

Maison Alphonse-Desjardins

Where it all began



ISBN: 978-2-9819371-3-1

Legal deposit – Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, 2022

Legal deposit – Library and Archives Canada, 2022

Les Éditions Dorimène

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Maison Alphonse-Desjardins

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as Maison
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FAMILY TREE

**Alphonse
Desjardins**
1854-1920



**Dorimène
Desjardins**
1858-1932



**Raoul
Desjardins**
1880-1951



**Anne-Marie
Desjardins**
1881-1929



**Edgar
Desjardins**
1882-1944



**Alice
Desjardins**
1884-1892



**Alphonse
Desjardins**
1886-1892



**Adrienne
Desjardins**
1888-1965



**Albertine
Desjardins**
1891-1968



**Paul
Desjardins**
1893-1958



**Léon
Desjardins**
1897-1904



**Charles
Desjardins**
1902-1973



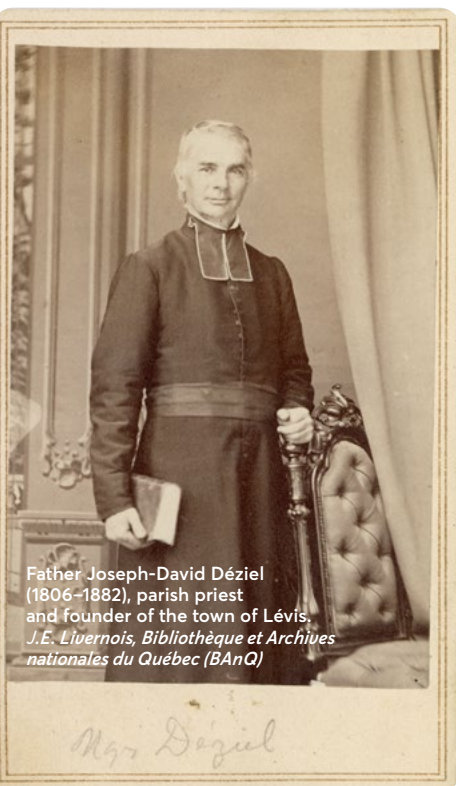
Maison Alphonse-Desjardins today.
Stéphanie Allard, Desjardins Group Archives

Maison Alphonse-Desjardins has been an enduring witness to the life and times of Lévis, where it has stood for nearly 150 years. Once a private home, it now welcomes thousands of visitors from around the world.

The location is famous because it's here, in part, that plans were first laid to create a financial cooperative movement and, from 1900 to 1906, it housed the very first caisse. It was also here that the Desjardins couple and their 10 children spent much of their family life.

A house, a community

In 1850, the parish of Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire, which would become the town of Lévis 11 years later, was founded by Father Joseph-David Déziel. A group of property owners donated a portion of their land near the current location of Maison Alphonse-Desjardins to build Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire Church.



A parade of military ships in 1867 with Lévis in the background.
Louis-Prudent Vallée, Desjardins Group Archives



In 1826, John Caldwell had a map drawn up tracing the first streets of what he would call Ville d'Aubigny. The site, which had some 40 dwellings, a hotel and an episcopal church in 1832, later became Lévis.

Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ)

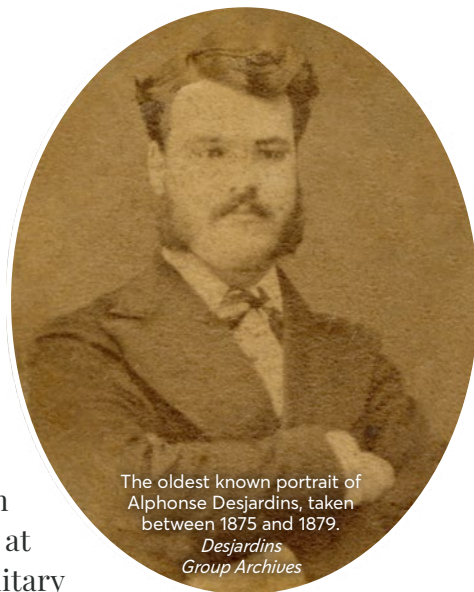
Urban development spread out from this place of worship. Schools were built nearby, Collège de Lévis for boys and Notre-Dame-de-Toutes-Grâces Convent for girls. In 1854, the arrival of the first railway brought prosperity—the town became the main link between Quebec City and the railway network until the construction of the Quebec Bridge.



Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire Church in 1870. The neoclassical stone building was built between 1851 and 1852 and expanded twice between 1854 and 1896. It's the biggest and best-preserved example of the Thomas Baillairgé school of architecture. *Louis-Prudent Vallée, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ)*

The first owners of the house: the Desjardins family

Alphonse Desjardins was born in the parish on November 5, 1854. He came from a family of 15 children, 7 of whom would die in early childhood. The Desjardins family eked out a living. Despite financial problems, Alphonse began studying at Collège de Lévis, but had to leave at age 15 to help support his family. A brief military career as a sergeant major led him to the Red River in Manitoba.

