



Bytown: Construction camp to fledgling city

Chapter one

Table of Contents

Bytown: Construction camp to fledgling city Chapter one 1

 Planning and self-organizing (1819-1838).....3

 Military presence.....5

 The canal and landowners.....6

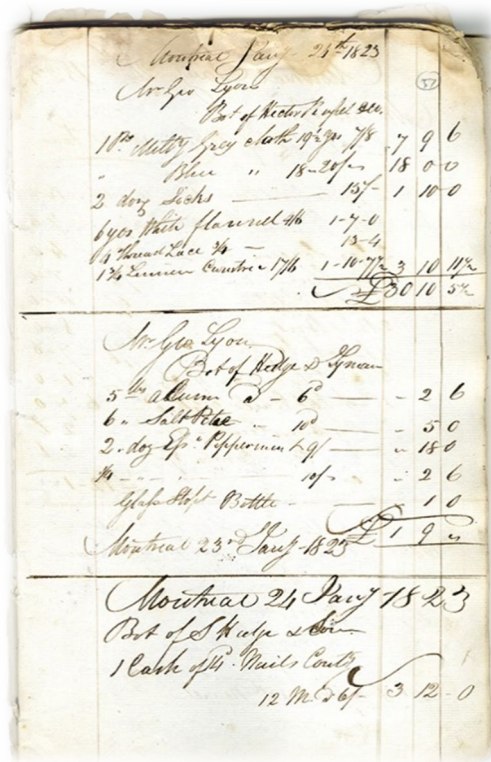
 Burgeoning Bytown.....8

 Governance and urban order 11

Planning and self-organizing (1819-1838)

The War of 1812 had shown the British government that its Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada were vulnerable to attack along the St. Lawrence River, which for about 185 kilometres formed the border with the United States. Anxious about the defensibility of the St. Lawrence between Montreal and Kingston, the government decided to build a canal system connecting those places along a secondary water route.

As the 1820s got underway, Governor Lord Dalhousie was looking to buy up land along the Ottawa River where an entrance to the canal might be constructed. It is said that his first choice was Richmond Landing, at the upper limit of navigable waters on the Ottawa River. A creek from Dow's Swamp drained into the Ottawa there, and a road led to the Richmond military settlement, where George Lyon had already opened a dry goods store, selling goods from Montreal.



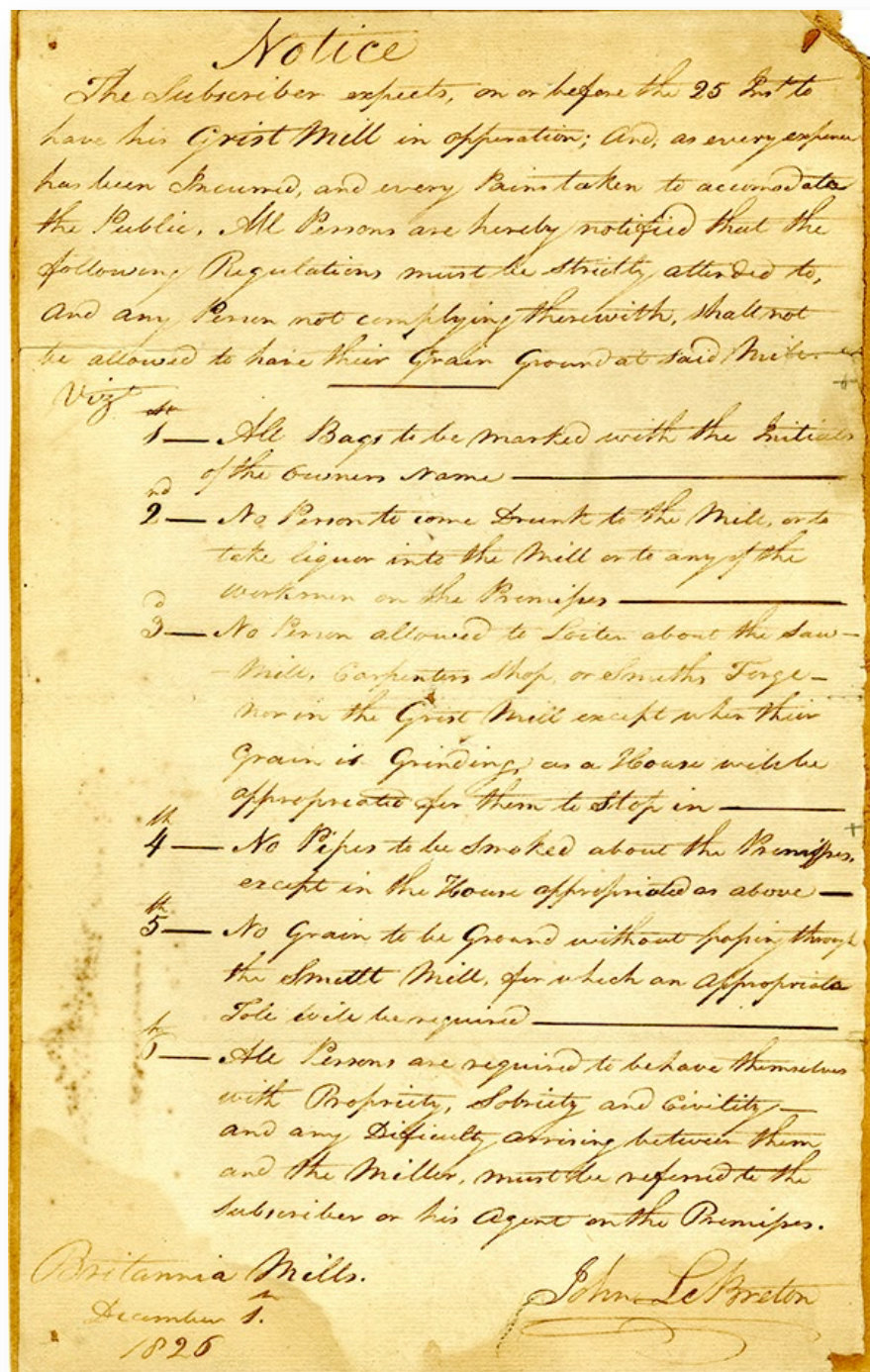
Page from cash and purchase book of George Lyon, Richmond, Upper Canada [Ontario], January 1823

City of Ottawa Archives | CA028576

Another consideration even closer was Wright's Town, where Philemon Wright had established a small settlement with mills.

