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Description

The Atwater Library and Montreal Island seniors construct a Living History Collection

By Wanda Potrykus

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"...Of (all) the works of the mind history is the record. Its genius is illustrated by the entire series of days. Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history. Without hurry, without rest, the human spirit goes forth from the beginning to embody every faculty, every thought, every emotion, which belongs to it in appropriate events. But the thought is always prior to the fact; all the facts of history pre-exist in the mind as laws... A man is the whole encyclopaedia of facts. The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn, and Egypt, Greece, Rome, Gaul, Britain, America, lie folded already in the first man."

History Essay, Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1841

Repository of tales from everyman (and woman)

The halls of the venerable [Atwater Library](#) were humming in those days of 2018, in particular in the Digital Literacy (aka Creative Media) Lab on the top floor where a small group of senior citizens were busy learning and improving their technology skills to allow them to create the nexus of a **Living History Collection** focusing on the geographic area surrounding the library.

Formerly known as the Mechanics Institute of Montreal, with its roots in the 1828 Montreal Mechanics' Institution and with an initial mandate to improve reading, arts and technological skills for English and French working men, the [Atwater Library](#) (Canada's oldest lending library) has constantly sought over the years to redefine its mission in line with the changing needs of its clientele and its surrounding environment.



Atwater Library – Image: Frédéric Ryan – instagram (@feddomtl)

At the dawn of the computer age in the 1980s this included the establishment of one of the first public access computer centres, to provide a safe and secure environment in which adults of all ages could have access to communication technology as well as improve their reading, research and technology skills at a no, low or reasonable cost. Today it offers a wide range of computer and technology courses as well as the hourly rental of PCs plus Internet access to users of all kinds, including students, visitors, street people, and refugees and migrants from the Y hostel next door.

The Living History initiative is just one of a long line of projects undertaken by a myriad of different groups at this heritage building located at the abutment of, or crossroad to, several disparate but fascinating areas on Montreal island, which makes it ideal location for creating and curating a living history collection.

Why a Living History Collection?

It is now well documented that humans learn in a variety of ways, some verbal, some visual, some auditory, some non-auditory, some tactile, and in the 21st century we have a variety of tools to help expand our knowledge and contribute to a greater understanding of ourselves and the world we live in. Audio, video, photography, mementos, written transcripts as well as books all help us to learn.

Unique voices of a time past

Not all of us become famous in our lifetime and the majority may never even wish to, but ordinary people, no matter who, have a life story, and this Living History Collection will allow some of them to share memories, recollections, insights and tales of a time past with current and future generations of Montrealers, Quebecers,

Canadians, visitors, students, social historians, artists, the public; basically whosoever chooses to pick up a pair of headphones to watch or listen.

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Many of those interviewed are the very people who would never ordinarily make it into standard academic history books or research papers but whose existence is no less vital to our understanding of who we are and where we have come from. The collection's existence, it is hoped, will encourage others to come and share more stories with the rest of us. Ordinary people we may be, but our stories are riveting simply because we are, each one of us, unique and no story is the same, no vision identical.



Atwater Park with what is now Dawson CEGEP in the background – Image: Public domain

Exceptional geographical, historical and dynamic location

The Atwater Library as a site for a Living History Collection is exceptional because:

- The library is located at 1200 Atwater Avenue opposite Cabot Square (formerly known as Western Square or Park), which 100 plus years ago was the western edge of the City of Montreal, abutting the small city of Westmount to the west, the southern flank of Mount Royal to north, the Shaughnessy and downtown district of Montreal to the east, Little Burgundy, Griffintown and Pointe-St-Charles to the south-east, and St-Henri, Verdun, Ville Emard, Cote-St-Paul and the shores of the St. Lawrence to the south and south-west.

‘... the Atwater library, unlike most municipal libraries, serves members, groups and visitors from a wide variety of demographic areas both on and off the island of Montreal...’

- As a privately-funded community resource, the Atwater library, unlike most municipal libraries, serves members, groups and visitors from a wide variety of demographic areas both on and off the island of Montreal, and even houses some of them, including the Quebec Writers Federation, which leases space in the building. And if anyone wishes to become a member, to take out books and DVDs, etc, library membership cost is minimal, ranging from \$10 for three months up to a maximum of \$35 for a full year. People aged 60+ pay only \$20 a year.