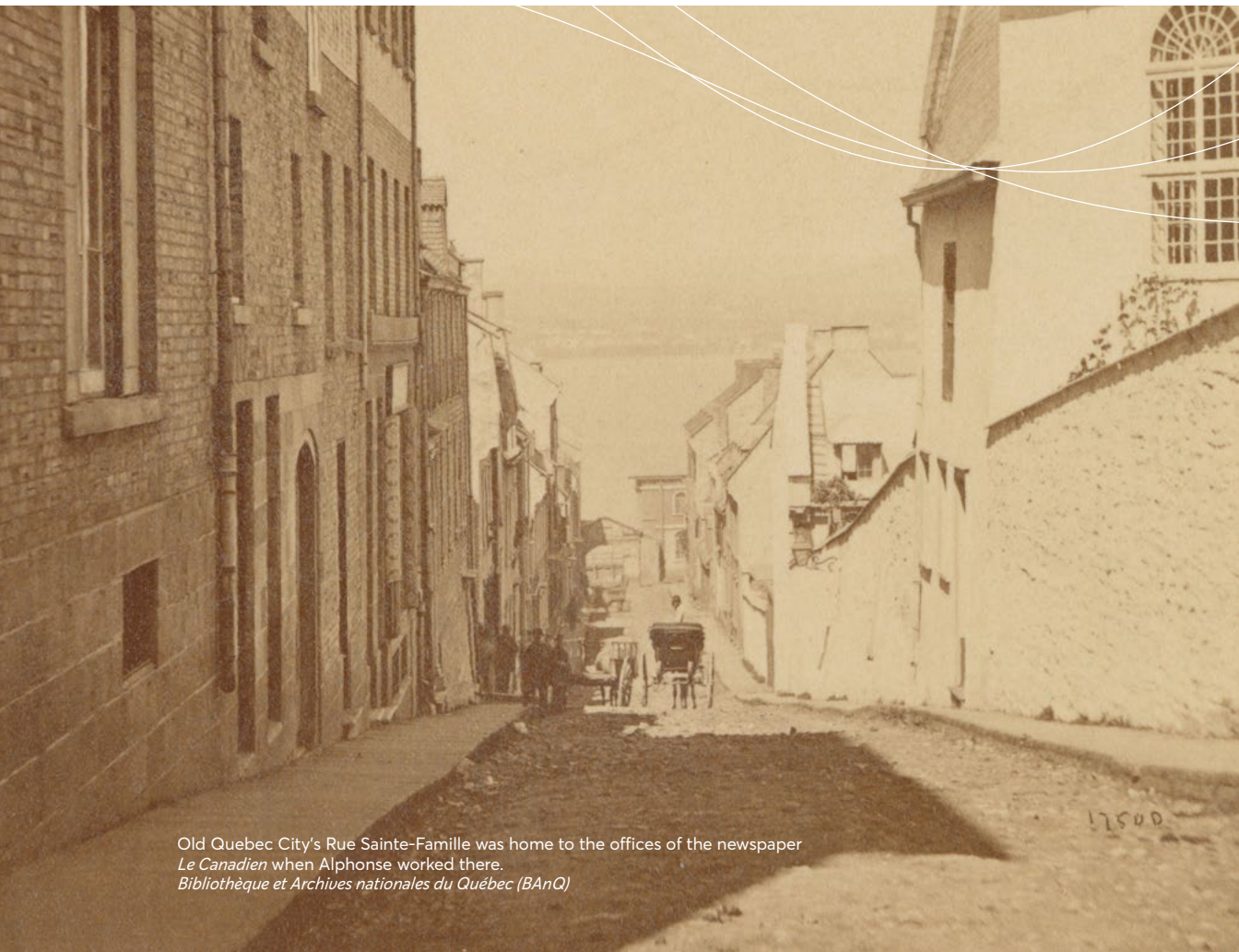


The oldest known portrait of Alphonse Desjardins, taken between 1875 and 1879.
Desjardins Group Archives



Collège de Lévis circa 1885. Alphonse and several of his sons went to the school. *Louis-Prudent Vallée, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec collection, donated by the Michel Lessard collection. Photographer: Denis Legendre*

When he returned to Lévis, he began a career as a journalist. He worked for *Le Canadien*, a newspaper co-owned by his brother Louis-Georges Desjardins. Alphonse's experience and commitments led him to serve as reporter for the debates of the Legislative Assembly of Quebec from 1879 to 1889. His role was to summarize what Assembly members said and commit it to print in a government-funded publication. It was during this time that he married Dorimène Desjardins.

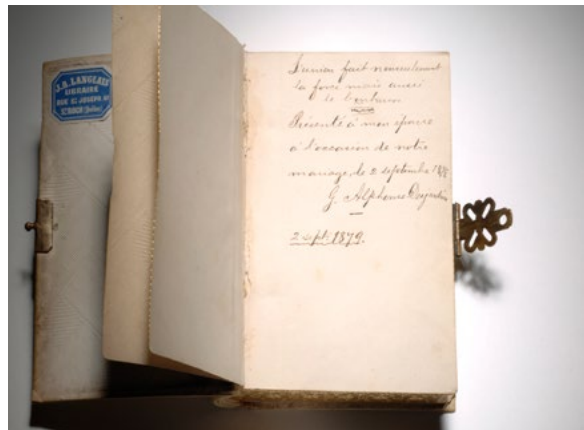


Old Quebec City's Rue Sainte-Famille was home to the offices of the newspaper *Le Canadien* when Alphonse worked there.
Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ)



Louis-Georges Desjardins (1849–1928) and his family. He was Alphonse's older brother, co-owner of the newspaper *Le Canadien* and a Conservative member of Parliament from 1881 to 1892.
Desjardins Group Archives

Dorimène Desjardins was born in Sorel, Quebec, on September 17, 1858. She was the daughter of Joseph Roy-Desjardins, a steamship captain, and Rosalie Mailhot. Like her future husband, she was a descendant of Antoine Roy dit Desjardins, who arrived in New France in 1665. In the 1860s, she attended Notre-Dame-de-Toutes-Grâces Convent in Lévis. She lived with her uncle and aunt, Jean-Baptiste and Louise-Clarisse Thériault, who also accommodated a niece of Jean-Baptiste's. Alphonse's marriage to Dorimène was celebrated at Saint-Pierre Church in Sorel on September 2, 1879.



On September 2, 1879, Alphonse presented his wife with this missal, a mass book, which he dedicated to her as follows: "Unity is not only strength, but happiness."

Alphonse Desjardins Historical Society



Dorimène Desjardins (1858–1932).
Desjardins Group Archives

Construction of the Desjardins family home

The Desjardins family grew rapidly with the successive births between 1880 and 1882 of Raoul, Anne-Marie and Edgar. The Thériaults, no doubt to help the young couple, gave Alphonse a vacant lot that they owned at the corner of Rue Guenette and Rue Saint-Joseph (now Rue Mont-Marie) near Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire Church and adjacent to their residence. The gift included \$500 to build a house. In return, Alphonse would pay the Thériaults an annual amount.



After their marriage, the young couple moved into a rental home on Rue Wolfe in Lévis.
Desjardins Group Archives



FIG. 68.—A PARRONAGE.



FIG. 69.—CELLAR PLAN.



FIG. 70.—FIRST FLOOR.



FIG. 71.—SECOND FLOOR.

The exact year the new owners took possession of the residence is unknown, but it was probably 1883 or 1884. The 2-storey house was built out of wood like the vast majority of residences at the time in Lévis. It had a wood-shingle roof, which differed from the sheet metal on most nearby homes.

Since not everyone could afford the services of an architect, it was customary to use designs sold by catalogue. The Desjardins home resembles a plan published in one of these catalogues in 1867. *Woodward's architecture, landscape gardening, and rural art. No. 1. 1867*

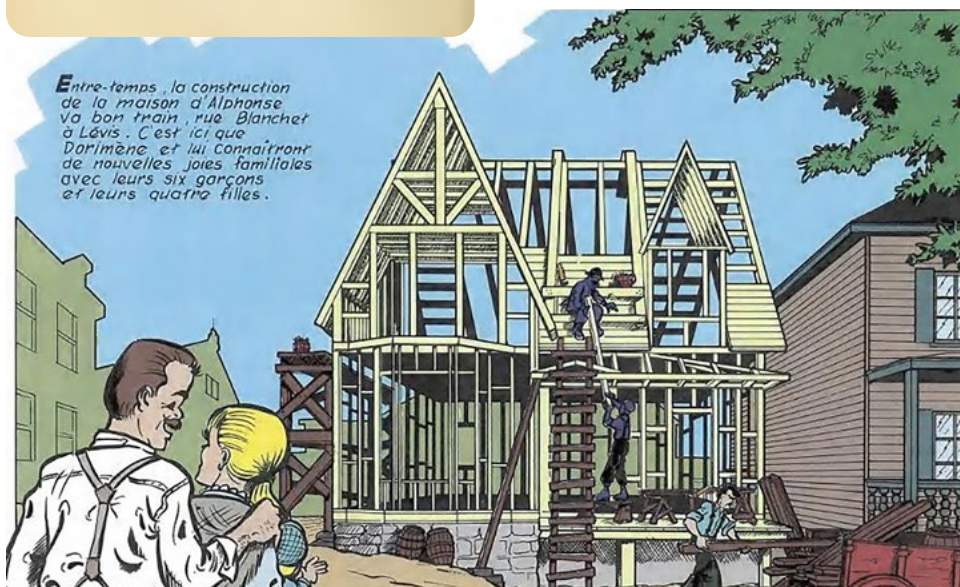


Illustration of the construction of the Desjardins family home in the graphic novel *Alphonse Desjardins, the Feat of a Founder*.

