Behind the Wall:

The Colonial Footprint of Fort Saint Louis at Kahnawake Mohawk Territory

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Rarely do we see a piece of monumental architecture, especially one made of durable stone and dating to the early colonial period, standing in such a state of invisibility in the community to which it belongs. Such is the case with the Fort Saint Louis, a stone and mortar wall originally erected in what is now the Kahnawake Mohawk reservation, twenty miles south-east of Montreal (Fig. 1). The wall, once part of the defensive architecture of a stronghold of the French economy within Native North America, now lies in a state of limbo: overlooked, ignored and unknown. I began my research about this remnant of the wall with little information readily available about the site aside from Jesuit missionaries' accounts, even though Parks Canada had declared the fragment in 1937 to be a National Historic Site. From being a citadel on an important trade route (the trading post of the North West Trading Company, an important name in the fur trade, located across the Saint Lawrence River at Lachine) the wall is now in ruin on a modern day "Indian" reservation. The wall has stood for nearly three centuries, and has witnessed the lives of residents and changes which happened over the years in the village. In this essay, I explore the spatial relationships between past and present, using a post-colonial viewpoint to analyze the site as a symbol and reminder of the past and ask what this ruin means to the community of nearly 8,000 Mohawk residents today. Through site visits and comparisons of different stories of the area, I have reconstructed a fragmentary yet revealing history of the partial wall that remains. In his introduction to *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory,* Andreas Huyssen describes a problem with history which applies especially to this site: that memory is absolutely imperative to both imagining the future and to understanding the present, in order to avoid the mistakes of history when planning for the future

(Huyssen 5). In order to understand the site of the Fort today, I must take the reader back in time to understand why, originally, it was built on this Aboriginal territory.

Beginnings: 1704-1885

French missionaries were nothing new to the Mohawks and many other northeastern bands by the mid-seventeenth century. The community of present-day Kahnawake Mohawk territory had relocated several times westward along the southern shore of the Saint Lawrence River. The founding of the village of Kahnawake in 1676 across from the Lachine rapids was the last in a series of migrations of Iroquois from northern New York state as well as other groups of Anishnabeg and Iroquois from what is now eastern Ontario/western Quebec. Many of these settlers were Christian, or at least appeared to adopt some Catholic ways of life, inspired perhaps by the appearance of less violence in the Christianized, southern Native territories. The settlement originated on the banks of the Saint Lawrence River at what is now LaPrairie, Quebec. It then moved westward, downstream, four times until arriving at its present location in 1716. This is where the building of the main Catholic church, the Saint Francis Xavier Mission, was completed in 1721. The site was used also as a military base for French soldiers occupying the area. In looking through records, Jesuit relations and some histories of the village, I was unable to determine who built the Fort, but it was evidently built in order to prevent a siege from occurring, which did happen in 1689 and forced the entire population to seek refuge at Lachine for one year (Devine 89).

The defensive walls of the former Fort Saint Louis, first proposed as early as 1704 by M. De Ramezay, then governor of Montreal, were meant to protect the interests of the colonizing powers at the Kahnawake Mohawk village. One could argue easily that the interest in Kahnawake at that time was primarily economic. Kahnawakero:non (persons from Kahnawake) were heavily involved in activities of the fur trade, from trapping to guiding and shooting the rapids upstream to making deliveries and aiding so-called "explorers" from Europe or from trading companies. This essay argues that the walls had multiple purposes and effects within the colonial context of the site.

Using local granite and mortar combined with methods used in Medieval European castles and fortifications, construction on the Fort started in 1725. The Fort had been opposed by the Jesuits at the Mission, but was nonetheless built under the direction of engineer M. Chaussegros de Lery. Governor De Ramezay believed there was good reason to keep French economic interests at Kahnawake protected (Devine, Chapter 6). The officers' house, located in the present-day rectory of the church, is sited on the north shore facing the water. This was one of the more heavily fortified parts of the wall, complete with loopholes built into the stone for firearms, and a stone gunpowder magazine, which still stands today. The Fort was completed in 1754. It is not recorded as to how much of the wall from the original 1754 plan was completed, but it is apparent that the stone fortifications surrounding the church and the garrison, where the non-Native population resided, created a physical separation between the Fort and the village where the Mohawks lived (Fig. 2).