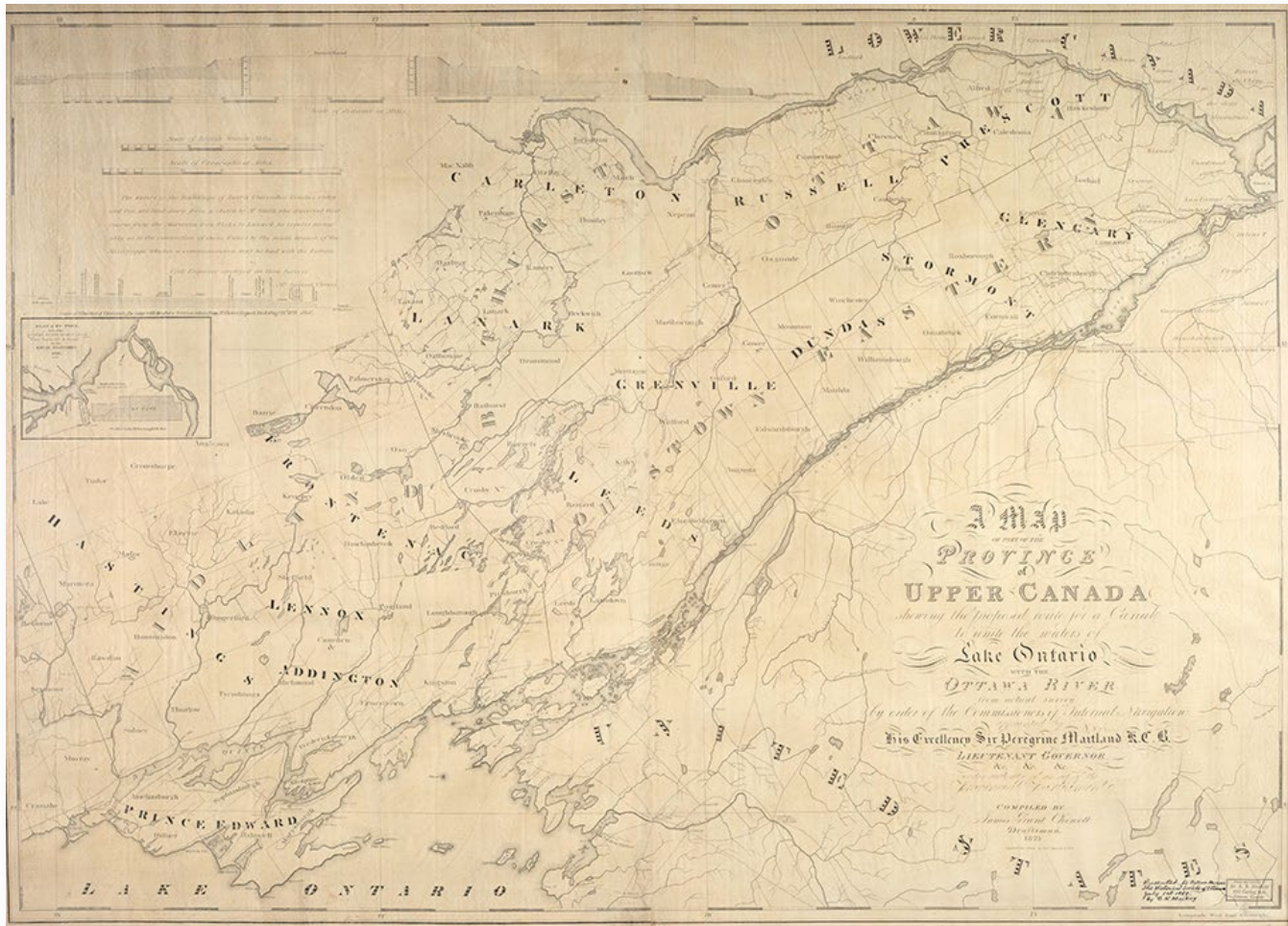
According to one story, Dalhousie was outbid at a sheriff's auction for the Richmond Landing plots. The buyer was John LeBreton, who owned nearby property. LeBreton then offered to sell the land to Dalhousie at a much higher price, but Dalhousie refused. LeBreton kept the land—which became

known as LeBreton Flats—and also kept his original farm, Britannia, where in 1826 he opened up a grist mill, to join the sawmill, carpenter's shop, and blacksmith's forge already operating there.



Notice by John LeBreton providing regulations for his new grist mill at Britannia Mills, December 1, 1826
City of Ottawa Archives | CA028477

Whatever the truth in this story, the entrance for the canal ended up further to the east, with Dalhousie buying lands on the Ottawa River near Rideau Falls, around what came to be called Entrance Bay.



A map of part of the Province of Upper Canada showing the proposed route for a Canal to unite the waters of Lake Ontario with the Ottawa River ... / compiled by James Grant Chewell, draftsman, 1825-1828

City of Ottawa Archives | CA028478

Military presence

Several settlers lived nearby, mostly Americans from New England, who were able to provide much-needed supplies for the canal venture. These settlers included the Wright family, who had mills on the north shore of the Ottawa River; Nicholas Sparks, who worked for the Wrights, farming on the other side of the river; the Billings family, who farmed further along the Rideau River; and a few others.