With its asymmetric design, various textures, steep gables, dormer windows, teardrop motifs, rise, lacework and friezes, the house was an example of Gothic Revival style. It was typical of the Victorian era, which saw renewed interest in styles of yore and a blending of influences. The small lot is almost entirely occupied by the house.

Members of the Desjardins family would live in this simple yet comfortable home for nearly 60 years.





Lévis in the distance and the Desjardins family home near Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire Church in the 1880s. In the foreground, the ice bridge that connected Quebec City to Lévis during the winter.

Louis-Prudent Vallée, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec collection, donated by the Michel Lessard collection. Photographer: Patrick Altman

The house and its site

The Desjardins family home is located in the heart of the parish in the upper town, a prime location in Lévis. This part of town stood in contrast to the lower town along Rue Commerciale, a transit point for travellers and a place of work. Daily life in the lower town was marked by the passing of trains, the docking of ferries and the hustle and bustle of businesses and industries. Upper-town residents had it much better. Fog horns and train whistles could still be heard in the distance, but the plumes of coal smoke had time to dissipate before they could reach them, and there was much more vegetation.



Côte du Passage, the main road leading up from lower town and a major commercial artery, circa 1880.
Desjardins Group Archives

There were also businesses and shops all along the upper town's commercial arteries. Foodstuffs were readily available, as were all the latest fashions. Electricity was gradually introduced to Lévis starting in 1901 to light the streets. Electrification of private residences was also available, but the service was optional.



The Desjardins house stood opposite Déziel Park, named after its monument in honour of Father Joseph-David Déziel. On September 27, 1885, hundreds of Lévis residents joined a number of dignitaries for the monument's dedication ceremony. In the evening, a large fireworks display lit up the skies. The Desjardins, who lived just across the street, may well have attended the festivities.

Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BANQ)

The Desjardins family lived close to the church and were all practising Catholics. Three times a day the church bells would ring—more often during celebrations and commemorations—adding a devout rhythm to their daily lives. They would also hear the steps of passers-by on the boardwalks and the clopping of horses and churning of carriage wheels on the dirt roads. It was 1902, and the "era of progress" that the early 20th century portended was now at the Desjardins family door with the arrival of the tramway in Lévis on Rue Guenette right next to the family residence. That meant the entire household had to put up with streetcars lumbering by multiple times a day.



A tramway on Rue Saint-Joseph in Lévis around 1902.
City of Quebec, Document Management and Archives Division

The layout

The house is rectangular in shape with a kitchen annex at the back that was likely added on after the original construction. It was a home for the family, but also a sign of their social standing. The interiors of middle-class residences of the day sought to strike a balance between comfort and ostentation. The Desjardins house was no exception.



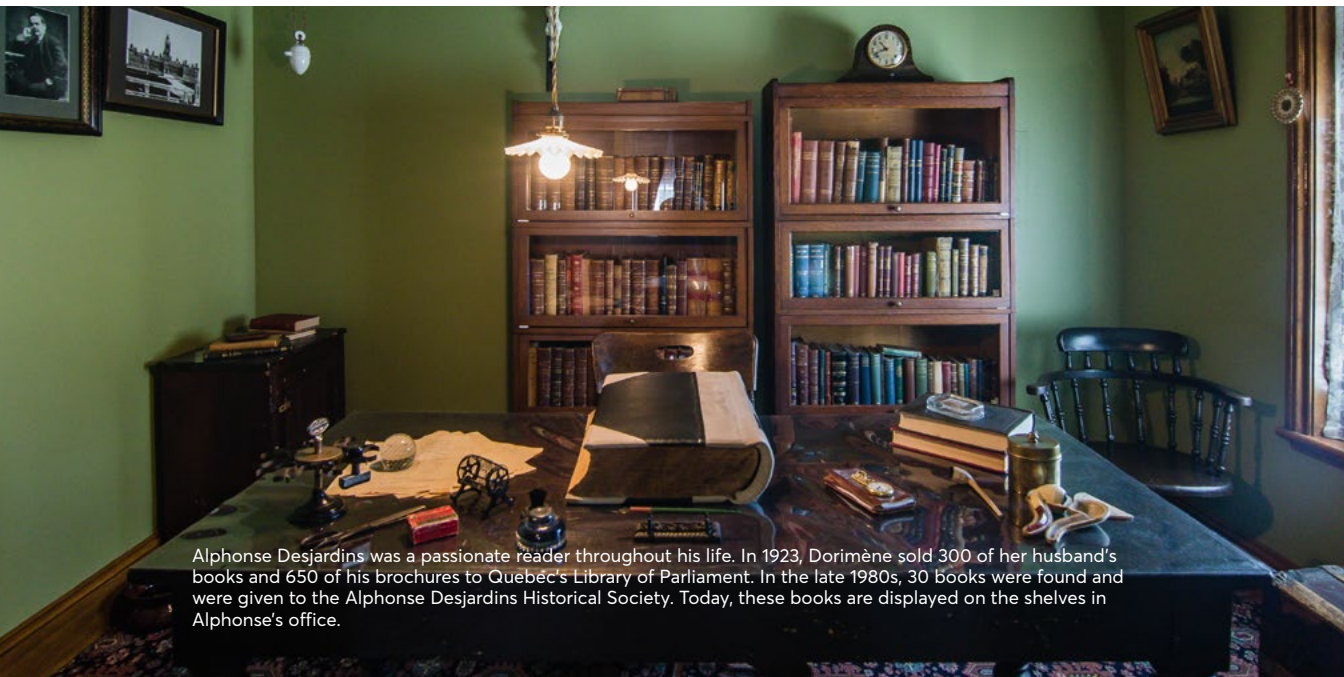
Assumed original layout of the house prior to the addition of the back annex. The second floor of the annex is thought to have been added between 1900 and 1909.

The ground floor was made up of rooms for the family's public activities. The parlour (which was mainly used to entertain), the office (where business was conducted) and the dining room (where the family gathered daily) were accessible to guests. These rooms



Ground floor layout of the actual historical restoration.

were also where the best furniture was found. Each of these rooms had its own entrance, which provided some privacy. Domestic areas such as the kitchen were closed to visitors.



Alphonse Desjardins was a passionate reader throughout his life. In 1923, Dorimène sold 300 of her husband's books and 650 of his brochures to Québec's Library of Parliament. In the late 1980s, 30 books were found and were given to the Alphonse Desjardins Historical Society. Today, these books are displayed on the shelves in Alphonse's office.



The dining room, where the family gathered at mealtime.
Desjardins Group Archives

The Desjardins children and grandchildren described the couple as very welcoming. The dining room table was always set and fitted with a fine tablecloth featuring embroidered Ds in the corners. There were often dinner guests, particularly men of the cloth. After meals in the dining room, everyone would join in a family prayer. Protocol was of great importance to the couple. Alphonse and Dorimène's grandson Alphonse, nicknamed Alphonso, was sometimes invited for family dinner on Sundays. Even though he was just a child, his grandfather always served him first since he was the guest.