- As of 2017, the immediate area surrounding the library is going through another series of major disruptions and changes, creating yet more upheavals for residents, workers, visitors and those just passing through.

The 5 Rs of urban renewal: Reconfigure, Renovate, Repurpose, Redesign, Rebuild

Some of the wide ranging past, ongoing and future changes the area contiguous to the library has undergone include:



Le Grand Seminaire c 1840 – Public Domain

- Looking eastwards, the area between Atwater Ave., Sherbrooke St., Bishop St. and the Escarpment St-Jacques, the ‘falaise’ or cliff located south of René-Lévesque, is called the Quartier des grands jardins, because of the former vast religious properties with farms and expansive gardens, such as the former Grey Nuns’ Mother House at René-Lévesque and Guy St., now part of the downtown campus of Concordia University and the [Grand Seminaire](#) property (aka [Fort de la Montagne](#)/Fort Belmont/Fort des Messieurs), site of a huge Sulpician farm and a First Nations mission village dating from c.1670.

Today, this description can be deemed as somewhat ironic since the farms and orchards have been built on and most of the gardens that still exist are small and private and the public does not have access to them. In fact, there are only 0.6 hectares (one and a half acres) of green space per 1,000 residents, while the recommended amount is four hectares (10 acres) per 1,000 residents. Indeed, most of the City of Montreal falls a good 50% below that recommendation since the average in our metropolis is only two hectares per 1,000 residents, and much of that is not evenly distributed. In addition, this neighbourhood, which saw its population grow by 16 per cent from 2006 to 2011 is slated, with all the new condo developments, to receive an estimated 8,990+ new residents over the next few years with no new common infrastructure, such as medical clinics, schools, parks, etc, as yet planned to support that influx.



Shaughnessy House / CCA – Image: CCA

• [Shaughnessy House](#), the historic 1874 greystone mansion, on the corner of Fort Street, was formerly two semi-detached private ‘country’ residences surrounded by gardens and orchards, which was converted over the years to one large house then to a hospital, a nurses’ home, a convent, and finally a destitute women’s shelter. It was vacant and boarded up for a number of years, and saved from demolition in 1974 by Montreal architect Phyllis Lambert. From 1985-89 it was repurposed, work that included the demolition and modifications of sections along with new construction, to create the [Canadian Centre for Architecture](#), with its whimsical modernistic sculpture park and garden across Rene Levesque on the [Esplanade Ernest Cormier](#), which is located on the belvedere overlooking the 720 autoroute with the remains of industrial Montreal below and the St Lawrence River in the distance.

Also across the street to the west, is the site of the former Franciscan church and priory built in 1893 and lost in 2010 to fire that is now being replaced by two 60 metre (20 storey) condo towers, which will over shadow two 1850 and 1874 heritage mansions (the Judah and Masson houses), whose gardens have also now disappeared, in spite of local residents’ pleas to have the area surrounding them converted into much needed neighbourhood [public access green space](#).



The Western Hospital – Public Domain

• To the west, the area immediately adjacent to the library, encompasses the site of the former Montreal Women’s Hospital, dating from 1870, which later became the Women’s General Hospital, and in 1945 was

renamed yet again becoming the Herbert Reddy Memorial hospital. When it closed in 1997, the building was repurposed into a hostel for Northern Quebec Inuit and First Nations undergoing treatment in Montreal hospitals, and is now a Refugee and Migrant hostel administered by the YMCA as well as offices for the Batshaw Youth and Family Services organization, whose principal building is a block south in Weredale Park.

Meanwhile the Western Hospital (founded in 1873 and subsequently renamed the Western General hospital) was located just across Atwater Avenue on Tupper and Essex streets. While its services became part of the Montreal General hospital further up the mountain, its buildings were absorbed into the Montreal Children's hospital complex in 1955, the huge campus of which is now being demolished in its entirety to build six multi-storey, mixed-use 32+ storey tower blocks, which will dramatically and visually change the neighbourhood yet again; as well as blocking sunlight from the neighbouring residences and Place Hector Toe Blake and Place Henri Dunant, the two small green spaces to the east of the development. Even though developers have committed to equipping Place Hector Toe Blake with children's play equipment structures, and combining these two space spaces in one, residents are not mollified. "More green space not less", they protest.

