

How Canada's Fathers of Confederation Were Connected to the War of 1812

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Painting of the Battle of Queenston Heights depicts the American landing at the village of Queenston in Upper Canada during the War of 1812, on Oct. 13, 1812. Public Domain



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Commentary

War and memories of war have always been important to Canadians—even the Fathers of Confederation.

In my last two years of high school, I worked Saturdays and summers in West Vancouver's best second-hand bookshop, the Bookstall in Ambleside, where my boss was a World War II veteran named David

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^ Angus Moon. He'd [served](#) in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, the RCN(R), and the Royal Navy, and in June 1944, in



command or second-in-command of a [landing craft](#) in the Battle of Normandy.



He once showed me a photograph of his younger self, whiskers dark instead of white under a well-worn forage cap, with some mates



among the ruins of Bernières-sur-Mer at Juno Beach a few weeks after D-Day. It would have been about 1987, more than 40 years after the



event, that he showed me the picture, but like yesterday to Dave Moon, who died in 2006. "It's a war" he would say of the losing battle to keep order among the books.

Today, the last veterans of that war who are still around are getting pretty venerable, like [101-year-old](#) Bryce Chase, who lives in Calgary's Colonel Belcher [retirement home](#), or Victor Osborne of Nanaimo, who is [106](#).

Despite the passage of time, we honour them still. People want to remember the great deeds of our forebears and those who died. On Remembrance Day, 35,000 turned out in Ottawa, [according](#) to the Royal Canadian Legion, and there were big crowds everywhere—testament that Canadians want to honour their veterans, including the [40,000](#) who completed tours in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014.

When Canada, already 200 years old, was re-founded as a federal Dominion in 1867, some of the Fathers of Confederation were veterans of the [War of 1812](#) or had a close connection to veterans. The war had ended 50 years before the [Charlottetown Conference](#) and was part of fairly recent memory and family lore. A fair number of the Fathers were only one generation removed from the war.



Sir John A. Macdonald. CP Photo/National Archives of Canada

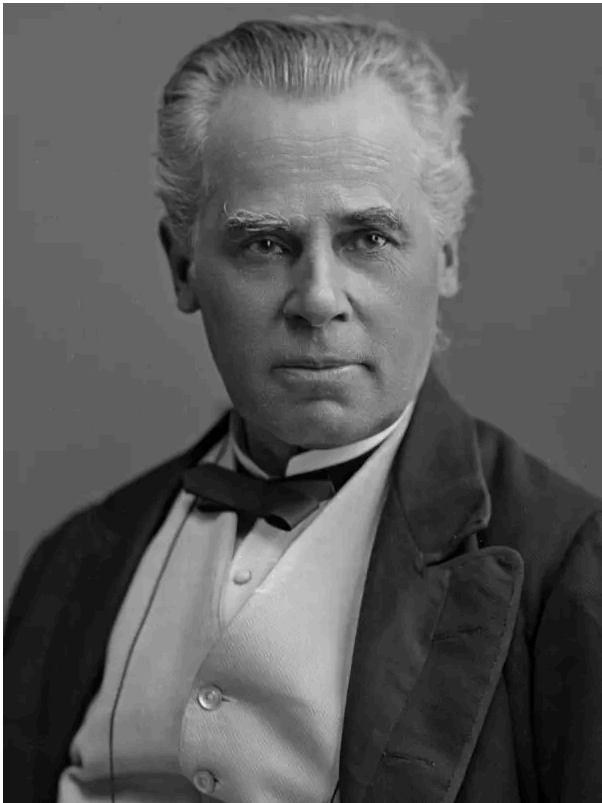
Sir John A. Macdonald's [uncle](#), Lt.-Col. Donald MacPherson, saw action in U.S. Commodore Isaac Chauncey's attack on Kingston Harbour during the War of 1812. One of MacPherson's six daughters (thus Macdonald's cousins) could remember shots penetrating "the wooden walls of the pretty white cottage that then did duty as the

commandant's residence." (To imagine Upper Canada in those days, think rustic Jane Austen but with bullets).

Young Johnny Macdonald, devouring "his uncle's library and the 'slices of pudding' set aside by Macpherson's youngest daughter," grew up in the shadow of the War of 1812. He was 14 when his uncle died in 1829, buried in Kingston with full military honours, "the minute guns from the city battery being answered by those from the fort," fired by the 71st Highlanders. Later, everywhere Macdonald campaigned in 1860, biographer Donald Creighton [relates](#), he met "lawyers, merchants, farmers, young men ... and old men who had fought in a dozen political battles and bore the medals of the War of 1812 upon their chests."