Glimpse into the Billings family's contributions to Ottawa's early growth. Through personal stories and historical context, the [Billings Family virtual exhibit](#) presents how one family helped shape the Billings Bridge Village and the surrounding region.

Although the canal was a military project, the canal was not built by the British Army. Instead, a governmental agency called the Board of Ordnance managed military infrastructure like canals, forts and infrastructure. It was led by the Duke of Wellington – a famous general and hero of the Napoleonic Wars. The Ordnance created the Corps of Royal Engineers, a military group commissioned separately from the regular British Army to construct the canal. In 1826, they sent out Lieutenant-Colonel John By to lead the canal project. He had worked in Canada before, building fortifications and a canal in Quebec.

Representatives were also needed from a second body, the Commissariat, a department of His Majesty's Treasury comprised of uniformed civilians. These officers were responsible for the disbursing the funds required for the canal project and for the provisioning of the military personnel involved.

The bulk of the canal work was planned to be accomplished by civilian contractors. Both the military and the contractors positioned their administration at the Ottawa-River entrance to the canal. The Board of Ordnance had the power to buy or seize lands for canal use, including space for fortifications, barracks, and administrative buildings. The Ordnance and Commissariat officers and a few regular soldiers acted as a security force and were located at Entrance Bay—an area that was named Barrack [now Parliament] Hill.

In accordance with Lt.-Col. By's plans, this Ordnance land was to be flanked by two separate settlements which came to be named after him: Upper By Town on the high ground to the west of the Hill, intended as a place for lawyers, government officials, and elite merchants, and Lower By Town in the marshland to the east, which was planned to be a community for the workers. The names Upper and Lower were not only geographic in meaning but also reflected social class. Both communities were bounded on the south by lands pertaining to Nicholas Sparks.

The canal and landowners

Nicholas Sparks was an American who had once worked for the Wright family. He later bought land from Thomas Burrows Honey and eventually became the Clerk of Works for the Ordnance Department during the construction of the canal.

Sparks owned land known as Lot B, which included parts of Concession C and the irregularly shaped Concession D. His property stretched from the Ottawa River on the east to what is now Bronson Avenue on the west. The northern boundary was a major road planned by Lt.-Col. John By, which

would soon be named Wellington Street. This road separated Sparks's land from the property purchased by Lord Dalhousie.

To the south, Sparks's estate was bordered by land owned by Grace McQueen, the border running along what is now Laurier Avenue.

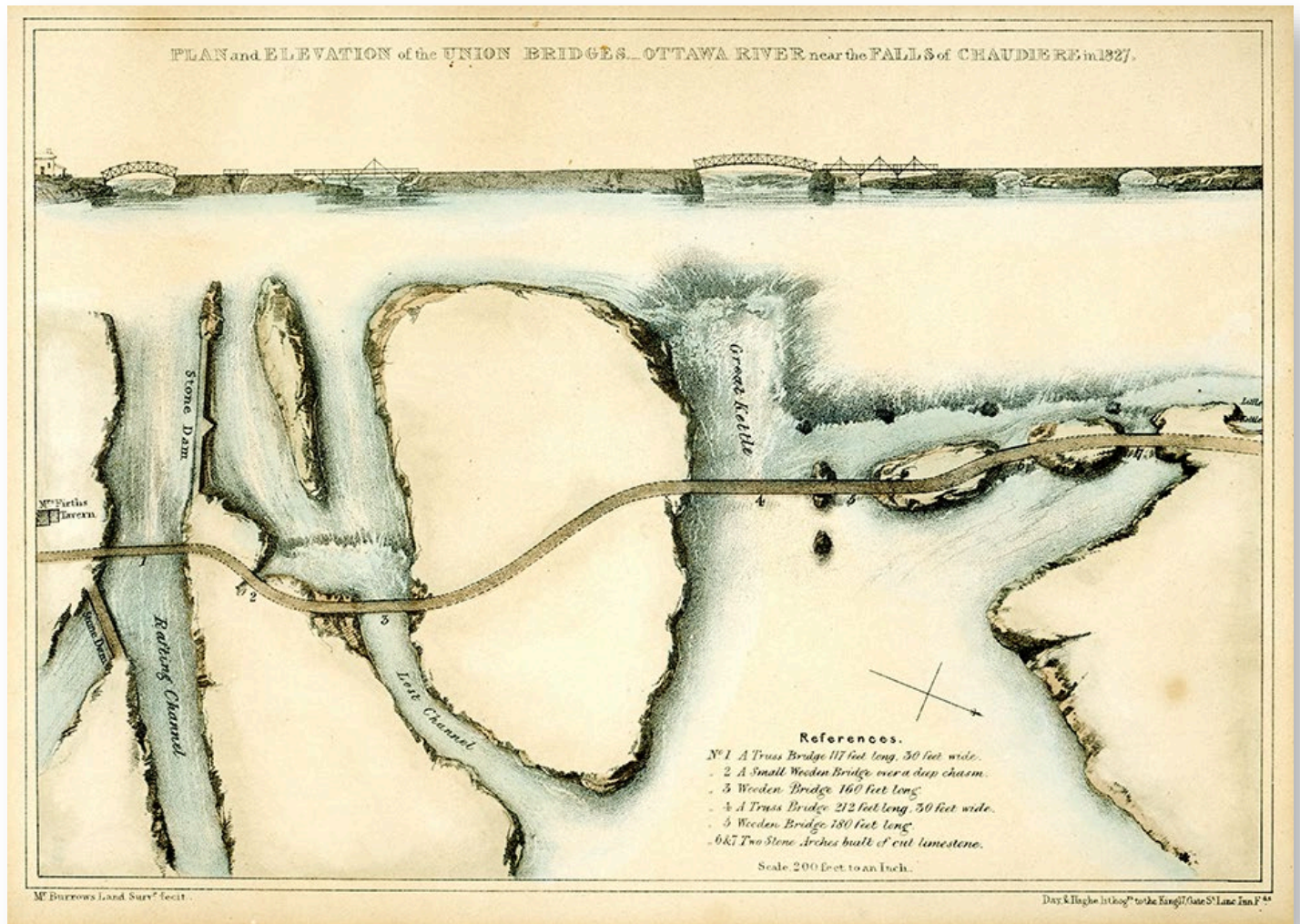
Together the McQueen and Sparks properties formed a large 1200-acre block through which the Rideau Canal was planned to run; consequently, sizable portions of both estates were taken by Ordnance for canal purposes.

