microfiche Series = Cihm/Icmh Collection De Microfiches, No. 55316, Montreal, Canada, 1819), p. 6; Rule 8 of the Beaver Club's

Rules and Regulations stipulates that "Every Member to drink as he pleases, after the Club Toasts have gone round; and retire at his pleasure."

²⁰ Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism," p. 54.

²¹ Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism," p. 54.

²² Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism," p. 54.

²³ W. Gray, *Rules and Regulations of the Beaver Club: Instituted in 1785* (Cihm/Icmh Microfiche Series = Cihm/Icmh Collection De Microfiches, No. 55316, Montreal, Canada, 1819), p. 3.

²⁴ Podruchny, "Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism," p. 54.

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- ²⁵ W. Gray, Rules and Regulations of the Beaver Club: Instituted in 1785 (Cihm/Icmh Microfiche Series = Cihm/Icmh Collection De Microfiches, No. 55316, Montreal, Canada, 1819), p. 6; Regarding the fact that only unmarried members must bring servants to Beaver Club meetings, Frost suggests that married men might have been obliged to return to their wives before midnight during meetings, whereas unmarried men usually stayed until the morning. Perhaps, then unmarried men were asked to bring “servants” in order to ensure they were waited-on throughout the night.
- ²⁶ Robin Winks, The Blacks in Canada: A History, Second Edition (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), p. 45.
- ²⁷ Winks, The Blacks in Canada, p. 45.
- ²⁸ Marcel Trudel, Canada's Forgotten Slaves: Two Centuries of Bondage, Translated by George Tombs (Montréal, Québec, Canada: Véhicule Press, 2013), p. 61.
- ²⁹ Trudel, Canada's Forgotten Slaves, p. 61.
- ³⁰ Trudel, Canada's Forgotten Slaves, p. 61.
- ³¹ Frank Mackey, Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), pp. 53, 73, 152, 423, 431, 431; According to Mackey's findings, Charles Chaboillez was a slave owner, Maurice-Regis Blondeau employed servants, Etienne-Charles Campion was an owner, Alexander Henry the elder was an owner, James Finlay was an owner, Benjamin Frobisher was an owner, James McGill was an owner, Gabriel Cotte and Joseph Frobisher had direct connections to the slave trade, and John McNamara was an owner. According to Montreal resident, Marie Angelique Bouchette, the sister-in-law of Beaver Club member Charles Chaboillez, “[m]any of [their] friends in Quebec were slaveholders,” thus suggesting that for Montreal's elite, slavemowning was a common institution.
- ³² Mackey, Done with Slavery, p. 423; NWC partner and Beaver Club member Charles Chaboillez owned multiple enslaved people. One of Chaboillez's slave transactions in 1793 implicates Joseph Frobisher as his proxy. Although Mackey's research indicates that Frobisher was not likely a slave owner, he was involved in this transaction.
- ³³ Charmaine A. Nelson, “A Tale of Two Empires: Montreal Slavery under the French and the British,” Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), p. 87; According to Nelson, in order to make money McGill had his foot in many realms of exploitation. Thus, not only did he own five enslaved people in Montreal, but he also gained most of his fortune from transoceanic trade in the Caribbean from slave-produced, plantation goods.
- ³⁴ Stanley Brice Frost, James McGill of Montreal (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), p. 25.
- ³⁵ L.J Burpee, “The Beaver Club: Reports of the Annual Meeting,” The Canadian Historical Society, vol. 3, no. 1, (1924), 88. Dr. Bryce, in his writing about the Beaver Club, suggests that “servants or voyageurs who happened to gain admittance to meetings,” engaged in the “voyageur” games and songs orchestrated by the Beaver Club during meetings. It should be noted that slave owners often believed that enslaved people had inferior capabilities to that of the white man. For example, the enslaved African American man Fredrick Douglass's owner underrated his literary capacity and the enslaved Caribbean woman Mary Prince's owners (the Woods) did not consider Prince's ability and agency that gave her the means to buy herself out of slavery. Due to this evidence, it is very likely that in their meetings, the members of the Beaver Club allowed their enslaved people to absorb and be witness to the happenings of their gatherings. Mary Prince, The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave: Related by Herself (DocSouth books ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, 2017), p. 81; Frederick Douglass, Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, eds Henry Louis Gates, (The Library of America, 68. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1994).
- ³⁶ Anonymous, “Etienne Campion (baptized Étienne-Charle),” Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 4 (date of last access March 30, 2020). http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/campion_etienne_charles_4E.html.
- ³⁷ Podruchny, “Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism,” p. 57.
- ³⁸ Beaver Club Menu (Montreal: Beaver Club, 1963); L.J Burpee, “The Beaver Club,” Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada, 3 (1), (1924), p. 83. Frobisher was a founder and the secretary of the Beaver Club.
- ³⁹ Stanley Brice Frost, James McGill of Montreal (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014), p. 25.
- ⁴⁰ L.J Burpee, “The Beaver Club: Reports of the Annual Meeting,” The Canadian Historical Society, vol. 3, no. 1, (1924), p. 83.
- ⁴¹ Podruchny, “Festivities, Fortitude, and Fraternalism,” p. 57.
- ⁴² William Henry Atherton, “Old Montreal in the early days of British Canada, 1778-1788,” (Secretary of the City Improvement League of Montreal), p. 10.