4 grandchildren of Alphonse and Dorimène. Alphonso (Alphonse) is pictured in the top-centre.
Desjardins Group Archives



The second floor was reserved exclusively for family members and close friends. It had 5 bedrooms along a centre hallway. Throughout their life together, the Desjardins occasionally employed maids for various domestic tasks.

Pénible accident

L'épouse de M. Thériault, ingénieur, résidant rue Guenette, voisin de M. Alph. Desjardins, a été victime d'un pénible accident, mardi soir, dans la maison de M. Desjardins.

La servante, qui était descendue à la cave, avait oublié en remontant d'en fermer la porte et Madame Thériault passant à cet endroit, mit le pied dans le vide et roula dans la cave.

Dans sa chute, l'infortunée s'est infligé de graves blessures. Le Dr Collet qui a été appelé auprès d'elle constata qu'elle avait deux côtes de fracturées et lui prodigua les soins nécessaires.

In 1889, an unfortunate accident occurred at the Desjardins family home. The maid forgot to close the trapdoor leading to the cellar and Dorimène's aunt fell through the hole as she walked past. She suffered serious injuries. *L'Electeur*, July 13, 1889



Digital image of Adrienne's bedroom.



At the time, domestic staff were typically recruited via referrals from acquaintances or by placing a small advertisement in newspapers, like this one in *Le Quotidien* in 1887.



Digital imaging shows what the second-floor rooms looked like. The master bedroom includes 3D renderings of the original furniture.

A small second-floor room connected to the kitchen by way of a back staircase served as sleeping quarters for those who stayed with them. The length of their stay probably varied depending on the family's needs and the duties of the person involved.

Desjardins family life

The Desjardins family expanded with the births of Alice, Alphonse, Adrienne, Albertine, Paul and Léon between 1884 and 1897. In late 1889, Alphonse learned that the subsidies for writing up and publishing Assembly debates would cease. Having lost his livelihood, he went back to journalism, founding his own newspaper, *L'Union canadienne*, out of an office on Avenue Bégin. After only 3 months, he was forced to give that up for health reasons.

Without a job for a second time in a short period, Alphonse turned to his connections within the Conservative Party. He was appointed a French stenographer in the House of Commons in Ottawa in 1892. Shortly after his appointment, tragedy struck his family. An outbreak of diphtheria wreaked havoc in Lévis. Within 8 days, the couple lost 2 children, Alice, age 7, and Alphonse, age 5. A few days later, the health board ordered that all houses affected by the disease be boarded up. During this period of concern and grief, the Desjardins were probably confined to their home to prevent further spread of the disease.

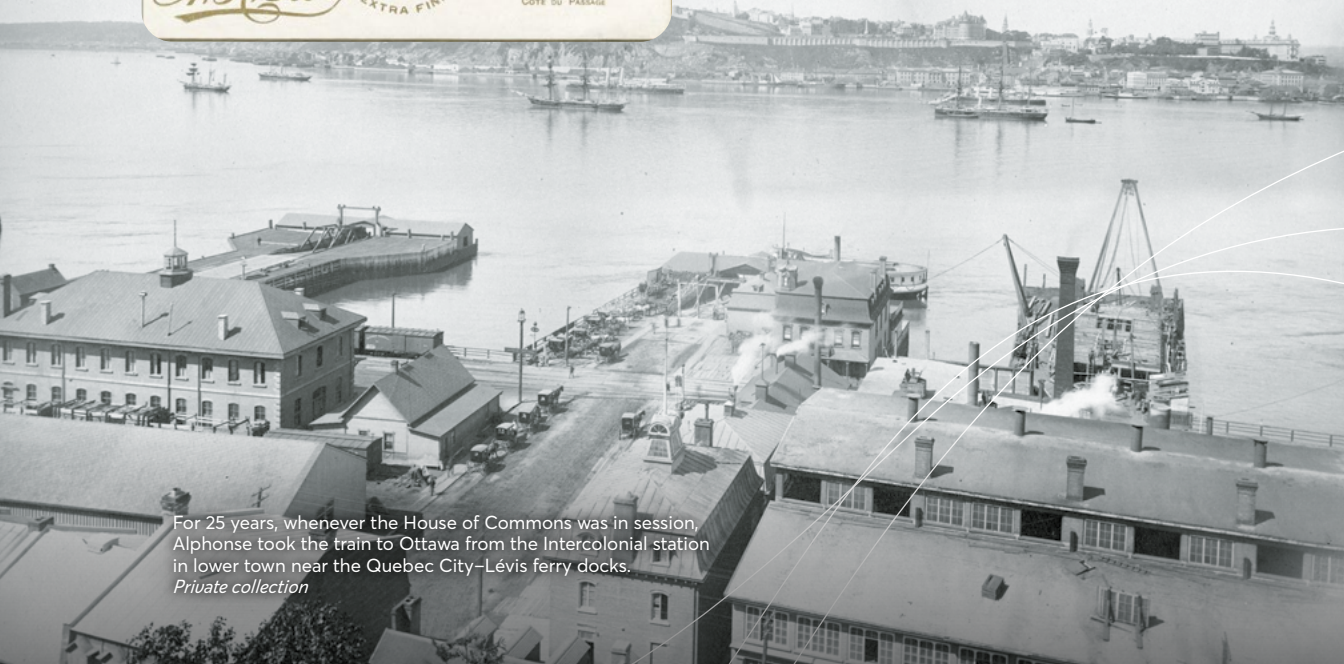


First page of an issue of Alphonse Desjardins's newspaper *L'Union Canadienne*, published from July to October 1891.
Desjardins Group Archives



Despite the tragic events of the spring, Alphonse took up his new role, which brought about changes for the family. He now had to move away from home for part of the year to practise his profession in Ottawa. Dorimène was responsible for day-to-day family life with the younger children, while the older children were sent away to boarding school.

Portrait of Alphonse Desjardins circa 1890 when he began his career as a French stenographer at the House of Commons in Ottawa.
Desjardins Group Archives



For 25 years, whenever the House of Commons was in session, Alphonse took the train to Ottawa from the Intercolonial station in lower town near the Quebec City-Lévis ferry docks.
Private collection

Birth of the caisses

In 1897, Alphonse was shocked to hear a member of Parliament describe how people were falling victim to loan sharks. He was becoming more and more aware of the shortcomings in the way credit was organized. He began a period of study and correspondence with members of the international cooperative movement. He developed a plan and convinced people around him to take part in it. Much of the planning for the future caisse took place in his home. In September 1900, he convened about 15 of his fellow citizens in his parlour to form a review and initiative committee that led to the founding of the Caisse populaire on December 6, 1900.



Centre Block, Parliament Hill, Ottawa. A fire destroyed part of the building in 1916. Alphonse was present when fire broke out and was able to exit safely.

William James Topley, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec collection, donated by the Michel Lessard collection



Avenue Bégin circa 1910, the street where the Caisse populaire founding meeting took place.
A. A. Roy, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ)

The Caisse populaire used the Société des Artisans premises in Lévis 3 nights a week to carry out transactions. Alphonse also offered members the possibility of depositing their savings at his home. Germaine Roberge, who later became Alphonse's secretary, said, "We went to Mr. Desjardins to pay our 5 cents. When we dropped by, he'd take us to the parlour. He always welcomed us in his Prince Albert jacket. He'd record our transactions in our book and then in his books."