Work had gotten underway on the canal by 1827, with the so-called Ottawa locks at Entrance Bay being among the more technically challenging parts. Starting in May below Hog's Back, John Burrowes Honey, an Overseer of Works for Ordnance, canoed down to Kingston to survey the proposed route.



Page from John Burrows diary at commencement of trip along Rideau Canal route with party under Lt. Frome, July 22, 1827
City of Ottawa Archives | CA028479

As part of the canal project, plans were made to build a bridge across the Ottawa River to connect Wright's Town to the Upper Canada side. Before this, the two sides were linked only by ferry. Not without incident, the bridge was eventually completed.



Plan and elevation of the Union Bridges. Ottawa River near the falls of Chaudiere,
 Artist John Burrows, 1827
 City of Ottawa Archives | CA028480

Burgeoning Bytown

With the bridge completed and canal work underway, Upper By Town was set to develop. Following By's plan, this community was designed to serve the needs of the military elite and Upper Canada's ruling class, both predominately English. But a larger portion of early settlers in the community were Scots, and so it was that that the first church to acquire land in Upper By Town was St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, in 1828. The land located on the south side of Wellington Street was provided by Nicholas Sparks. Work was later begun in 1832 on the Anglican Christ Church in Upper Town.

Ingram
 married to } His birth day of January
 Johnston } one thousand eight hundred &
 thirty eight Richard Ingram of
 Bytown Labourer & Sophia
 Johnston of the same place
 Spinsters were married by me their
 parents having been published on
 the three preceding Sundays -
 Witness J. Strong Minister
 of Bytown & Hull.
 When Johnston called
 being again before Susan Jane Strong.
 I certify that the above is a
 true extract from the register
 kept by me as Minister of Bytown.
 J. Strong
 Minister of Bytown
 & Hull
 Bytown 12 Jan 1839.

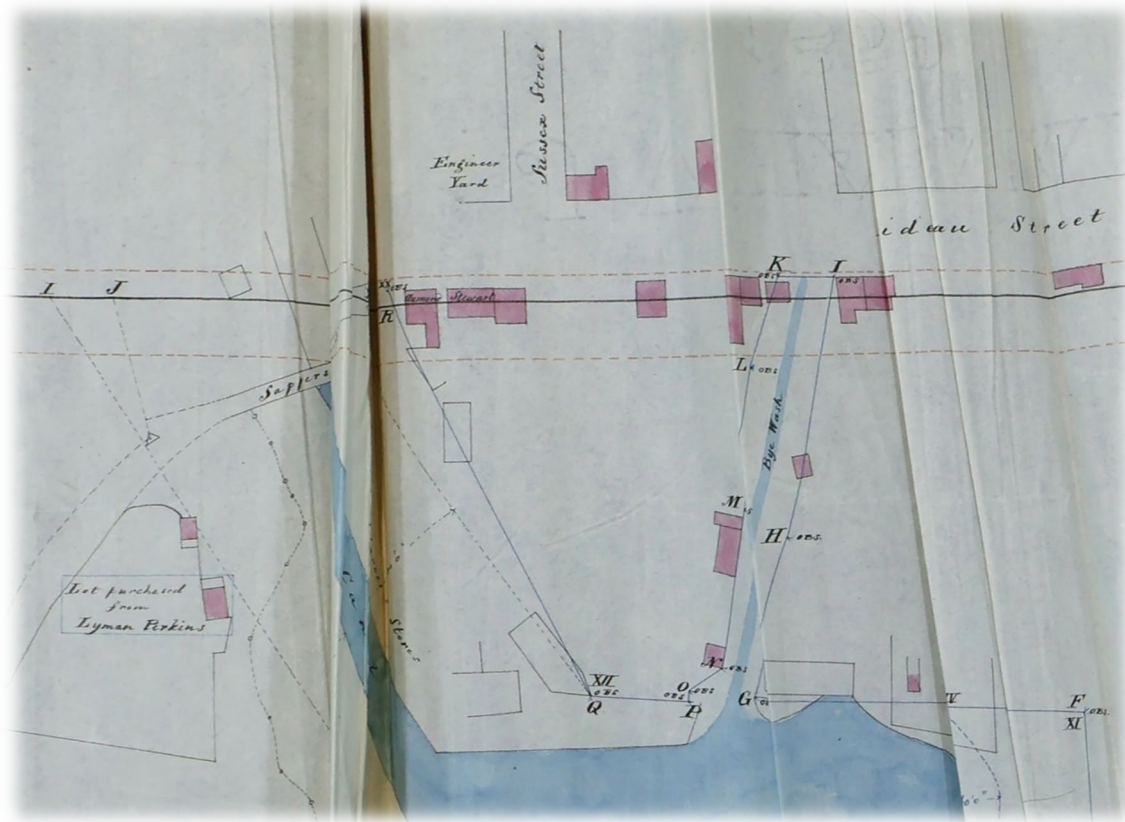
Certified extract by S.S. [Samuel Spratt] Strong, Minister of Bytown & Hull, from his
 minister's register for Ingram-Johnston marriage at Bytown, January 12, 1839
 City of Ottawa Archives | CA028482

