

Ottawa's Quest for the Capital



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Ottawa's Quest for the Capital

Ottawa's Quest for the Capital explores the 19th century political journey that led to Ottawa being chosen as the unlikely seat of government. The material is based on the 2007 exhibition featured in Ottawa City Hall Art Gallery.

When Ottawa made its famous bid to become Canada's capital in 1857, a memorial written by local resident Richard Scott played a key role in the decision.



Portrait of Sir Richard William Scott, [187-?]
City of Ottawa Archives | CA002210

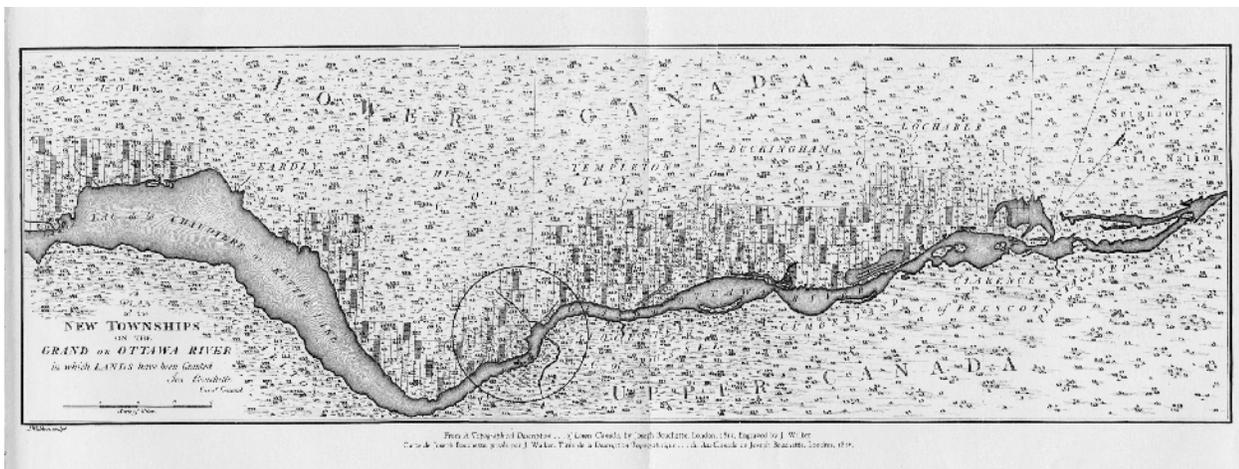
A New Province, a New Need: The Search Begins

The need for a new capital began with rebellion in 1837. At that time, the provinces of Upper and Lower Canada (roughly equivalent to today's Ontario and Quebec) were separate colonies, each with its own capital – Toronto and Quebec respectively.

After the rebellion, a prominent British Reformer arrived, Lord Durham, to investigate the causes of unrest and recommend solutions. He pushed for the union of the Canadas as a first step towards responsible government.

That was the beginning. When the Province of Canada was created in 1841, neither Canada East nor Canada West would accept the other's capital. The search was on for a new seat of government.

An 1815 map shows the Ottawa River between Upper and Lower Canada with Bytown (circled).



Topographical Description... of Lower Canada, Joseph Bouchette, London, 1815



Lord Durham, author of the Durham Report in 1839.

Library and Archives Canada | C-121846

The Rebellion of 1837 was quickly suppressed - as at the Battle of Saint-Charles.



Attack on Saint-Charles, November 25, 1837

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Regional Rivalry: The Search Continues

In seeking a new capital, early decision makers looked beyond Toronto and Quebec and settled instead on Kingston, a Lake Ontario port close to the border of Canada East and West. The Legislature flinched, however, as protests erupted from more established communities.

In 1844, the capital moved to Montreal. And there it might have stayed had mobs not burned the Parliament Buildings in 1849. After that, a perplexed government decided to alternate the capital between Quebec and Toronto (four years in each city). It was an expensive and unwieldy solution, and the Canadian legislators continued to argue into the 1850s.

Few people gave serious consideration to a remote little lumber town called Bytown.

In 1849, mobs torched the legislative buildings in Montreal.