In Alphonse's absence during the months he was in Ottawa, Dorimène welcomed the members in his place. Adrienne recalled years later, "For a few years whenever Dad left for the session, Mom became a 'volunteer manager' of the caisse, which was run out of Dad's home office. So many times we both worked late into the night, making the entries and keeping



Alphonse with Dorimène and their son Charles on the side stairs of the house around 1917. Alphonse is wearing his Prince Albert, a three-quarter jacket named after Queen Victoria's husband. It was formal daytime wear.
Desjardins Group Archives

the books up to date." Dorimène provided moral support and valuable advice to her husband and worked with him year after year.



Dorimène and her last child,
Charles, in 1903.
Desjardins Group Archives

Amidst all these occupations and household activities, she gave birth to her last child, Charles, in 1902. Dorimène had 10 children in the span of 21 years. In 1904, the family was saddened to once again mourn the loss of a child with the death of Léon, who was frail and only 7 years old.

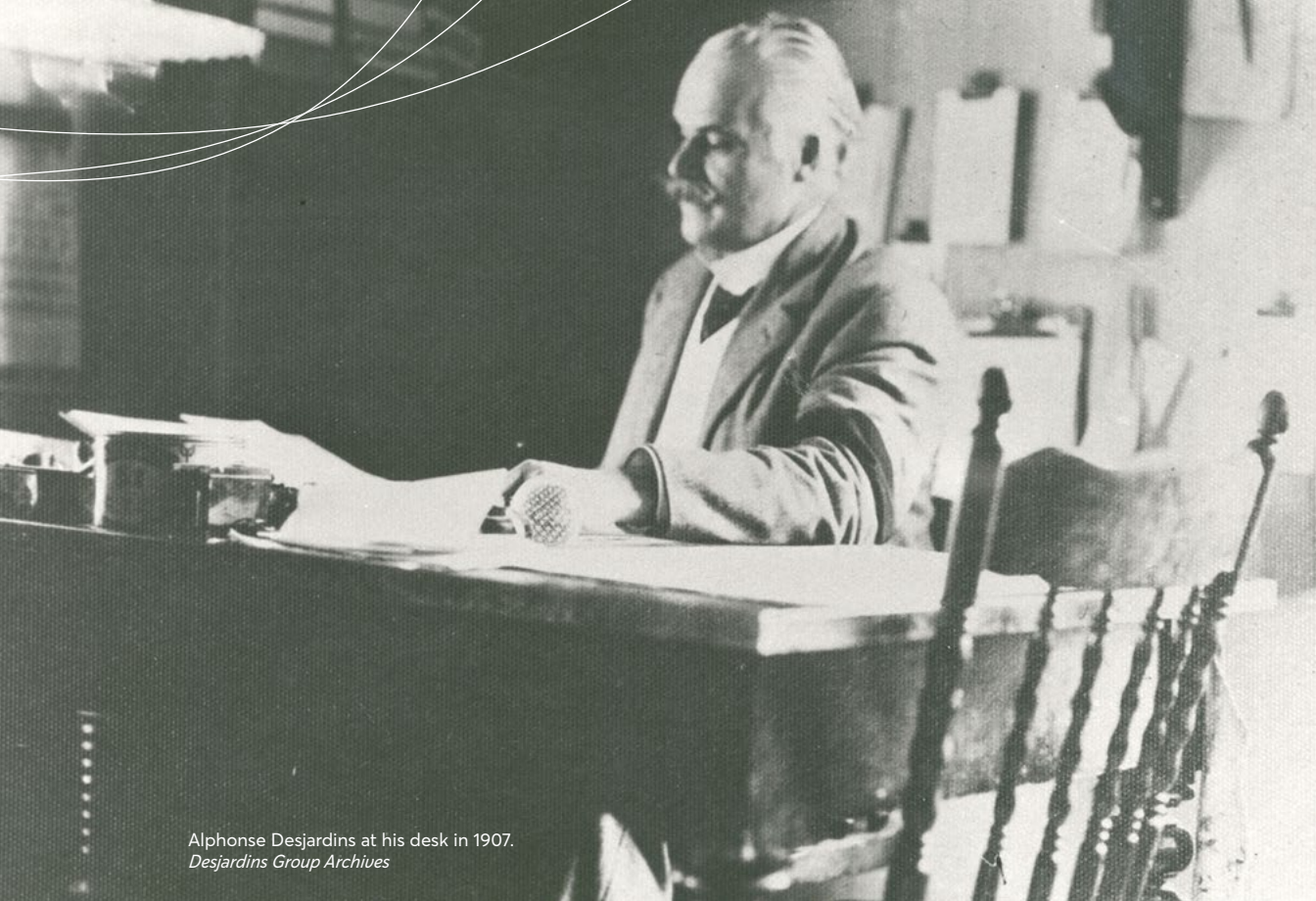
LA CAISSE POPULAIRE DE LEVIS
Société coopérative d'épargne et de crédit à capital variable et à responsabilité limitée.

Folio _____ CAPITAL SOCIAL
Partes sociales souscrites par _____
demeurant à _____

DATE		DÉBIT	CRÉDIT
1904			
Janvier	4 45 ^e versement	5 10	40
19	5 6 " "		10
Février	5 6 " "		25
Mars	9 7 " "		80
			5
			90

Reporté
Part annulée
Mort de Léon - 12 mai 1904
à 4 p.m. - 7 ans

Little Léon's account booklet page with
Alphonse's hand annotation "Died on
May 12, 1904, at 4 p.m., age 7."
Alphonse Desjardins Historical Society



Alphonse Desjardins at his desk in 1907.
Desjardins Group Archives

When Alphonse Desjardins was not away for work or on the road to promote and help create credit unions, he followed a strict schedule at home. As his daughter Albertine explained, "He did his correspondence in the morning at home, then went to the caisse office afterwards . . . In the evening, he went for his walk . . . stayed up with us until about 10 o'clock, then holed himself up in his office to write (by hand) until very late at night." By the end of 1906, the Lévis caisse's office had permanently moved from the family home to a location on Avenue Bégin.

This was probably a relief for the entire family, without the constant comings and goings of members. As the children grew into young adults, Dorimène had more time to go with Alphonse to Ottawa, leaving the family home uninhabited for several months of the year.