Meanwhile, in Lower Town, William Stewart and John Glass McIntosh established a shop on Rideau
 Street in 1827 near the barracks of the canal workers. The workers, predominately Irish and French-
 Canadian, formed the nucleus of Lower By Town's population. The workers were not generally
 landowners and rented tenements from the Ordnance or from the few landowners. It was not until
 1832 that a Roman Catholic Church was completed on land donated to Father Angus MacDonnell by
 Lt.-Col. By in Lower By Town—an important milestone in the religious and cultural life of the working-
 class community. This site would later become home to the Basilica.

Among the settlers arriving in 1827 to take property in the Lower Town was Jean-Baptiste Billy dit St.-
 Louis, an entrepreneur from Montreal. In 1830, he constructed the first sawmill in the community. He
 purchased land along the canal and later constructed the St. Louis Dam to block a stream that
 drained the nearby swamp. This led to the formation of what is now known as Dow's Lake.

Discover how Jean-Baptiste Billy, born in Montreal in 1782, is connected to the American city of St. Louis and the California gold rush—and what three indenture documents reveal about his story.

Joseph Aumond, one of the first francophone residents of Lower By Town to achieve financial and political success, arrived there in 1828. At first, he operated a store for J.D. Bernard of Montreal, beside McIntosh & Stewart's shop on Rideau Street.



Detail from Plan of Lot C Concession C Nepean Township showing land taken by the late Lt. Col. John By, Royal Engineer, 1846, showing locations of neighbouring shops of Aumond and Stewart.

City of Ottawa Archives | MG110-BRMK-8/18-61

Among the workers who had come to By Town to work on the canal was Antoine Robillard, a stonecutter from Saint-Eustache, near Montreal. Once the canal was complete and opened in 1832, Robillard settled in Lower By Town on Clarence Street.



Antoine and Marie Émilie Robillard [photograph], [1860-1875]
City of Ottawa Archives | CA028484

The division of Bytown into two distinct communities—one for the elite and one for laborers—was a defining and unusual aspect of its development. And this divide was reinforced by the enduring presence of the British military, which continued to control key lands situated between the two communities long after the canal's completion.

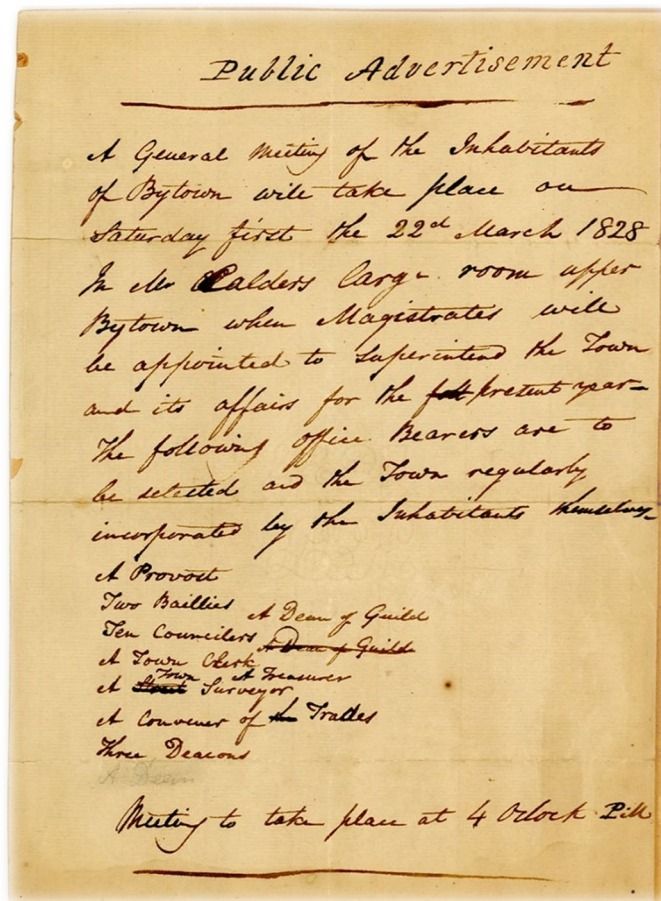
While operating as a landowner in Bytown, Ordnance never sold its lands but rented them out instead. Lt.-Col. John By, an absentee landlord himself after his purchase of the McQueen lands, did the same, extracting rents from tenants without selling property to any buyers. This effectively bolstered the town's division into separate upper and lower parts for decades. Also, because of election requirements at that time, tenants did not qualify to vote in elections. This meant that Ordnance and Lt.-Col. By were responsible for a comparatively small electorate in Bytown, concentrating power into the hands of only a few.

Governance and urban order

Despite the British military's control of land separating Upper and Lower Town, the inhabitants from both settlements began to self-organize to conduct their own affairs.

Bytown initially was situated within the Bathurst District, which held General Quarter Sessions of the Peace in Perth. Following the English model of government, these sessions were presided over by justices or magistrates, typically appointed by the colonial administration.

It is interesting to note that Bytown sought to elect its own government in 1828. Also contrary to common practice was the chosen government structure, modelled on a Scottish town, electing a provost, bailiffs, a dean of guilds, a town clerk, a treasurer, a surveyor, and a convenor of trades and a council.



