

HERITAGE TRAIL



MONTREAL BROADCASTING PIONEERS 1919-1945

This heritage trail will introduce you to some of the historic places of radio broadcasting in Montreal.

Two routes are proposed: Circuit 1 will take you mainly through the streets of Old Montreal. Circuit 2 takes place in downtown Montreal as well as in the southwest districts of the city. Each circuit is about 5 kilometers.

XWA was the first radio station in Canada. It began transmitting experimental broadcasts in December 1919 from its location on William Street in Montreal. In May 1920, members of the Royal Society of Canada, meeting in congress in Ottawa, had the opportunity to hear a brief recital and speeches transmitted from Montreal. This was a first in the country, an achievement that made the front page of all the newspapers!

The year 2020 marks the 100th anniversary of broadcasting in Canada. The Musée des ondes Emile Berliner and the Société Québécoise des Collectionneurs de Radios Anciens (SQCRA) have joined forces with other institutions in the Montreal region to highlight this event.

HOW TO USE

If you do not use a smart mobile phone or a tablet, you can print the maps and descriptions of the circuit in PDF format and take them with you.

With a smart device, you can follow the circuit using the online interactive map and the electronic version of the descriptions.



XWA

1014 William St.

To the left of 1015 William Street, where Shannon Street ends, once stood the building that housed the first broadcasting studio in Canada. So this is where it all started!

The Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co moves there in 1914 to manufacture wireless telegraphy equipment. During the First World War, this is where telegraph operators are trained. After the war, the experimental station XWA belonging to MWTC carries out radiotelephone tests. In the fall of 1919, a 500-watt transmitter, from the British subsidiary of Marconi is installed.

Regular radio transmissions begin broadcasting from this location on December 1919, but only for a few hours a week! Over the next two years XWA is the only Canadian radio station, yet the few listeners at the time can also receive transmissions from a growing number of American stations. In November 1920, XWA announces 'concerts' via 'wireless telephone', which in fact are discs played on a mechanical gramophone placed near the microphone. The workers of the station said that it was pleasant to smell the chocolate that came from the Lowney factory located next door, at the 1015.

The Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co of Canada occupied several buildings in Montreal in the early 20th century.



SHAUGHNESSY BUILDING

401 McGill St.

The Shaughnessy Building, inaugurated in 1912, takes its name from Sir Thomas Shaughnessy, then President of the Canadian Pacific Railway. At the beginning of the 20th century, he acquired a property located on McGill Street, where two hotels had been erected a few months earlier.

This ten-story building was designed to meet the transportation and communication management needs of the CPR railway company. The Canadian National company also occupied part of the building between 1929 and 1980. In the early 20th century, the railway companies had a very impressive wired telegraph network. It is therefore not surprising that Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co, specializing in wireless telegraphy, set up offices on the fifth floor of the Shaughnessy building in 1914 and remained there until the end of the First War. Nearby, the headquarters of the Grand Trunk, another railway company, were located at 360 McGill Street.

Let's go now to 276 Saint-Jacques Street, a place where the first tests of wireless telephony took place





FREEMAN'S HOTEL

276 Saint-Jacques St.

The building you see at 276 Saint-Jacques Street shows the inscription Insurance Exchange Building.

This is where the Freeman Hotel, a popular location for business people, was located in the 1910s. In 1919, you could rent a room there for \$1.50, breakfast included! The publicity said that the hotel was conveniently located in the business district, with Saint-Jacques Street being the financial center of Canada. Proof of this are some neighbouring buildings such as the Molson Bank, right next door, and the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, opposite to the hotel. Also, this hotel was closely located to the nearby railway stations and ferry terminal.

In March 1919, the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co of Canada showed to a group of business people the possibilities offered by the radiotelephone. With the transmitter located on William Street, they showed that it is possible to communicate by radio between two points without using wires. At that time, there were hopes to convince paper companies to buy radiotelephones for communication between the head office and distant sites. The Montreal Gazette of March 22, 1919, reports on this event.

The Freeman Hotel was demolished around 1923 and a large part of the block was rebuilt to make way for the Insurance Exchange Building which opened in 1924. With more than 20,000 square meters of office space, the Insurance Exchange was one of the largest office buildings in Montreal. It has eleven floors, one more than the limit set by the old building code that ended up being modified in 1924.