Sir George-Étienne Cartier, who brought Quebec and British Columbia into Confederation, was proud of his Militia connections. Both his father and grandfather served. Cartier and Macdonald's right-hand man, Hector-Louis Langevin, later a cabinet minister, was married to [Sophie-Scholastique LaForce](#), whose father, Major Pierre LaForce, was one of Salaberry's [Voltigeurs](#) officers in the 1813 battle of Chateauguay, in which Canadian-born militia and native allies forced back the American invasion aimed at capturing Montreal.

One of Macdonald's mentors in Upper Canada, Sir Allan Napier [MacNab](#), born in Niagara in 1798, had volunteered at the age of 14 and served in the Militia at Sackets Harbor, Plattsburgh, Black Rock, and Fort Niagara. Sir Charles [Tupper](#), who brought Nova Scotia into Confederation, got his start in politics in the 1850s under the influence



Hon. George Etienne Cartier. Public Domain

of an 1812 veteran, James W. Johnson, the Conservative leader and pre-Confederation premier whose portrait hangs in the [legislative chamber](#) in Province House today.

Sir Oliver Mowat, a Confederation delegate in 1864, went on to become Ontario's third premier and eighth lieutenant governor. His Scots father, John Mowat, was a [Peninsular War](#) veteran among the 6,000 troops sent by the Duke of Wellington to Canada to fight in the War of 1812, and served at Plattsburgh in 1814.

Nor was it untypical for Macdonald's caucus members, and not least the Quebecers, to have a connection to the war. Theodore Robitaille, MP for Bonaventure after Confederation, was a longtime Tory backbencher except for a stint as Receiver General, until Macdonald made him the fourth Lieutenant Governor of Quebec in 1879, and afterwards a senator. Even here we find a link, as Robitaille's great uncle served as chaplain of the Lower Canadian Militia during the War of 1812.

Sir Richard Cartwright was a Liberal MP and the grandson of a Loyalist officer from the [Revolutionary War](#) who, retired and in his 60s during the War of 1812, wrote articles for the Kingston Gazette explaining why Upper Canada's "traditions" should be preserved from U.S. aggression. Sir Richard asked the House in 1887 how many 1812 veterans remained living, 73 years after the [Treaty of Ghent](#). Remarkably, there were 271 living veterans of whom 221 were receiving a pension of \$30 each, 49 were getting \$80 each, and one was receiving \$60, the total allocation being \$6,630.

The Canadian founder with the closest connection to the war was Sir Étienne-Paschal **Taché**. Born in 1795, he was an archetypal Victorian French Canadian, serving in the military, taking a profession, representing his home constituency of Kamouraska, marrying well, and siring 15 children: living, loving, and dying on his native soil in communion with the Catholic Church. “Our Loyalty is not one of speculation, of pounds, shillings, and pence,” Col. Taché told the Canadian Parliament (then in Montreal) in 1846. “We do not carry it on our lips, we do not make a traffic of it. But we are in our habits, by our laws, and by our religion ... monarchists and conservatives.”



Sir Étienne-Paschal Taché. Public Domain

That was Taché’s famous speech in which, recalling his experiences in 1813, he predicted, gesturing toward the portrait of Queen Victoria in the chamber (the very painting that later **hung** in the Senate foyer in Ottawa), that the “last cannon shot” in defence of Britain would be fired “by a French Canadian.”

By 1864, Col. Sir Étienne Taché, Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George from Queen Victoria and Knight of the Pontifical Equestrian Order of St. Gregory the Great from Pope Pius IX, among other honours, was co-premier with John A.

Macdonald in the coalition that brought about Confederation. He was unanimously elected chairman of the **Quebec Conference**, the 17-day meeting to discuss a proposed Canadian confederation. More than any other figure, Taché’s life and career connect the War of 1812 with Confederation.

The old Canada of Taché is long gone, obliterated by time and the loss of memory as well as deliberate replacement and suppression of

traditional symbols and history with the invented traditions of the 1960s—and most recently, by false narratives and greatly exaggerated claims of evils in Canadian history.

It used to be part of a non-partisan historical consensus that the War of 1812 was foundational to Canada’s identity. The historian Arthur R.M. Lower, the author of the influential book “Colony to Nation,” wrote that the war was semi-mythical but formative all the same: “The sense of Canadian nationality dates from the war of 1812. ... The essence of the war ... is that it built the first story of the Canadian national edifice.”

“Old soldiers never die, they just fade away,” said General Douglas MacArthur. But the memory of Canada’s war veterans and their ultimate sacrifice in all the wars of Canadian history remains strong. Given Canadians’ abiding interest in Remembrance Day and veterans (despite government neglect and mishandling), there is still much hope that younger Canadians and future generations will somehow gain a better sense of Canada’s history and traditions than they have been given at school.

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