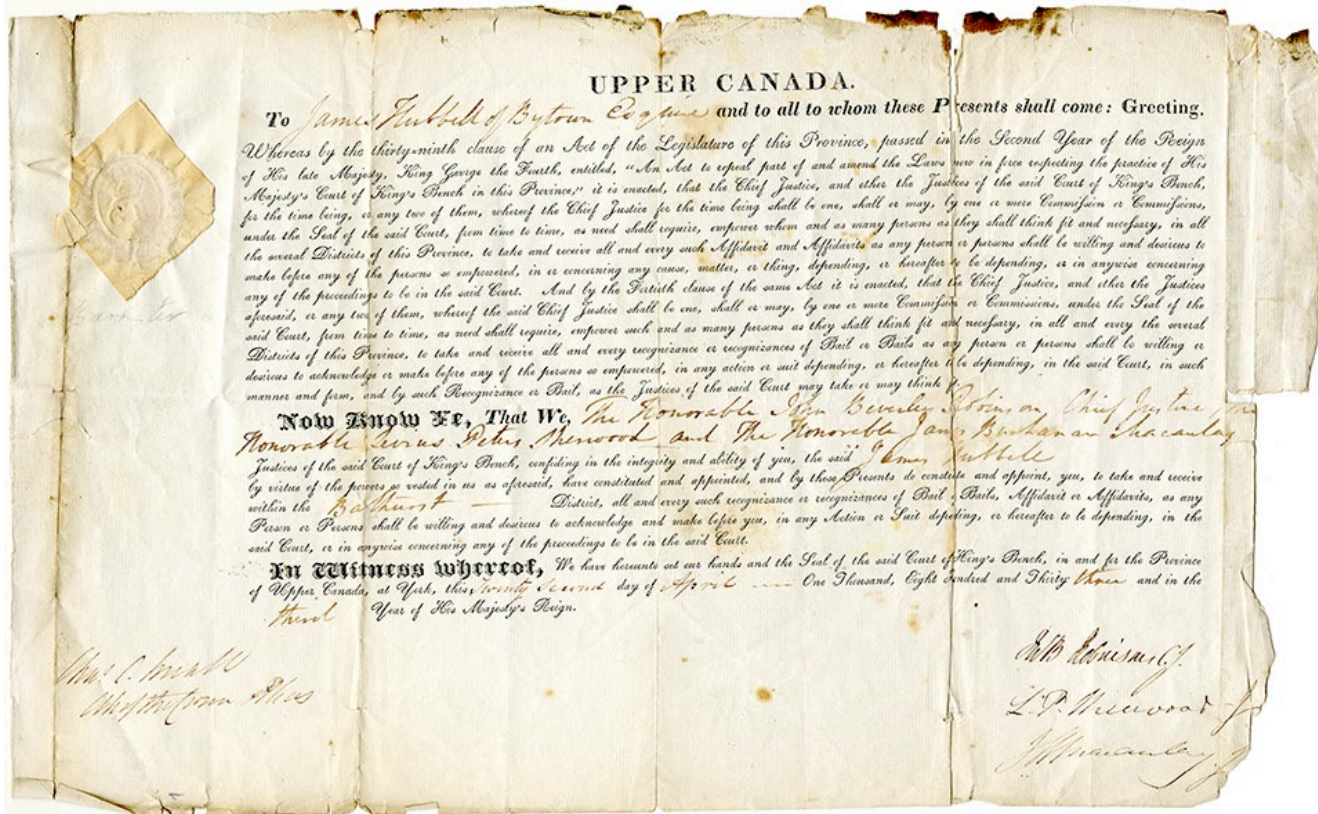
Public advertisement of a general meeting of the inhabitants of Bytown at Calder's large room, March 22, 1828

City of Ottawa Archives | CA028485

The meeting took place at Calder's place—likely the shop of William and Hugh Calder, early Scottish merchants in Bytown. Comprised of many of Bytown's leading figures, including Alexander Christie, Thomas MacKay, John McTaggart, George and Robert Lang, and William Stewart, this first elected council itself was indeed overwhelmingly Scottish in character—it was not haphazard, then, that the Presbyterian Church had been the first to be established.

But the new officers and council were soon to discover that their election would not be officially recognized. Instead, five men—though none of those who had been elected—received life

appointments as town magistrates from the provincial government. As time advanced, additional public officers were needed, including Commissioners of Oaths, appointed by the provincial courts.



Appointment by Justices of the King's Bench, of James [Lawrence] Hubbell, Bytown, as Commissioner for Oaths, April 22, 1833
City of Ottawa Archives | CA028486

Policing became more necessary once the canal was completed. There was massive unemployment, and Peter Aylen and the Shiners had sparked unrest with French-Canadian lumbermen. A community effort to create its own system of protection was needed, and so William Stewart and other community leaders established the Bytown Association for the Preservation of the Peace. An unsuccessful volunteer battalion of quasi-militia, the Ottawa Rifles, was also attempted. Otherwise, security was fairly often obtained through the generous assistance of the few British soldiers stationed in Bytown.

The town's inhabitants also had to be self-reliant in terms of medical services. Fortunately, they had done a good job of attracting practitioners from the earliest days. James Stewart was one of the first doctors in town, arriving in 1827 with an indenture of apprenticeship to a surgeon in Newton Stewart and a certificate from the County Tyrone infirmary in Omagh as proof of his professional qualifications.