Mohawk villages were usually composed of several wood and bark longhouses, which could hold anywhere from twenty to fifty people, depending on size. The housing arrangement

was decided by clan, which is passed down matrilineally; longhouses were inhabited by individual clans.[1] Villages were also surrounded by palisades made of small tree trunks, such as maple, which are shaved down and sharpened to a point at the top. This fortification provided basic protection for the village, which mainly housed women and children when most husbands, fathers and sons were hunting for long portions of the year. The housing configuration remained similar at Kahnawake in the eighteenth- century, forming what is now the heart of the Kahnawake community. The wood that would have only partially protected the community contrasts powerfully with the thick, strong stone used to protect the Fort.

Today, this area is a reminder of the past, and of the formation of a strong Mohawk community that has survived years of oppression due to colonization. Nevertheless, the 1754 plan of the Fort and village clearly indicates that this site made a powerful assertion of hegemony, placing the colonizer above the colonized in terms of spatial priority and safety. This statement is made visible not only in the difference in building material, but also in the physical division of the space, with the "important" persons – the Jesuit priests, soldiers and officers representing the French, and businessmen and fur traders – protected by the Fort wall. This area also must have appeared more indestructible, in comparison with the wooden villages which could easily burn down in a fire. The Mission church and surrounding buildings would have been protected in case of a siege; the same cannot be said for the Mohawk members of this settlement.

What was kept within the confines of the walls is just as important as what was contained in the surrounding village, which can be seen in the plan from 1754. The relationships of power

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[1] Darren Bonaparte's on-line collection of writings, *The Wampum Chronicles,* describes in detail the habitation traditions of the Iroquois people, including living arrangements, spiritual and political practice. For further information on the living traditions of the Iroquois, see Bonaparte, "The Mohawk Longhouse."

which existed in this arrangement set the tone for the consequent acts of colonization among the Mohawks.[2] The plan demonstrates how the physical arrangement of the Fort location within the Mohawk village created a visible separation that not only solidified the separation of classes and cultures, but was a spatialization of European patriarchal powers within this Native community, whose colonizers sought control over land, economy, faith and the lives of the people within. The colonized Mohawks were seen as inferior, and had even been referred to as having inferior building skills when it came to deciding who would ultimately help to build the actual Fort wall; it is as though the colonizing powers, those persuaded by either religious, economic, or military influence, did not want the Natives near this place. The area surrounded by the Fort, the Mission, church and army base, were mainly if not solely occupied by French missionaries and soldiers, along with some businessmen and *coureurs du bois* who had economic ties with the community. The Fort was, in short, the realm of the colonizer. Outside this area, to the east, is the "*Village du Sauvages Iroquois*," as it is indicated on the French-authored plan. The village was filled with hundreds of Mohawks, as well as persons from other First Nations, living in close quarters with dozens of family members.

Fort Saint Louis thus spatialized and made visible a separation of cultures, but Fort itself also made an architectural statement to visitors and residents, suggesting that the area contained within the Fort was much more important and thereby more powerful than the village just steps beyond.[3] The village, made of wood, stood in stark contrast with the large grey stone walls and

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[2] There is a similar situation in the planning and preservation of residential schools throughout Canada, as these sites bear the same stigma of colonial memory (Carr 92).

[3] Blomley explains the insertion of colonial powers, who practised the expulsion of native inhabitants, and possessed and allocated their land to European settlers in order for them to create new and independent communities and nations (such as the United States and Canada.) This was at the cost of driving out and nearly extinguishing whole communities, which was an underlying motive of the colonial project (Blomley 110-17).