⁴³ L.J Burpee, "The Beaver Club: Reports of the Annual Meeting," The Canadian Historical Society, vol. 3, no. 1, (1924), p. 82.

⁴⁴ Burpee, "The Beaver Club," p. 82.

⁴⁵ Luc Noppen, "Recherche documentaire: etude historique et analyse patrimoniale de l'ilot St-Patrick," (Montreal: Universite du Quebec a Montreal. Ecole des sciences de la gestion. Chaire de recherché du Canada en patrimoine urban, 2014), p. 11.

⁴⁶ William Henry Atherton, "Old Montreal in the early days of British Canada, 1778-1788," (Secretary of the City Improvement League of Montreal), p. 10.

⁴⁷ Noppen, "Old Montreal in the early days of British Canada," p. 11.

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Plate List



Fig. 1: Samuel Edward Dawson, "Map of the City of Montreal: Compile from the Latest Surveys," map, 49 x 54 cm, Handbook for the city of Montreal, 1888, McGill University Library, Montreal, Quebec.

| 1st Voyage to the Interior. | | NAMES. | |
|-----------------------------|--|---------------------------|------|
| 1751. | | Charles Chaboilliz, | dead |
| 1752. | | Maurice Blondeau | do |
| 1753. | | Hyp. Desrivieres | do |
| do | | Et. Campion | do |
| 1760. | | Gabriel Cotté | do |
| 1761. | | Alexr. Henry | do |
| 1762. | | Ls. Jos. Ainsi | dead |
| 1765. | | Ben. Frobisher | do |
| 1766. | | James M ^c Gill | do |
| do. | | Geo. M ^c Beath | do |
| do. | | Jas. Finlay | do |
| 1768. | | Jos. Frobisher | do |
| 1770. | | John M ^c Gill | do |
| 1770. | | Peter Pond | do |
| 1770. | | Mathew Lessey | do |
| 1772 | | David M ^c Crae | do |

Fig. 2: W. Gray, "Names," Rules and Regulations of the Beaver Club, (Cihm/Icmh Microfiche Series = Cihm/Icmh Collection De Microfiches, No. 55316, 1819), pp. 13, Montreal, Quebec.

| 1st Voyage to the Interior. | Year of Admission. | NAMES. | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|------|
| 1770. | 1787. | J. B. Tabeau | dead |
| | // | Josiah Bleakley | |
| | 1789. | Patrick Smalk | dead |
| | 1790. | Nicolas Montour | dead |
| | // | Venance St. Germain | |
| | // | Leon St. Germain | dead |
| | // | Jos. Howard, sen. | dead |
| | 1791. | John Gregory | dead |
| | // | And. Todd | dead |
| | // | Jacque Giasson | dead |
| | 1792. | Simon M ^c Tavish | dead |
| | 1793. | Myer Michael | dead |
| | // | James Grant | dead |
| | 1795. | Isaac Todd | |
| | // | Wm. Gillivray | |

Fig. 3: W. Gray, "Names," Rules and Regulations of the Beaver Club, (Cihm/Icmh Microfiche Series = Cihm/Icmh Collection De Microfiches, No. 55316, 1819), pp. 14, Montreal, Quebec.