- North, across Cabot Square from the Montreal Children's Square construction site is the former hallowed North American hockey shrine, the legendary [Montreal Forum](#), which itself replaced a previous popular roller and ice skating rink in the 1920s, and which, after the move of Montreal Canadiens hockey team further east to the new Molson (now Bell) Centre in the 1990s, was renamed the Pepsi-Forum. Sadly, it still seems in need of a renewed mandate, and although billing itself as an entertainment complex, it's not quite the bustling "go to" venue it once was; and although you can still visit and even stand on "centre ice", it's somewhat of an unsettling experience, at least to those of us that remember the atmosphere and excitement of the "old Forum".



Montreal Forum in the 1930s – Public Domain

- Facing it is the Alexis-Nihon shopping mall, apartment towers and office buildings that replaced apartment buildings and a baseball park, originally called the Montreal Baseball Field, where the Montreal Royals first played, and which later became known as Atwater Park. Its neighbour along de Maisonneuve Boulevard was and still is the grandiose former Congregation Notre Dame convent and Mother House secretarial school dating from 1908 that in the 1988 became the site of Dawson College, Montreal's largest CEGEP, which moved from

its previous location between St Antoine and Selby streets in Westmount (a site that is, currently, also being repurposed as a residential condo building).

- Urban renewal initiatives have also extended to the western end of St Catherine Street, whose shabby storefronts are long overdue a face-lift. Located here are the iconic black towers of the Mies van der Rohe designed Westmount Square apartment, office and shopping mall complex constructed between 1964-67, the owners of which have been recently trying (and so far failing) to do some repurposing of their own. In addition, the City of Westmount is planning to reconfigure and redevelop part of its southwest section that includes the area from Clarke to Atwater, between Dorchester and Tupper, currently an urban boulevard and a motley collection of parking lots dating from a somewhat unsuccessful 1960s urban renewal project that, in retrospect, detracted from rather than added to the neighbourhood.