The Burning of the Parliament Building in Montreal, Anonymous, 1849

McCord Museum | M11588

Bytown in 1853, looking east along Wellington Street to Barracks Hill (today's Parliament Hill).



Wellington Street near Bank Street, Ottawa

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Political Deadlock: The Search Grinds to a Halt

In 1856, politicians from around Ottawa and Montreal united to end the four-year cycle of perambulating capitals. The legislature voted instead to consider the claims of five rival cities – Quebec, Toronto, Kingston, Montreal and the newly minted City of Ottawa (formerly Bytown) – to be the permanent capital.

An astonishing series of votes – 48 in a single year – brought politicians to each other's throats in 1856, with each motion involving days of bitter debate. In the end, no city won or retained the support of a clear majority.

Finally, in March 1857, government leaders convinced the legislature to approve the referral of the question to London and to appeal to Queen Victoria to break what had become a political deadlock.



Quebec, 1832

McCord Museum | M17262



Kingston, 1851
McCord Museum | M922



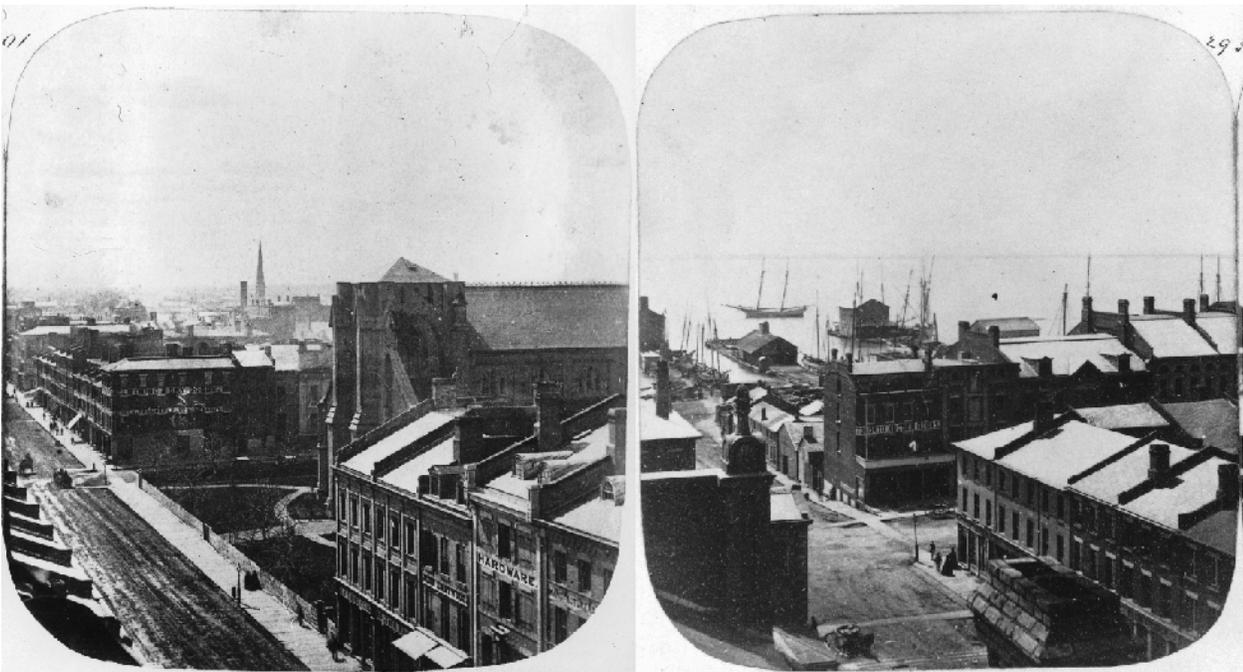
Montreal, 1852
McCord Museum | M13835



Bytown,

1855

Library and Archives Canada | C-000600



Toronto, 1860s

From St. Lawrence Hall looking south, Toronto, ON, about 1860

McCord Museum | VIEW-7301.0

McCord Museum | VIEW-7293.0

Referral: Royal Intervention

Canadian legislators who pushed for the referral of the capital question to the monarch believed that only Queen Victoria had the necessary prestige to break what had become a permanent stalemate. Some of the impetus for the referral came from the Governor-in-Chief, who represented the Queen in Canada.