Desjardins family members in front of their home in summer 1909. The tram tracks can be seen on Rue Guenette.
Desjardins Group Archives



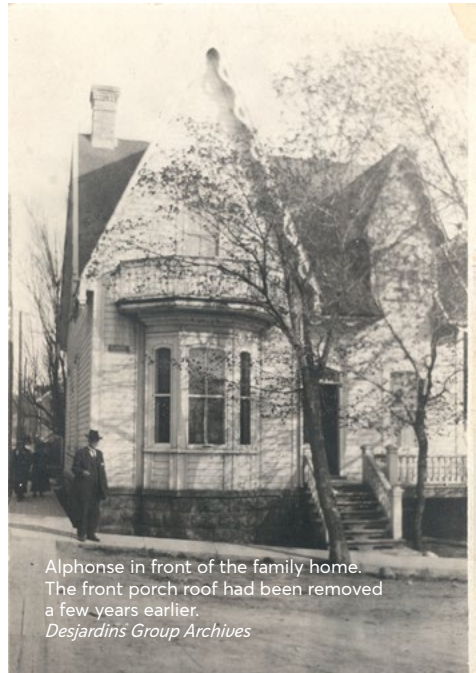


Alphonse, Dorimène and Albertine near Parliament in Ottawa in June 1915.
Desjardins Group Archives

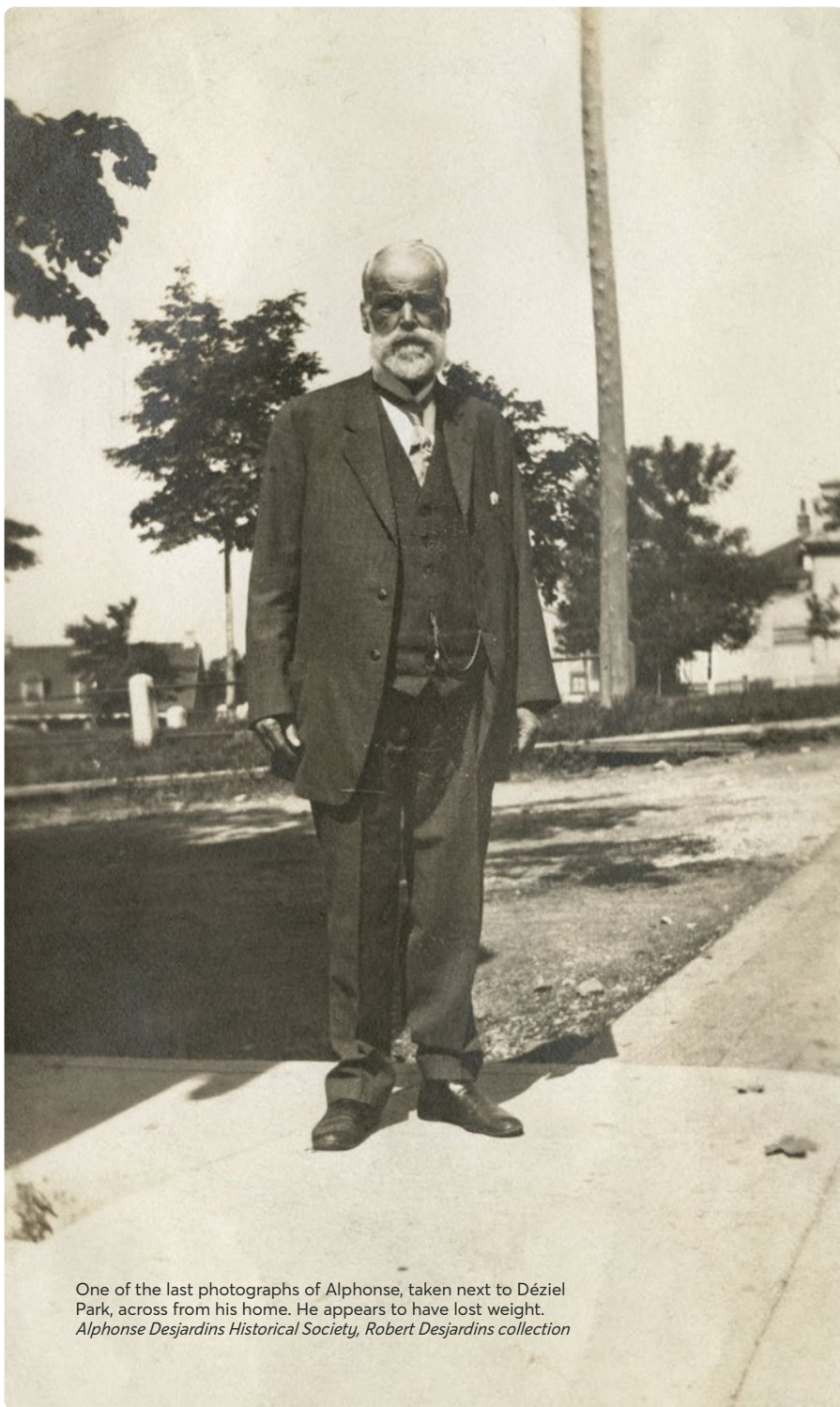
Illness

Alphonse Desjardins, a strong and hard-working man, collapsed on Avenue Bégin in January 1914. Passers-by carried him to a nearby doctor's office. After a few days bed-ridden at home, he resumed his work, but his health remained precarious. In June, he was diagnosed with an incurable disease called uremia. He took advantage of periods of remission to continue his work. In November 1915, he helped found a caisse for the last time, in Sainte-Brigitte-des-Saults near Drummondville.

He permanently left his job as a stenographer at the House of Commons in 1918. That same year, feeling quite fit, he travelled with Dorimène to Chicoutimi to witness the official admission of their dear daughter Adrienne into religious life. On August 3, 1920, he attended the blessing of the new caisse office in Lévis. This was probably his last public appearance. Bedridden thereafter, he spent his time reciting the rosary. On the night of Sunday, October 31, 1920, after receiving last rites, he took Dorimène's hand and said, "My sacrifice is total. After you and the children, it saddens me the most to leave my caisses." He smoked one last pipe, and by evening's end his breathing was increasingly laboured. Shortly before midnight, Alphonse Desjardins passed away at home a few days before his 66th birthday.



Alphonse in front of the family home.
The front porch roof had been removed
a few years earlier.
Desjardins Group Archives



One of the last photographs of Alphonse, taken next to Déziel Park, across from his home. He appears to have lost weight.
Alphonse Desjardins Historical Society, Robert Desjardins collection



The Alphonse Desjardins funeral monument
at Mont-Marie Cemetery.
Desjardins Group Archives

News of his death spread in the following days. The press was full of tributes. The Lévis caisse board of directors took charge of funeral preparations and expenses. According to the custom of the time, the body was laid out for viewing in the family residence. On Thursday, November 4, the procession headed across the street to Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire Church, which was draped in black. There was a huge turnout, and many dignitaries, including the premier of Quebec, were present to pay their final respects to the caisse founder. After the ceremony, a huge procession accompanied the deceased to his final resting place at Mont-Marie Cemetery.

The Desjardins's final years at the family home

Those who'd been close to the Desjardins couple described them as deeply in love until the end. Dorimène began her widowhood at 62, living in the house with 3 of her children and 1 of her granddaughters. It was during this difficult time that she repurposed some of the rooms. Alphonse's office was moved to where the dining room is now located, while the dining area was set up near the fireplace. The old office became Dorimène's sitting room. A music lover, she kept her table grand piano there and played along as she taught Christmas carols to her granddaughter Marie-Marthe. Dorimène was a great cook and hosted her children and grandchildren for New Year's dinner. After Alphonse died, she was the one who gave the traditional family New Year's blessing. She also entertained vicars and priests, who joined her on occasion for a bite to eat.



Anne-Marie and Albertine (standing) with Dorimène and her grand-daughter Cécile (sitting) a few months after the death of Alphonse. Anne-Marie returned to the family home after her husband Almanzor passed away, just one month after her father's death. *Alphonse Desjardins Historical Society, Claude Laporte collection*



Assumed layout of the house after the death of Alphonse in the early 1920s.