Westmount Square – Image: Andrew Burlone

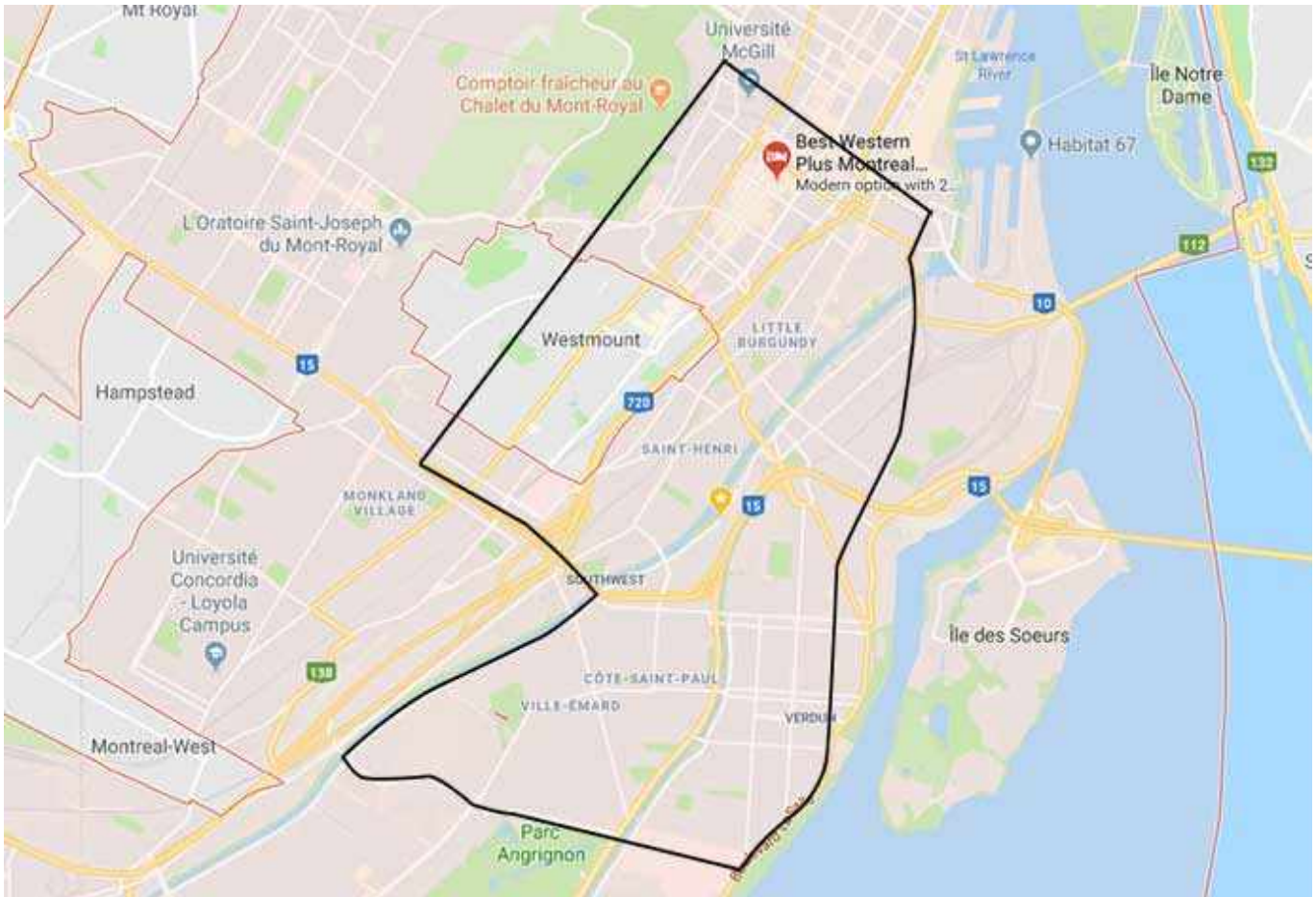
- Meanwhile, the Quebec Ministry of Transport is rebuilding the A-720 as part of the multi-year Turcot roadway interchange redevelopment project, lowering the western end of it to create an urban highway (renamed National Highway or Route 136) instead of an elevated autoroute; although of late the Quebec Ministry of Transport has reneged on its original 2008 plans that also called for it to lower it at the eastern end as well, so as to reduce noise levels for [affected residents](#). This massive project has significantly disrupted the area once again, moving yet more people and businesses and obliterating in the process what was left of the 18th century historic [Village des Tanneries](#) in St Henri as well as the former Selby Street in Westmount, most of which had already been destroyed when the autoroute was originally constructed some 50 years ago in preparation for Expo 67, and which also destroyed homes, churches and community life further east in Little Burgundy.

Thus, as you can see, this portion of the area under study has already undergone so many transformations over the years, displacing people and lives and livelihoods, with more yet to come, which helped make it one of the most compelling reasons why the seniors chose to focus their efforts on discovering stories connected to this

dynamic and fascinating area of Montreal island.

Geographic focus of stories

The approximate geographic area, therefore, for the initial collection of stories has as its heart the Atwater Library building at 1200 Atwater Avenue, then stretches north as far as the southern flank of Mount Royal, east to the former University Street (now renamed rue Robert-Bourassa), then south to Wellington St. and Lasalle Blvd, and finally west to Decarie Blvd on the eastern edges of NDG, and southwest as far as Agrignon Park in Ville Emard and rue de l'Eglise in Verdun. In consequence, the potential for story gathering is endless and only limited by the capacity of the seniors to research and capture the stories for posterity.



Approximate area of Living History Collection focus

A permanent collection linking Montrealers to their past, present and future

The Living History Collection will serve as a link between the past, present and future of this demographically diverse section of Montreal that includes western downtown, Shaughnessey Village, Griffintown, Little Burgundy, Pointe-St-Charles, Saint-Henri, Ville Émard, Côte-St-Paul, eastern Verdun, eastern NDG and Westmount. It will also act as a foundation and as a dynamic gift of knowledge from those who came before to future generations wishing to understand a little more of their world and some of the changes undergone by the land under their feet.

Further updates and the public access launch date



Check on the [Atwater Library website](#) for more snapshots and updates on this vibrant Living History Collection project

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Feature image: *Village des Tanneries* – Alexander Henderson – Public Domain



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