Local residents like Richard Scott had powerful support in their bid to make Ottawa the capital. The Governor-in-Chief, Sir Edmund Head, had traveled to all the contending cities and quietly concluded that Ottawa was the only acceptable compromise.

Open the door to the Ottawa dream and discover why the Governor-in-Chief (now called the Governor General) supported Ottawa as the future capital of Canada in 1857.



Queen Victoria, 1859

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Sir Edmund Head, Governor-General of British North America, 1854 to 1861
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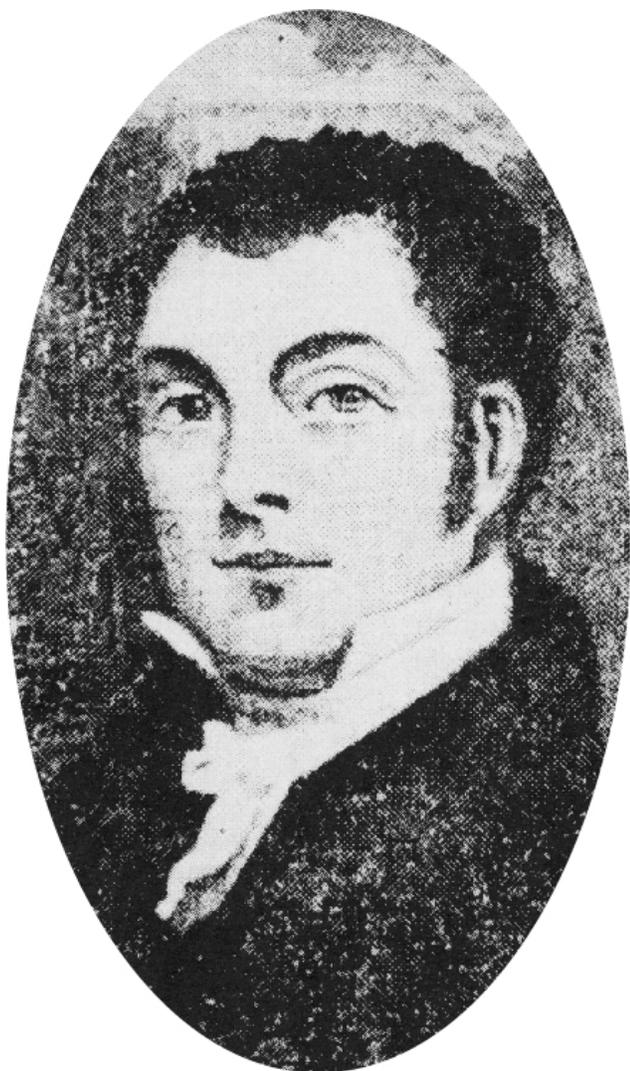
Arguing for Ottawa: Early Boosters

Bytown in the beginning was incredibly rough, but some people at least recognized its potential. While visiting the future site of Bytown in 1822, the Governor-in-Chief, Lord Dalhousie, said: *“whoever lives to see the Canadas united, will, from this eminence, see the seat of the United Legislature.”*



Lord Dalhousie, Governor General of Canada from 1820 to 1828
Library and Archives Canada | e010775259

Newspapers – notably the *Bytown Gazette*, founded in 1836 by Alexander J. Christie – continued the theme. Christie wrote that Bytown might be “selected as the Capital of the united Canadas without exciting those jealousies which could arise from the choice of any other place.”



Dr. Alexander J. Christie, founder of the *Bytown Gazette*
Library and Archives Canada | C-115785

In 1854, Ottawa formally petitioned the government for incorporation as a city.