County Tyrone Infirmary

Omagh January 1st 1811

I certify that Mr. James Stewart, has been a
regular Pupil in this Infirmary- twelve months:
during which time, he conducted himself very much
to my satisfaction —

Tho. Maxwell

Surgeon

Certificate by Thos. [Thomas] Maxwell, surgeon to James Stewart for twelve months
study at County Tyrone Infirmary, Omagh, Ireland, January 1, 1811

City of Ottawa Archives | CA028487

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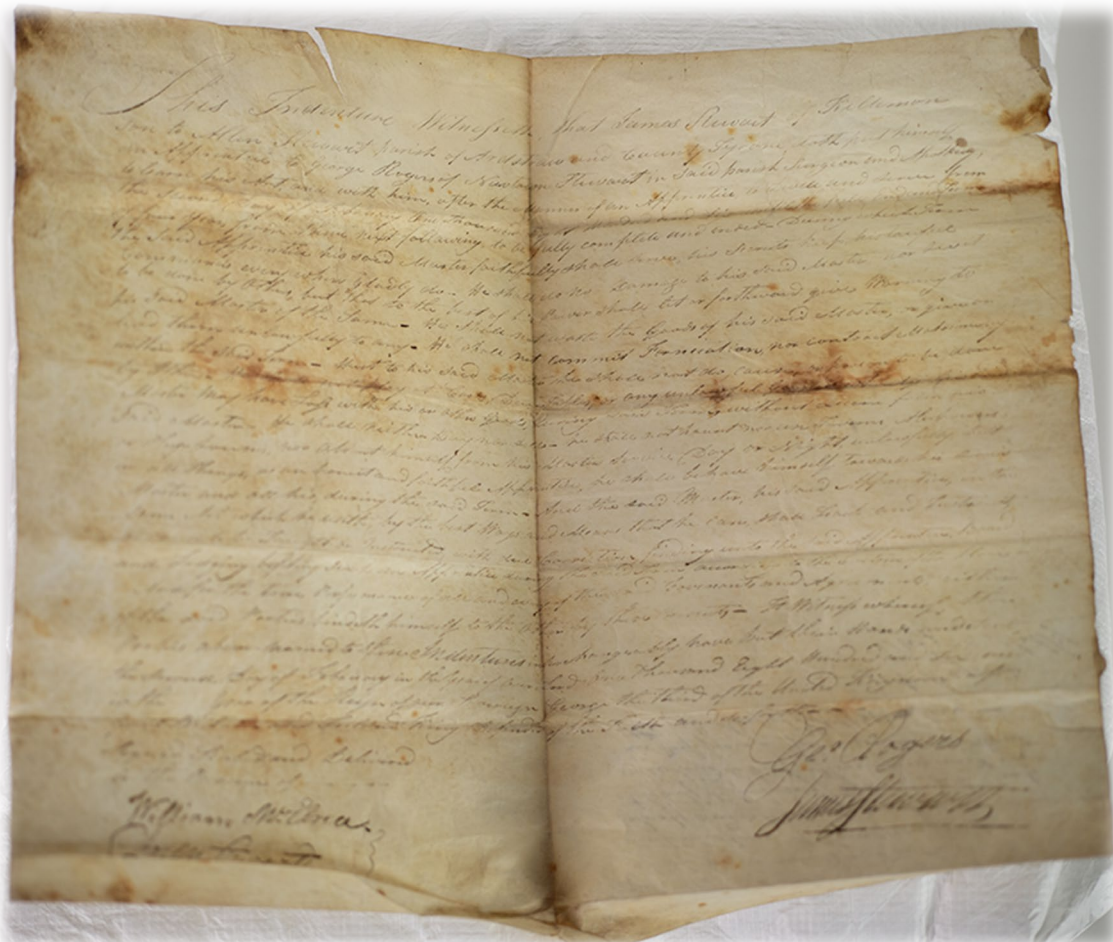
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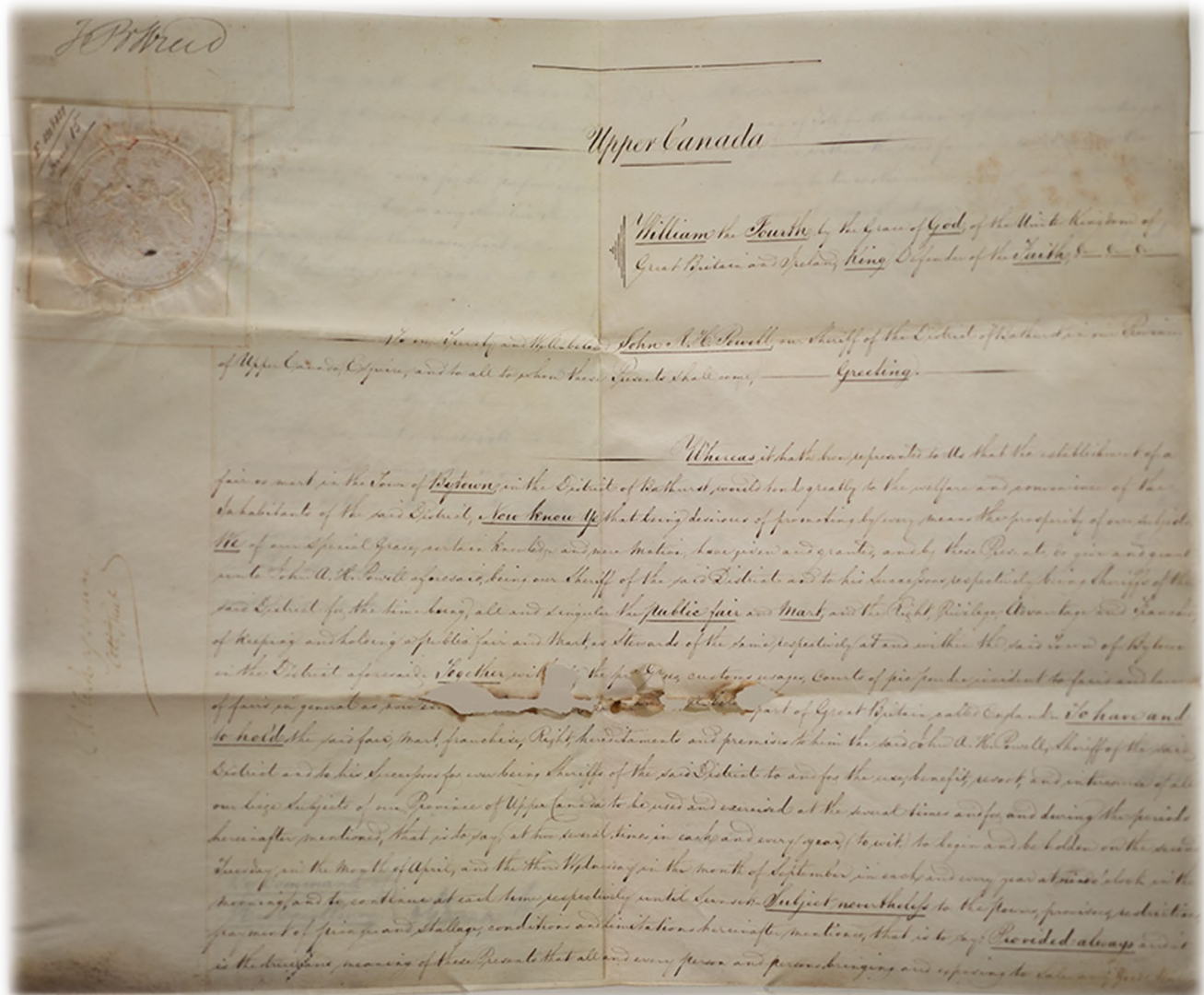