buildings within it. The building methods as well as the skilled and hard labour associated with masonry, such as digging and transporting large stones, and cutting them down to size versus collecting and cutting trees, meant the construction of the Fort would have been far more costly than the village. Wood was considered as a potential building material for the Fort, during the early propositions of building the Fort, but the funders and planners thought this would be inferior, as it reflected the technology which the Mohawks were using to build their protective palisades (Devine 186). The labour of Natives was rejected as a labour resource for building the wall, although it is speculated that local labour, both French and Native, were used when the Fort was finally executed (Devine 186). The material and manner in which the Fort and its contents were built substantially reflected the power relationships between colonizer and colonized subjects; a mixing of the two materials, methods was avoided, just as social interaction was discouraged except during religious rites or business exchanges. The Jesuit missionaries feared that the soldiers occupying the Fort would bring intolerance and encourage drunkenness in the Native population; they also feared that the Mohawks would have a negative influence on the French soldiers and fur traders, and believed that these "civilized" men would turn "savage." Nevertheless, there was economic gain at stake for the French officials in both France and New France, and this is why the Fort was built at Kahnawake.

Reclaiming the site as our own

The British regime took power over the area in 1760, just six years after the completion of the Fort. By 1910, a large portion of the wall had already been dismantled (Fig. 3). This phase was likely completed during the British regime (1760-1820), and the fortifications subsequently

crumbled over the years of disuse. By the early-twentieth century, when the photograph shown in Figure 3 was taken, Kahnawake was mainly native in population but still controlled as a community by Indian Agents put in place by the Government of Canada. This control notwithstanding, the former Fort site was then re-purposed by the community according to their needs. It is speculated that this site (surrounding the church) was used at one time as fairgrounds and was often the site of church activity, beginning in the late-nineteenth century (Kanienkeha:ka Onkwenwennen Raotitohkhwa Cultural Center 9). This site is where a road was eventually built, and where Kateri School was constructed in the early 1950s. There were also many houses built in the Breton chateau style in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, using stone from local quarries much like the Saint Louis church and the Fort walls themselves. Many of these homes still stand today in the area surrounding the church known as the Village, which is the site of the original Mohawk village of 1716 and still bears resemblance to the close living quarters preferred before the road and the seaway were imposed upon the area (Fig. 4).[4] The remnants of the wall were eventually incorporated with the Church of Saint Francis Xavier Mission, rebuilt in 1845, while the original 1720 mission and officers' mess have been repurposed and expanded into a museum and church rectory, their modifications also built of similar, local stone.

The black arrows in Figure 4 show the direction of the growth of the Kahnawake community over the centuries. The church was rebuilt in 1845, and still remains on the original site. Green areas illustrate the original structures which were built alongside the wall during the French occupation. The reserve now borders the Saint Lawrence Seaway on the north, Saint

[4] The European structure of the town, which always stayed in one place, was completely different from the agrarian lifestyle the Mohawks lived before European and Christian influence (Blomley 120). Colonialism enforced a static nature upon native communities, separating them from their previous way of moving to the rhythms of seasonal change. The contested areas of land which the Mohawks of Kahnawake once inhabited at different times of year include the island of Montreal, the Laurentian Mountains, and areas along the Saint Lawrence river eastward to La Prairie, Quebec. Migration also led into eastern Ontario and most of New York State.

Catherine to the east, and Mercier and Chateauguay are found along the south-west borders. Land allotments are controlled by the interior Mohawk Council of Kahnawake, and most newer developments are in these new areas are not illustrated here. Red indicates the fragments of stone wall fortification that remain today. The wall on the north side is the main focus of this paper.

This plan also illustrates those pieces of land that were demolished or changed to make way for transportation: the roads in the nineteenth century, and the seaway construction in the 1950s. The outlying areas comprise a combination of residential and municipal buildings. Across from the church there is the Kateri School mentioned above, the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake, while several businesses and community centres are located in this area of Kahnawake, now known as the "Village" to most residents. The original village, seen in this plan, is still a village, and layouts of the lots here seem original to the plan (they are close together and close to the road) compared to newer lots beyond the "Village". Notably, the pieces of wall that survived are located on land that once belonged to the Church. There is a piece of wall, which can be seen in the new plan, that is located in the parking lot of Kateri School, built in the early 1950s, which was once a Catholic school for children in the community of Kahnawake. Other surrounding buildings have the Mohawk Council of Kahnawake, the Kahnawake Education Center, Kateri Hall, and the Youth Center. What the plan does not show is how the area has truly transformed into one which can finally belong to its community members.