Dorimène came to exercise great moral authority over the caisse directors in the Quebec City area. She had worked with her husband for so long and had maintained his archives so carefully that she was considered to be the keeper of his thoughts. In 1929, tragedy struck again when Anne-Marie died at the Prévost Sanatorium in Montreal, aged only 47. Her body was transported by train and a viewing was held in the family home. During her lifetime, Dorimène had the misfortune of seeing 4 of her 10 children die. In November 1931, she was hospitalized at Hôtel-Dieu de Lévis after breaking her hip. She would spend several months in bed with her leg suspended. She passed away on June 14, 1932, at the age of 73.



Dorimène would sometimes invite her granddaughter to come and have breakfast with her. Although she usually had her long white hair meticulously pulled up, she would greet her granddaughter with it tied in a braid, then set to work in the kitchen, generously buttering a skillet and browning toast with a large iron.

Desjardins Group Archives



Dorimène visiting the convent where her daughter Adrienne lived in Chicoutimi in the 1920s.
Alphonse Desjardins Historical Society, Robert Desjardins collection

The body of the late Dorimène Desjardins was brought home for a viewing in her small living room. Family and friends gathered to pay their respects. The *Congrégation des Dames de Ste-Anne*, an organization Dorimène belonged to, came to the Desjardins family home to recite prayers. The funeral was held on June 17 at *Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire Church*, before a sizable crowd. After the ceremony, she was buried with her husband at *Mont-Marie Cemetery*.

Dorimène bequeathed her possessions to her children and grandchildren. Her daughter Albertine inherited the family home and all the furniture it contained. Finding herself alone, Albertine decided to share the big house in 1933 with the family of Lucien Labrecque, a train worker with 5 children. A sixth child, Gérard, was born in 1936 after they moved in. Albertine lived on the second floor and the Labrecques on the ground floor.



Albertine Desjardins in her room in the 1920s. This is the only known photograph showing the interior of the house at the time of the Desjardins.

Desjardins Group Archives

On October 25, 1938, the board of directors of Union régionale des caisses populaires Desjardins de Québec authorized Cyrille Vaillancourt, the principal figure at Desjardins at the time, to approach Albertine about acquiring the founder's home and the neighbouring property, which belonged to Dr. Joseph-Godéric Blanchet. An agreement was reached: Albertine donated the house to the Union régionale in exchange for a lifetime rent. Albertine's reasons for letting go of the residence remain unknown. It's assumed that as a single, unemployed woman, the monthly rent provided her with a stable and secure income. Nevertheless, it was a sacrifice for her. The Labrecques and Albertine left in early 1939. Their departure closed a chapter in the history of the house.

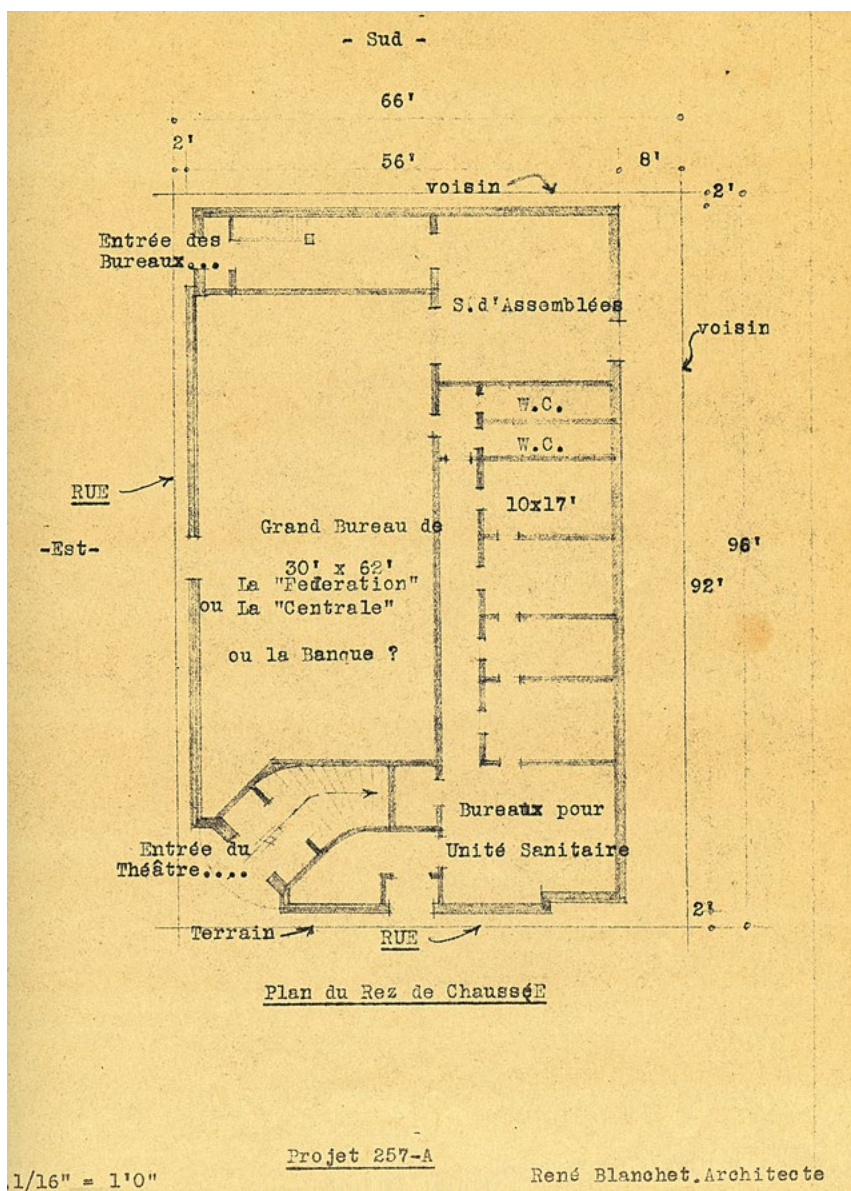
Years of uncertainty

In early 1939, the future of the Desjardins home was uncertain. At that time it wasn't considered a heritage property. The Historic Monuments Board, set up in 1922 to protect heritage, concerned itself mainly with older buildings dating from the French regime. Nineteenth century architecture was still very prevalent throughout Quebec, and there wasn't much public interest in preserving it.

There had been discussions earlier, in 1931, to buy the house for use by the future federation. However, the 2 houses were not large enough for its requirements, and demolition was considered. They were acquired by Union régionale des caisses populaires de Québec, which, together with Caisse centrale and Caisse populaire de Lévis, planned to locate its offices there. Architect René Blanchet drew up plans for a new building to be called Monument Desjardins. The leaders seemed interested in moving forward on the very grounds where Desjardins was founded. In the meantime, Union régionale de Québec decided to rent the 2 houses it now owned.



The Desjardins house in the 1940s.
Desjardins Group Archives



Drawing by René Blanchet of the Monument Desjardins project in 1940.
Desjardins Group Archives



Louis-Napoléon Huart and his wife Juanita on the front porch.
Desjardins Group Archives

In April 1939, the family of Louis-Napoléon Huart moved into the former Desjardins house for a monthly rent of \$25. He and his wife Juanita Michon were a couple in their early sixties who had 5 children. Louis-Napoleon was a wood dealer specializing in railway ties. He often travelled to Western Canada to buy British Columbian wood, the raw material of his trade.

