

McKee: Move over Colonel By — the Irish helped build Ottawa too

The capital's history isn't just about the builder of the Rideau Canal. Other key figures moulded the city, writes Eamonn McKee.

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Published Dec 26, 2023

I don't have a problem with Colonel John By. He was decent fellow by all accounts, a great engineer, and hard done by the Whig government that unfairly accused him of going over-budget. The Rideau Canal, whose construction he oversaw, is rightly regarded as a marvel of construction. Today, a fine statue of Col. By overlooks the locks as the Rideau Canal dramatically enters the Ottawa River.

The issue I have is that Col. By alone is credited as the founder of Bytown, renamed Ottawa in 1855. He certainly played a part as chief engineer of the project, begun in 1826. What he left behind was a sprawling work camp and the beginnings of a rough lumber town. Bytown was not created *ex nihilo* but was rather the outcome of a convergence of efforts by pioneering figures. They were instrumental in the economic development of the Ottawa Valley 20 years earlier, the actual decision to build the canal, and the sustained development of Bytown subsequently.

From time immemorial, the bluff overlooking the conjunction of the Rideau and Gatineau Rivers with the Ottawa River was a meeting place of the local Anishinaabe and the other Indigenous groups that met and traded there. The place name Ottawa derives from the Anishinaabemowin “adaawe,” meaning “to trade” or “a place for trading.”

A microcosm of settler colonialism

As with all of the Indigenous communities, the Anishinaabe population of the area was decimated by diseases brought by early Europeans. After the American War of Independence, settlers infiltrated the Ottawa Valley. As local historian Jim Stone records, Algonquin Chief Constant Pinesi and his warriors allied with the British in the War of 1812. Yet his many appeals for the British to recognize his people's traditional lands, including the hunting grounds around the Rideau River, fell on deaf ears. Further reduced by the cholera epidemic that killed Chief Pinesi and his wife in 1834, the local Anishinaabe were unable to resist settlement and deforestation of their traditional, unceded and unsurrendered territory. Ottawa was a microcosm of a wider process of settler colonialism and Indigenous resilience. To this day, the Anishinaabe continue fighting for recognition of their Indigenous rights and title to this land.

It is important, vital even, to put Col. By's role in perspective. He was there to do a job at the behest of Britain's greatest soldier, Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington. Wellington was an Irishman, born in Dublin, raised in Trim and a lifelong member of his Masonic Lodge in Ireland. His family had deep roots in

Ireland going back to the 16th century and bore, until his grandfather's time, the surname Colley.

Wellington was outraged at the U.S. invasion of 1812, seeing it as a stab in the back at the climax of the struggle between Britain and France for global hegemony. He resolved to fortify Canada. Under his authorization, the Rideau Canal was built to relieve Montréal from Kingston should the Americans try to take the city from the St Lawrence River. No Wellington, no Rideau Canal, no Bytown, no Ottawa.

Hamilton spurs economic growth

The reason Bytown endured after the canal's construction was completed was not because of any commercial traffic on it but because of the local economy developed by the Hamiltons from Ireland. George Hamilton, from Dunboyne in Ireland, had established himself as a major businessman after he arrived in Quebec around 1804, thanks to the entrée offered by his uncle-in-law and fellow Irishman, Henry Caldwell. Caldwell, a major figure in the military and business affairs of Quebec, had convinced the Admiralty in 1804 to source their timber in Canada since the supply of Baltic timber was interrupted by the Napoleonic blockade. Hamilton realized that the only way to meet this demand was by exploiting the vast and largely untapped forests of the Ottawa Valley, and later the Gatineau Valley.

The economy of the Ottawa and Gatineau Valleys received a major boost when the mills at Hawkesbury were taken over by Hamilton in 1811. Hawkesbury was on the Ottawa River, halfway between the Gatineau Valley and Montreal, with an island that created an ideal location for lumber mills. It was the head of the Long Sault rapids, which encouraged loggers upriver to sell to Hamilton rather than break up their rafts and reassemble them for the onward trip to Montreal. By 1818, the mills employed 80 men directly and by 1822 was operating 40 saws.

Between 1808 and 1811, Canadian timber exports to Britain tripled. By the time George's sons had developed the business, the Hamiltons were one of the largest exporters of lumber from Canada, its main export throughout the 19th century. At its peak around 1870, the mills at Hawkesbury were employing 1,000 men and producing 700,00 feet of lumber a week — or 40 million feet over the year.