What has happened to the meaning and purpose of the Fort walls since the early twentieth century? Today they are nearly hidden, seeming to blend in with their context. Several community members have memories of the wall being used as a playground, as something to jump from into surrounding snow or water, or just being a backdrop to their youth. Families may

walk by it when coming out of church service on Sunday morning, while artisans selling their beadwork and other traditional crafts would set up shop in the area, by the former Fort walls, as they were in the heart of the village and frequented by locals and visitors alike.[5] In the early- and mid-twentieth century, the remnants of the Fort did not seem to be an imposition on the community; its architectural and aesthetic qualities seemed to flow with what this area of the reserve had become, and was known to be.

The site in the twenty-first century...and beyond?

Today, only two sections of the fortification wall of Fort Saint Louis remain: the north wall behind the church facing the Saint Lawrence Seaway and a small strip separating the parking lot of Kateri School/Mohawk Council of Kahnawake Lands unit offices, which are located across the street from the church. Only the northern section seems to be culturally designated as a heritage site by Parks Canada; the only maintenance done by the group so far is cleaning of a bronze plaque, located on site, every one to two years. It is usually left to the responsibility of the Church of Saint Francis Xavier and community members for the maintenance of the church grounds, which includes the north end of the wall which remains. This is also the piece of wall that has seen the most change from the original site, and has been the target of vandalism for the last several decades (Fig. 5).

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[5] During the 1960s and 1970s, the Kahnawake Indian Village, which was built as a dance site and produced spectacles and sold crafts, was a popular tourist attraction in Kahnawake. This brought many visitors from outside the community to come to the reservation and explore Mohawk culture, as well as visit the Church of Saint Francis Xavier and surrounding area. The creation of this space, in turn, attracted many local artisans to the site who took advantage of this opportunity to sell their crafts (Loft, email to the author).

In the 1970s, Deacon Ronald Boyer, an Ojibwa clergy member who resides in Kahnawake, had a steel platform installed on top of the wall behind the church (Rice). Prior to this addition, a garage was installed on this section of the wall (Fig. 6). During weekday business hours and during church services, this is where visitors usually park their vehicles. But during the past generation, the youth of Kahnawake have claimed this piece of the wall as their own, once the sun goes down and the area is quiet and dark. Many youth recall underage drinking, drug use, general loitering, climbing or sitting on the wall, as well as vandalism, including throwing rocks at the church and spray-painting profanities, cartoons, or signature "tags" on the wall's surface.[6] Some would even use the site, which provides a direct view to passing cargo ships traversing the Seaway from April to November, to express their anger against and feelings of distrust for the Canadian government, the state of life on the reservation, and First Nations class struggles, as well as opposing the capitalist implications of the Seaway having divided a stretch of land whose previous integrity is still in the living memory of many Kahnawakero:non.

In 2009, a community effort to remove graffiti on local buildings targeted the Fort and church walls as a primary concern. Mostly cleaned by a handful of volunteers associated with the nearby Saint Francis Xavier Mission, who seem to be the only group in the community concerned with tending to the wall. The wall is a popular youth hang-out and site of collective expression for teenagers. While this wiping away of the youth's claiming of the area and the wall as their own social and political space occurs every few years, the wall remains a persistent site of resistance. And what better site they could they have chosen in the community than one of the

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[6] In graffiti, "tagging" is when the artist, or "writer" quickly writes or sprays his or her street alias. The tag or signature can be made anywhere; no special location is preferred. The alias serves to hide their true identity. This gesture can be made at any scale, and is understood to mark territory and assert power. Anna Waclawek describes the practice in the introduction to her doctoral dissertation (2). See also 159.