Indenture of apprenticeship of James Stewart of Kiltimon to George Rogers of Newtonstewart, surgeon and apothecary, 1806
City of Ottawa Archives | CA028488

Other doctors followed: Alexander James Christie arrived that same year and worked as a doctor, though his lack of similar credentials limited his progress. Edward Van Cortlandt joined the community in 1832.

John By departed the town bearing his name in 1832 to return to England and to his estate at Frant, Sussex, leaving John Burrowes Honey responsible for his estate—formerly belong to the McQueens—south of Bytown.

In Bytown's early days, Lt.-Col. By had established a market, with two buildings in the middle of George Street next to the butchers' shambles on the south side. Over time, the town gained a more central role in the economy of the district, emerging out from the shadow of Perth. After successfully petitioning the government, Bytown received letters patent by King William IV in 1837 chartering it to hold its own twice-yearly fair, under the direction of the district sheriff:



Letters patent by William IV to John A.H. [Ambrose Hume] Powell, sheriff of Bathurst District, Upper Canada, as steward, granting permission to establish a fair or mart in Bytown, 1837

City of Ottawa Archives | CA028492

By this time, the canal was fully operational. But the presence and influence of Ordnance continued after completion and opening of the canal in the summer of 1832. The canal remained under its administration, led by a new superintendent, Captain Bolton, after the departure of John By.

RC 6
Reception of
Notice
5 June 1835

As soon as the Iron
Bars for the Guts of the
Carillon Lock are complete
The Master Smith will proceed
without delay to fit the
strengthening rivets of the lock
Guts between the first Rapids
and Mytown commencing
with the deflection rivet at
Mcneils Village then to proceed
to the first Rapids and work
downward. The Master Smith
will take with him the
 requisite Tools. Smiths &c.

D. Bolton Capt.
An. Roy. Engin.
Ottawa C.

Orders by Captain [Daniel] Bolton, RE, to the [Ordnance] master smith [William Tormay],
June 5, 1835

City of Ottawa Archives | CA028493

Starting in 1835, and continuing over the next two years, Ordnance conducted arbitration panels to resolve outstanding issues relating to lands appropriated for the canal work.



Leather Ordnance arbitration portfolio, 1835
City of Ottawa Archives | CA028494

Even after the canal was completed, Ordnance retained control of Barrack Hill and the surrounding lands. There was still a need to provide offices for the Ordnance and Commissariat leadership as well as accommodations for the few soldiers stationed in Bytown who provided ongoing canal administration. The Ordnance's reluctance to part with lands may have stemmed from the need to fund local operations. The rents collected from these properties were a valuable source of income they could not afford to lose.

A further explanation involves Ordnance's undeveloped plans to use some of the lands for the construction of a citadel on Barrack Hill, even suggesting it be renamed Citadel Hill. This plan continues to appear in Ordnance documentation as late as the 1840s. Because of this potential development, Wellington Street in Upper Town was unable to run straight to connect with Rideau Street in Lower Town. Instead, it bulged around Barrack Hill before reaching Sapper's Bridge across the canal.



Detail from Sketch of By Town shewing the proposed fortification, land taken from Mr. [Nicholas] Sparks, Lot C, Concn [Concession] C, also Crown Reserve, 1838.
City of Ottawa Archives | MG110-BRMK-8/18-71

With the canal in use, Bytown was no longer so dependent on its supply route from Montreal along the Ottawa River.

The path of the canal largely coincided with existing Indigenous routes that connected the centrally important Ottawa River (at first called the Grand River) with lands and lakes to the north and east of Kingston. All of the mounting military, immigration and industrial activity around the canal—extending out of previous land surveying and rural settlement in the area—was straining the patience of the Indigenous groups in the area. Eight times between 1798 and 1834, Constant Pinesi, an Anishinabe (Algonquin) leader and veteran of the War of 1812, protested to no avail to the British government about the extensive intrusion on his family hunting grounds. But indigenous use of the lands and routes had not yet been completely erased.

Watch for more chapters in 2026 and follow the journey as told through our archival collection.