Nicholas Sparks, an Irishman, was central to the economic development of the capital. Bytown Museum

Enter Nicholas Sparks and Daniel O'Connor.

Sparks emigrated from Wexford to join with the pioneering farmer and lumberman Philemon Wright from Massachusetts and his sons Ruggles and Philemon Junior in 1816. They operated a farm and then a lumber interest out of Hull, today's Gatineau. Wright rafted the first lumber down the Ottawa River in 1806. Having made some money with the Wrights, Sparks bought 200 acres from John Burrows Honey for £95 in 1821 where the Rideau entered the Ottawa, across from Hull. The area today comprises all of downtown Ottawa.

When the canal's construction began and Bytown evolved from a work camp into a town, Sparks became, in his own words, landlord to a whole community. In converting his farm into a town, for example, Sparks donated the land for the first Methodist, Presbyterian and Anglican churches.

Daniel O'Connor arrived in 1827 from Tipperary, lured by news of the canal. He became a very successful businessman and civic leader in the first decades of the town's development. Sparks and O'Connor Streets were from the outset the commercial heart of Ottawa.

If there was another key figure in the development of Bytown from a work camp to an actual town, it was the Scotsman Thomas MacKay. Part of the consortium that built the Lachine Canal near Montreal, MacKay won the contract to build the Rideau Canal, working closely with British Army sappers at difficult points along the route. While his partner, John Redpath, invested his money from the project in Montreal, MacKay invested his in the development of Bytown. He sponsored factories along the river at today's Sussex Drive and developed New Edinburgh. Gov. Gen. Charles Stanley Monck, from Tipperary, chose MacKay's estate to be the official residence, Rideau Hall. The main entrance gates were made by Irish born William Clendinning at his foundry in Montreal.



Daniel O'Connor was a respected businessman, town clerk and magistrate in early Bytown who was dedicated to building a harmonious and prosperous community. Postmedia

Enter John Egan. Born in 1811 in Lissavahaun, County Galway, Egan arrived in the Ottawa Valley penniless and rose to become one of the richest lumber barons in the area, as well as a leading politician and advocate for Bytown's development. He founded Aylmer and greatly encouraged the settlement of the Irish in the area as

farmers, notably in Pontiac County. His son was also a major business figure in the area, partnering with the Hamiltons.

Rise of the lumber barons

Egan's timber rights on the Madawaska River in what is now Algonquin Park were bought in 1867 by J.R. Booth, a son of Irish immigrants. By 1890, and based in Ottawa, Booth was one of Canada's largest timber producers. Along with the Wrights and E.B. Eddy, Booth was a leading contributor to the economic and social transformation of the Ottawa Valley through the lumber industry, railways, and the hydro-electric dam at Chaudière Falls. Prime Minister MacKenzie King described Booth as a founding father of Canada. Another son of Irish emigrants, inventor and business magnate Thomas Ahearn brought electricity to Ottawa, transforming the city with electric light, heat, communication and transportation.

The story of Ottawa would not be complete without reference to the violent rivalry between the Irish and the French. The Irish, led by Peter Ayles and his Shiners gang, violently muscled in on the lumber industry once the Rideau Canal was completed in 1832. The French lumbermen were led by the legendary logger Jos Montferrand. Order was eventually restored in 1837 but Bytown's reputation as a rough frontier settlement lived on.

One of our Irish seniors, Pat Marshall, remembers looking at the Ottawa River in 1966, unable to see the water beneath the layer of floating logs. Today, the lumber industry is a memory. The ByWard Market still bustles with social life but Sparks and O'Connor streets have lost their commercial brio. History creates development but development can swallow history, sometimes literally. Submerged with the Hawkesbury mills, the perilous Long Sault rapids have been calmed by the risen waters of the Carillon dam. All that remains today is the stone office building, now the Chenail Cultural Centre.

When I say move over Col. By, I mean the man no injustice. He was deeply solicitous of the welfare of his workers, more than 1,000 of whom died through disease and accidents. Indeed Col. By should rightly be seen as a representative of the British Army that played such a crucial role in the canal's construction.

However, I am sure that even he would agree that the honour of founder might be justly shared. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community to make a town. And in looking to this wider group of Indigenous, French, Irish and Scots, we see a truer picture of the rich and fascinating history of the capital city.

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A portrait of lumber baron J.R. Booth Courtesy of the Bytown Museum