oldest structures remaining in Kahnawake, one that is a symbol and a reality of the colonial powers which once oppressed Kahnawakero:non, now standing as a reminder and a relic of that past. The wall, seemingly belonging to the church, brings about the anger of community members for the institutions of church and state, which threatened a community because of their race and culture. The Catholic Church, which used religious missions to oppress and control Native populations through assimilation, was just one facet of the colonial project which was unfolding in North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, yet they remain alive within the community today. Although the Catholic population has dwindled and church attendance is at an all-time low, the area still remains a Catholic property. It is also a popular pilgrimage site for North American and European Catholics, as the Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, a Mohawk woman who died at the age of twenty-four in 1680, is well-known in the Catholic community, and her remains are entombed in the Church of Saint Francis Xavier.[7] So in this manner, in attracting visitors to Kahnawake and the Village area each year, the Church still has some sort of power on the reserve, even if only a fraction of the community considers themselves Catholic. This makes the presence of the Church of Saint Francis Xavier Mission and the Fort wall surrounding the site an ambivalent one. For some, it is a thorn in the side of the community, even if the architecture itself does not generate much concern to Kahnawake. Social and economic development is at the top of the council chiefs' agendas, so the site remains in an ambiguous state of limbo.

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[7] Darren Bonaparte has written extensively on the Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. Also see Fleming's thesis, which goes further in depth into the history of the Saint Francis Xavier Mission.

Conclusion

In my research about Fort Saint Louis, I have traced the colonial footprint of this site, showing it to be a remainder and a reminder of European stronghold on the Aboriginal community from the mid-seventeenth century until 1860 and into our own times. What now remains are ruins, which serve to recall these oppressive, conflicted times. Although the actual Fort structure has changed form over the years, it continues to exist implicitly in the community. Stairs leading up to the north portion of the wall, long a site of vandalism and teenage rebellion, were blocked to public access in 2006 (Fig. 7). The former use of the structure, for both play and rebellion, have thus been curbed, but the secluded space created by the remnants of the wall still serve teenagers, who themselves have to try to be "invisible" to access it. The fight against vandalism, including graffiti, has made community youth a target for authorities, and so a site that once discouraged native use and access has once again become forbidden to young community members. The purpose this wall serves today is barely structural; aside from the parking garage added to the north wall, or the parking lot markers which the southern remnants serve, Kahnawake has no real structural use for the Fort walls today. But when it comes to holding on to a memory of a past which would more readily be forgotten by the colonizers than the colonized, the wall serves as a reminder and a witness; it has survived through the changes that occurred in the community, and has seen the struggles and resilience of its people. To destroy it would mean to wipe the slate clean of the history that occurred during the colonial era in a Canadian "Indian" reservation. Yet the current state of ambiguity fails to do justice to the history the wall has participated in, and this is unacceptable in terms of the future of the site, and

the education of the public, both inside and outside of the Mohawk community. The remnants of the wall are a symbol of the struggles of a nation, and mark an ongoing turbulent relationship between the Mohawk community and colonizing powers which remain in Canada today. Its history must be acknowledged as all histories, especially oppressive ones, need to be told. And although now the care of the wall is left to few elderly Church members, it should be left to the future generations, who need to be further educated in understanding their own historical, spatial circumstances, in order to move forward within their own territory.

Figures

Fig. 1 A portion of the north wall of the Fort Saint Louis, Kahnawake, 2009, showing the bronze plaque denoting the wall as a historic site.
Digital photograph: Wahsontiio Cross.

Fig. 2 Plan of the Fort of Saint Louis, 1754. M. Chaussegros de Lery, engineer. Saint Francis Xavier Mission Archives, published in Edward James Devine, *Historic Caughnawaga* (Montreal: The Messenger Press, 1922) 208.