Now let us go to one of the most famous buildings in Old Montreal,



LE DEVOIR BUILDING

211 Saint-Sacrement St.

The daily Le Devoir occupied this building for 20 years, between 1972 and 1992. During this time, the newspaper, founded by Henri Bourassa, was managed by Claude Ryan, who later became leader of the Liberal Party of Quebec. Under his leadership, the newspaper bought the imposing building not far from the former Montreal Stock Exchange. It is this image of Le Devoir that a large part of Quebecers have: an official-looking building made of large blocks of stone, immutable, solid, sheltered from storms...

The newspaper, which Mr. Ryan ran as a tight ship, lived its glory days in this location. Its influence on the decision-making of the public was considerable. It was public knowledge that the high and mighty would seek to speak to the director of Le Devoir before he wrote his editorials.

Le Devoir Building continued

Other leaders came after him, including Jean-Louis Roy and Lise Bissonnette. Le Devoir experienced significant events at this address, such as the major technological changeover to the use of computers, and most notably the armed attack against journalist Jean-Pierre Charbonneau in the middle of the newsroom during his investigation on organized crime.

This building has a varied history. Initially built for the Merchants Exchange and Reading Room in 1867, it hosted the Montreal Stock Exchange between 1883 and 1904, before it moved to a new building on Saint-François-Xavier Street (where the Centaur Theatre is today). The building on 211 Saint-Sacrement Street also bore the name of Marconi Building, as can be seen in some vintage photos. In fact, the company Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co owned it for three decades, starting in 1919.

The MWTC company headquarters were located in this location until 1930, the year of the inauguration of an office and factory building on Trenton Street in Ville Mont-Royal. The company nevertheless remained the owner of the building on Saint-Sacrement Street until 1950.



With the participation of the
Government of Canada



FIRST HEADQUARTERS OF THE MARCONI WIRELESS TELEGRAPH CO OF CANADA

200 Notre-Dame west

In December 1901, Guglielmo Marconi successfully sets up wireless telegraph communication between England and Newfoundland. After this feat, he was invited to establish a business in Canada by the government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier. In 1902, Marconi built a transatlantic telegraph station at Glace Bay in Nova Scotia. The following year the company Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co of Canada was incorporated and its head office was established in Montreal, in the British Empire building, located at the corner of Notre-Dame and Saint-François-Xavier streets (200 rue Notre-Dame west), where it remained until 1913. The head office of the MWTC later moved to the Shaughnessy building on McGill St. and, in 1919, to 211 Saint-Sacrement Street.

It should be noted that the company occupied other premises to manufacture telegraphy equipment and, eventually, radios. In 1909, the first manufacturing plant was established on De Lorimier Street between Tansley and Sainte-Catherine streets, just below the current Jacques-Cartier bridge. In 1922, the manufacturing was moved to the building on William Street, the location where we started this trail.

In the early 1920s, the MWTC also owned the retail businesses named Scientific Experimenter. They sold radios already assembled as well as all the necessary components to build one. One branch was in Toronto and the other in Montreal approximately where we now find the BNP building (1981 McGill College Street).



CKAC

7 Saint-Jacques St.

The newspaper La Presse occupied this building since the summer of 1900. At that time, the newspaper's offices were located on the second and third floors, while the presses were installed in the basement. Other tenants, including lawyers and insurance agents, occupied part of the ground floor and the first floor. In May 1922, the Government of Canada granted the first commercial operating permits to several radio stations, including eight in Quebec. The daily La Presse shortly after announced that it will have its own radio station, CKAC. In collaboration with Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co, it undertook the construction of the most powerful broadcasting antenna in America on the roof of the building on Saint-Jacques Street. The contemporary press said that "Soon, the La Presse building will be surmounted by high pylons and powerful antennas."

During the weeks following the announcement of CKAC, the newspaper presented its readers with the various building stages of the station, which starts broadcasting officially on September 30, 1922. Shortly after the inauguration, film actors like Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks were invited to the studio which housed a grand piano, a standard set up at the time. In early 1923, a Casavant electric organ was also installed. CKAC and CFCF (XWA's successor) even shared an orchestra of some twenty musicians since in the early 1920s music was sang and played live!