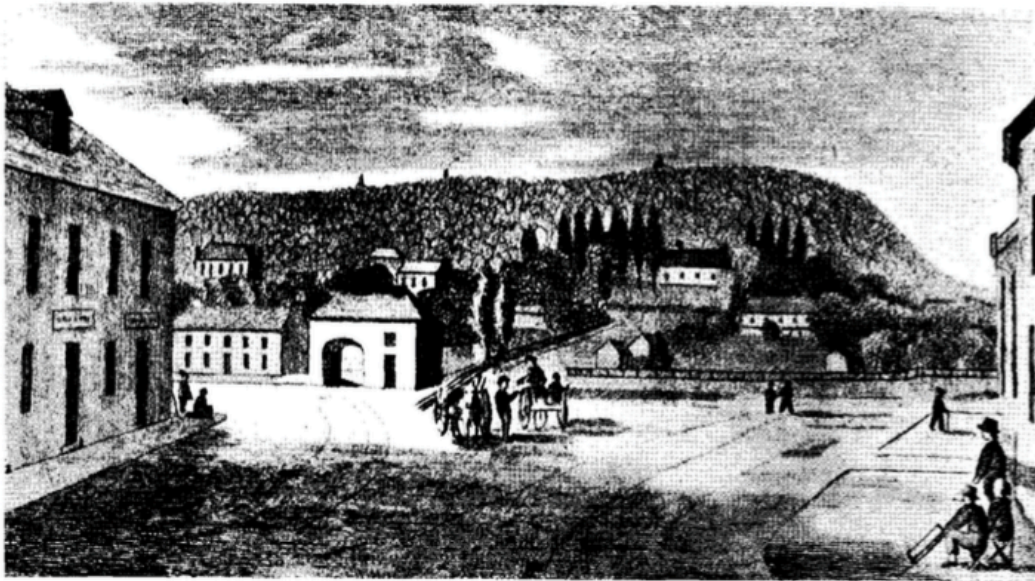
Fig. 4: Anonymous, “Fortitude in Distress,” Beaver Club Medal, 3.6 cm, (Gift of Mr. McGillivray Dawkins, M20987, c. 1785), McCord Museum, Montreal Quebec.



Fig. 5: Anonymous, “Beaver Club Instituted Montreal: Industry & Perseverance,” Beaver Club Medal, 3.6 cm, (Gift of Mr. McGillivray Dawkins, M20987, c. 1785), McCord Museum, Montreal Quebec.



Fig. 6: James McGill, "Beaver Club Instituted, Montreal," 13 x 6 cm, (Purchase from Associated Screen News Ltd. VIEW-20853.A, medal, 1785, photographed, 1923) McCord Museum, Montreal, Quebec.



BEAVER HALL HILL

Taken from near McGill and St. James streets, Showing the Hay Market, now Victoria Square, Beevor Hall (note the spelling) near the centre, distinguished by its poplars, the Weigh- House to the left, and on the extreme right a small portion of the American Presbyterian Church.

Fig. 7: Anonymous, "Beaver Hall Hill," The Beaver Club: Reports of the Annual Meeting, between pp. 84 and pp. 85, (The Canadian Historical Society, v. 3 Issue 1, 1924), Canada.



Fig. 8: Adele Clark, "A Meeting-Place of the Club," Masters of the Wilderness, between pp. 58 and pp. 60, (Chicago Historical Society. Fort Dearborn Series. Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago press 1914).