Fig. 3 Children at remains of fortification wall, Kahnawake, 1910.
Photograph: Joseph-Amédée Dumas. Silver-salts on paper mounted on card, Albumen process.
12cm x 16cm. Courtesy of Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum, MP-0000.115.7

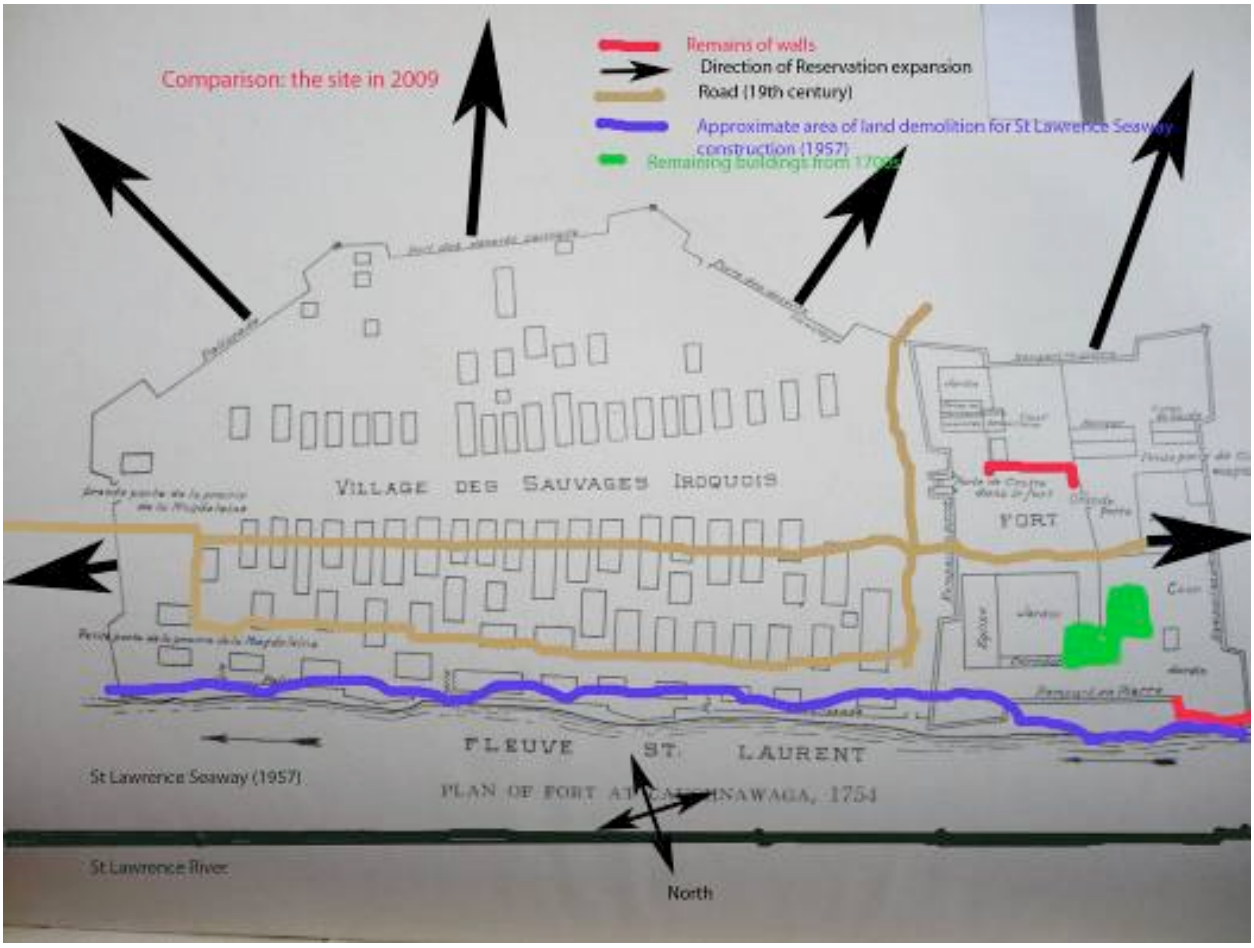

Fig. 4 Plan comparing land use in 1754 and in 2009.
Modifications to 1754 plan: Wahsontiio Cross.

Fig. 5 Graffiti on the north wall of the Fort remnants, 2009.
Digital photograph: Wahsontiio Cross.

Fig. 6 Garage modifications and steel platform added to the wall circa 1970s, 2009. Digital photograph: Wahsontiio Cross.

Fig. 7 Detail of stairs located next to garage, 2009.
Digital photograph: Wahsontiio Cross.

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