In December 1940, lacking unanimity, the Monument Desjardins project on the house site was abandoned. Ten years later, it would become a reality just steps away from the founder's house under the name Édifice Desjardins. The Desjardins house would be occupied by members of the Huart family for 42 years.



Between 1942 and 1948, work was done on the property. The porch roof, which had been removed when the Desjardins family lived there, was rebuilt. The kitchen was updated with new cupboards and a new countertop and sink, and the wallpaper was changed throughout the house. After the death of her mother in 1956 and her father in 1968, Bérangère Huart lived alone in the house.



A Huart family Christmas in the double living room. Louis-Napoléon is in the centre with his daughter Bérangère on the right.
Desjardins Group Archives

In search of a new purpose

In the ensuing years, Desjardins Group management began to ponder how the residence could be put to long-term use. In 1968 and again in 1974, plans for a museum that would pay tribute to the founder were discussed but quickly dismissed because of the fire hazard and the lack of interest in Victorian architecture. A new initiative took form in 1978. This time, comprehensive research was carried out to better understand the house's history and architecture. Interviews were also conducted with Desjardins Group executives to get their views on the house's future use. After the report was released, a decision was made to set up a not-for-profit corporation to identify a purpose for the home and to manage it. The Alphonse Desjardins Historical Society was officially created in late 1979. It was at that time that the house came to be known as Maison Alphonse-Desjardins. The corporation's goal was to restore the house and use it as a centre for documentation, information and exhibition dedicated to the history of Desjardins Group.

A new life as Maison Alphonse-Desjardins

The 1980s opened up a whole new destiny for the house. In June 1981, Bérangère Huart, the sole remaining tenant, left with a heavy heart. Thus ended nearly 100 years of residential use for a house where the daily lives of various families had played out. In 1982, a thorough inspection and study of the house were conducted to better understand its various components. The room layout and general appearance were found to have undergone little change since the time of the Desjardins family. The decision was made to refurbish the main architectural elements, which were removed for cleaning and then returned.



The kitchen before the house was restored.
Desjardins Group Archives



The sitting room a few months before Bérangère departed and the house was restored in 1982.
Desjardins Group Archives

Changes were also made to the decor and some room divisions to ready the house for its new purpose. Alphonse's office and the kitchen were redone in their original style to evoke the Desjardins era. The furniture that had belonged to the family was brought back to the house. The other rooms on the ground floor where exhibits and the documentation centre were to be housed were given a more modern look. On the second floor, 2 walls were knocked down to make way for a meeting room and staff offices.



The parlor before the house was restored.
Desjardins Group Archives



Maison Alphonse-Desjardins was officially inaugurated in 1982 in the presence of Raymond Blais, then president of Desjardins Group.
Desjardins Group Archives

Many guests were in attendance when the house was officially opened on November 5, 1982. In the early years, the house provided visitors with guided tours, documentation and videos on the history of Desjardins. In 1983, Maison Alphonse-Desjardins was officially declared a historic monument by the Ministère des Affaires culturelles du Québec. Efforts in recent years to present the residential function of the house and the importance of events and people associated with it have been a success. In 1985, a historian was hired to fulfil the second part of the historical society's mandate: research into the house's history and the publication of the findings.



The living room after reconstruction and changes in 1988.
Desjardins Group Archives

In 1988, the museum aspect of Maison Alphonse-Desjardins was expanded. The living room was redone to give it a Victorian feel. The following year, the Alphonse Desjardins Historical Society bought the neighbouring house, Maison Blanchet, to enlarge its premises. A passageway was then built to link the 2 houses. The ground floor of Maison Blanchet is used to present exhibitions and serves as the entrance to the museum.

In the mid-1990s, the decision was made to redo the ground floor of Maison Alphonse-Desjardins as it would have appeared to a visitor at the turn of the century. It was an ambitious undertaking that required extensive research into the context and material culture of the time. The plans also included the creation of a new permanent exhibition at Maison Blanchet. The original furniture and newly acquired antiques were used to reconstruct the family's living space.



Furniture and objects belonging to the Desjardins family were apparently given to Cyrille Vaillancourt in the 1950s by Albertine Desjardins. A small museum was set up in the Édifice Desjardins building to exhibit them. It was not until 1982 that Desjardins furniture items returned to their original home. Later, descendants of the couple generously donated other objects and furniture that add to the authenticity of the reconstruction.

Desjardins Group Archives



The reconstruction restored the early 20th century atmosphere by incorporating materials and furniture from the time.

Desjardins Group Archives



Maison Alphonse-Desjardins in winter.

The restoration was inaugurated in 2000, Desjardins Group's centennial year. It took visitors on a trip back in time to 1906 in the company of an interpreter guide. Over the years, a number of new features and activities have been added to enhance the experience for visitors of all ages.

Maison Blanchet and its history

Maison Blanchet has been connected to Maison Alphonse-Desjardins by a passageway since 1992 and serves as the museum's main entrance. Maison Blanchet is thought to have been built between 1853 and 1857. In 1882, it was bought by Joseph-Godéric Blanchet, a doctor and politician who lived in a nearby house. In the early 1880s, Dorimène fell gravely ill and Dr. Blanchet stopped by regularly, day and night, for 6 weeks.



Joseph-Godéric Blanchet (1829–1890) was successively mayor of Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire, member of Parliament, speaker of the Legislative Assembly in Quebec City and speaker of the House of Commons in Ottawa.
William James Topley, Desjardins Group Archives



Members of the Lévis whist club in 1890. Alphonse Desjardins, seated on the far right of the first row and his neighbour Joseph-Louis Blanchet, son of Joseph-Goderic, standing with his hand in his jacket, second from the left, in the second row, were both members. Whist was a very popular card game in the 19th century.

Alphonse Desjardins Historical Society, donation made as a tribute to Jean-Guy Fortin, Claire Bellerive and Louis-Joseph Fortin



Jean-Marie, the grandson of Joseph-Godéric, with his family when they lived in the house.
Desjardins Group Archives

As medical care was very expensive, Dr. Blanchet suggested that Alphonse become his secretary until the fees were paid off. In 1884, Alphonse made a proposal to city council that the street in front of his and the doctor's houses be named "Rue Blanchet" in his honour. And so it was until 1968. The house was rented out during the 1880s, then later occupied by descendants of Dr. Blanchet. A floor was added between 1909 and 1918. After plans for the Monument Desjardins project on the site were dropped, the house was sold in 1941. It became a rooming house in the 1970s before the Alphonse Desjardins Historical Society acquired it in 1989.

Since 1982, Maison Alphonse-Desjardins has welcomed more than 300,000 visitors. What would Dorimène and Alphonse say if they knew that so many people had visited their home to learn more about their way of life and the birthplace of Desjardins Group? It's impossible to tell, but it's certainly a fitting tribute to 2 individuals who helped shape Quebec's history and whose legacy lives on to this day.

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Linguistic revision:

Linguistic Services, Desjardins Group

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Thanks to David Camirand, Pierre-Olivier Maheux, Marie-Ève Larue, Christine Plante, France Desjardins, Louise Rodrigue, Michèle Marchand and Pierre Blanchet



Desjardins

Société historique
Alphonse-Desjardins