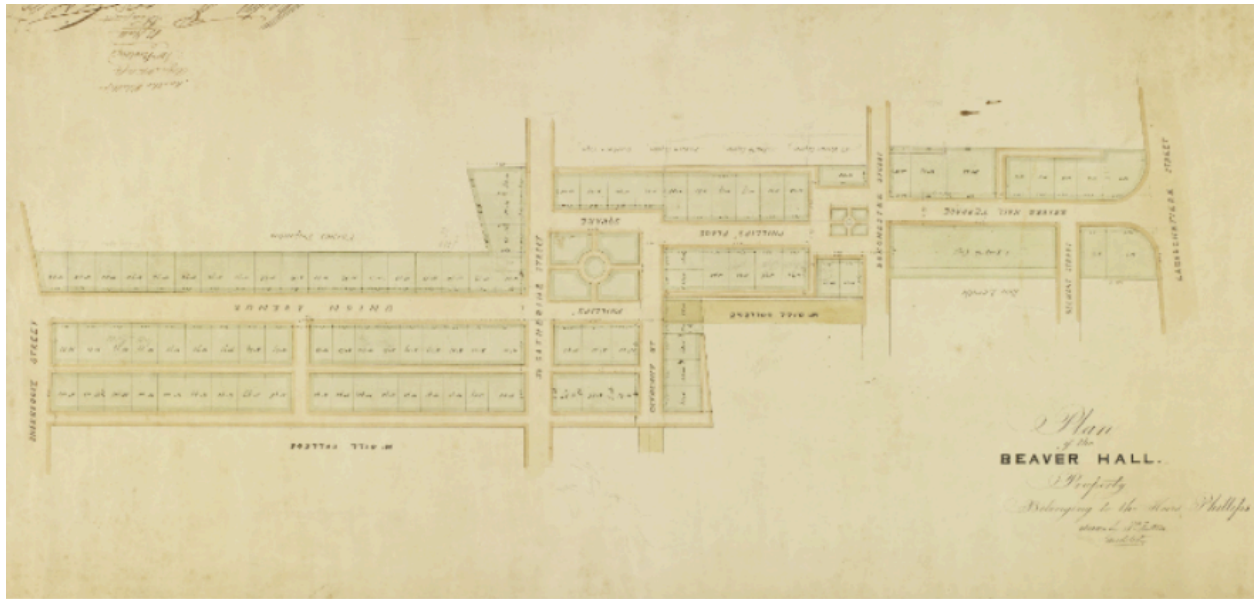


Fig. 9: W Footner, “Plan of the Beaver Hall Property Belonging to the Heirs Philips,” Recherche documentaire: etude historique et analyse patrimoniale de l’ilot St-Patrick, pp. 12, 1843, (Montreal: Universite du Quebec a Montreal. Ecole des sciences de la gestion. Chaire de recherché du Canada en patrimoine urban, 2014), BanQ, P364, Montreal Quebec.



Joseph Frobisher.

Fig. 10: Anonymous, “Joseph Frobisher,” The Beaver Club: Reports of the Annual Meeting, pp. 74, (The Canadian Historical Society, v. 3 Issue 1, 1924), Canada.



Dillon's Tavern.

Fig. 11: Richard Dillon, "Dillon's Tavern," The Beaver Club: Reports of the Annual Meeting, pp. 82, (The Canadian Historical Society, v. 3 Issue 1, 1924), Canada.



Fig. 12: Walter Jackson, "Bell Telephone Building, Beaver Hall Hill," Recherche documentaire: etude historique et analyse patrimoniale de l'ilot St-Patrick, pp. 25, 1931, (Montreal: Universite du Quebec a Montreal. Ecole des sciences de la gestion. Chaire de recherch  du Canada en patrimoine urban, 2014), MP, 1989, McCord Museum, Montreal Quebec.



Fig. 13: Guillaume St-Jean, "1085, cote du Beaver Hall," Recherche documentaire: etude historique et analyse patrimoniale de l'ilot St-Patrick, pp. 12, (Montreal: Universite du Quebec a Montreal. Ecole des sciences de la gestion. Chaire de recherche du Canada en patrimoine urban, 2014), Montreal Quebec.