For several years, CKAC was the benchmark for French-language radio in America.

It is not, however, the first French-speaking station in America. This title goes to CJBC, property of the Dupuis Frères department store. CJBC started broadcasting in June 1922 but stopped operating less than a year after its inauguration for unknown reasons.



CFCF

606 Cathcart St.

The head office of the Canada Cement company, located at 606 Cathcart Street, was inaugurated in the spring of 1922. The building has 10 floors and its front is divided into three very distinct sections. The first floor has high windows. Floors three to eight are more sober. The last two floors mark a new break in the rhythm of the facade and offer grand architectural decoration.

After the inauguration of the building, the CFCF station moved to the 10th floor, office 1047. This was the commercial station of Marconi Wireless Telegraph that followed after XWA, Marconi's experimental station on 1017 William Street. The antennas were installed on the roof of the building on Cathcart Street, but in order to maintain the aesthetics of the new building, the pylons were not to be visible from the street. CFCF's studio was equipped with standing microphones and walls covered with drapes for better sound. There was also a gramophone (electric record players are not yet invented) and a grand piano. Small orchestras are invited to perform in the studio.

The CFCF studio would remain in this building until 1927. The station will then relocate to the Mont-Royal Hotel, on Peel Street.



CHLP

1155 Metcalfe St.

Like many other radio stations, CHLP was created by a newspaper, the daily La Patrie. This station began broadcasting operations on December 31, 1932, and it would remain on the air until 1957. Since its inception, CHLP was located on the ground floor of the Sun Life Building, where it remained until the year it stopped operating. After the daily La Presse acquired La Patrie, it became unnecessary to maintain two radio stations (CHLP and CKAC).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Sun Life Building was said to be the largest in the British Empire. The first part of the building was inaugurated in 1918, but it only had 7 floors. Until 1924, it was forbidden to build buildings in Montreal of more than ten stories. Because of this regulation, architects had to wait until 1930 before they could build the central part of the structure, which is 26 stories high.

The history of the building is rich in every sense of the word. One remarkable example of it's importance is the fact that its vaults were used as storage to protect valuables of several countries during the Second World War!



CKAC

980 St. Catherine St. west

Owned by the newspaper La Presse since its inauguration in 1922, the CKAC station underwent major changes in 1929.

A more powerful transmitter was installed in Saint-Hyacinthe, replacing the one on Saint-Jacques Street. The broadcasting power went from 2,000Watts to 5,000Watts. Originally, since their creation in 1922, CKAC and CFCF shared the same frequency. But in 1929, CKAC obtained its own frequency at 730 KHz, frequency at which they still broadcast today. Meanwhile, CFCF transmitted at 1030 KHz.

The studio at CKAC station also moved in 1929, from Saint-Jacques Street to the sixth floor of this building on Saint-Catherine, which was once a branch of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. The station remained here until 1963 when it moved nearby to 1400 Metcalfe Street.

ORGANIZERS



MUSÉE DES ONDES **EMILE BERLINER**





CFCF

Mount Royal Hotel, 1555 Peel St.

During its first five years of existence, the CFCF studio was installed in the Canada Cement Building, on Cathcart Street. In 1927, the station moved to the top floor of the Mont-Royal Hotel to establish a real studio with the most modern equipment.

This hotel had been inaugurated with great fanfare in December 1922 in front of a crowd of more than 1,000 people. The architectural firm for the Mount-Royal Hotel was Ross and Macdonald, the same firm that designed Ottawa's Laurier Castle. When completed, the hotel had over 1,000 rooms, each with a private bathroom. It was said to be the largest hotel in the entire British Empire.

The idea of installing a radio studio on the top floor of the building had significant advantages. At the time, it was common for radio stations to have musicians in the studio or to broadcast music from concert halls or dance halls. On the ninth floor, the hotel had a banquet hall that could accommodate 2000 people as well as a ballroom. The hotel thus became an extension of the radio studio.

The CFCF station will move again in 1931 to settle at 1231 Sainte-Catherine St. West.

Circuit 1