Copy of Memorial
To His Excellency the Governor General
in Council
The petition of the Town Council of the Town of Bytown
Represented by John Smith
That the Town of Bytown from its position in the
Commercial Capital of the Ottawa Section of the Province
Comprising the Counties of Carleton, Prescott, Russell,
Lanark, and Nepean in Western Canada, and the
Ottawa Counties of Ottawa and Pontiac in Eastern
Canada;
That its importance is greatly increased
by the termination within its limits of that great
Public work the Rideau Canal which connects
it with Lake Ontario and also by the completion
of the Bytown & Prescott Railway which connects
it with the Atlantic Seaboard by way of Boston
and New York - a line of Railway being also
in course of construction to the City of Montreal
through the Ottawa Valley;
That the population of Bytown is estimated
at two thousand being the number required under
the Municipal Law to entitle it to City Corporate powers,
Therefore your petitioners pray that the Town
of Bytown be proclaimed a City by the Name of the
City of Ottawa and that the said City may
be divided into the same number of wards and
with the same divisions as the City of Bytown is
now constituted under the General Municipal Law
And we in duty bound your petitioners will ever pray
Bytown Sept. 21st 1854
John Smith
Mayor

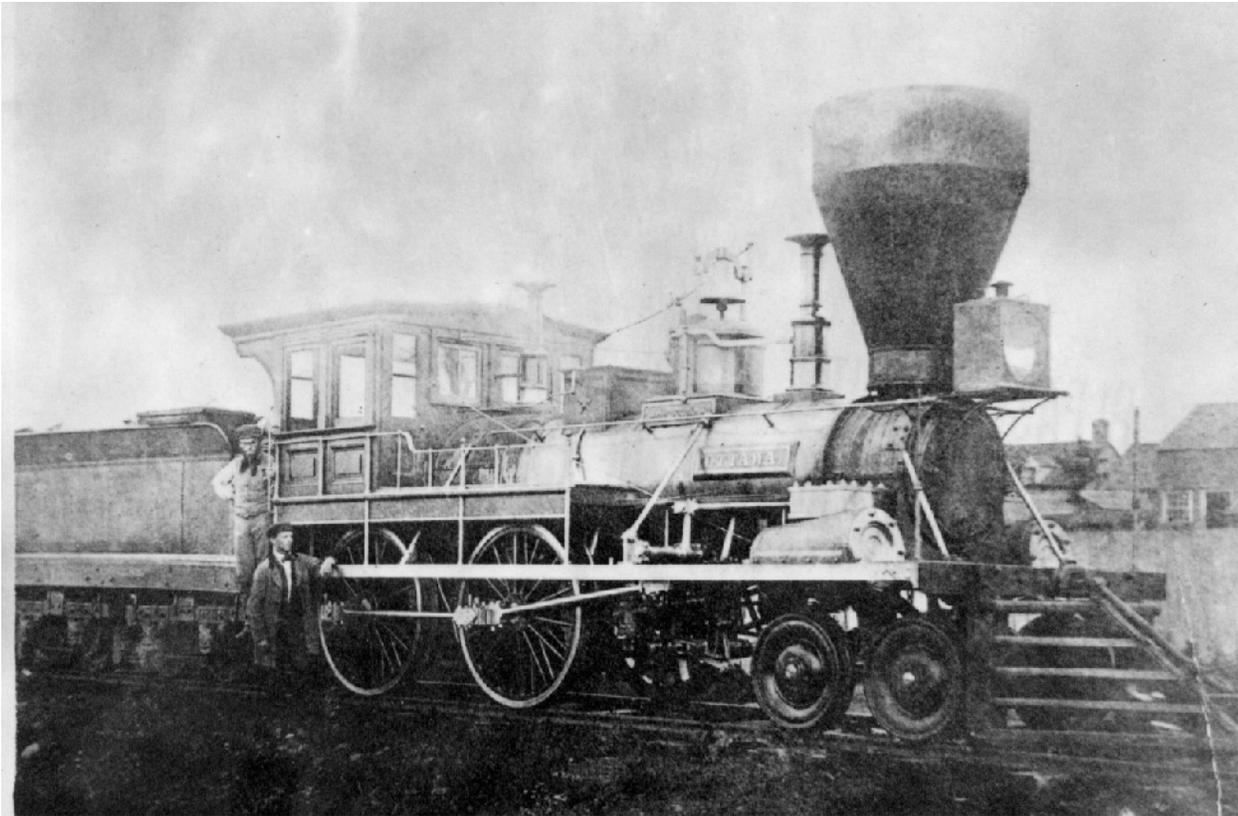
City of Ottawa Minutes, 21 September 1854

City of Ottawa Archives

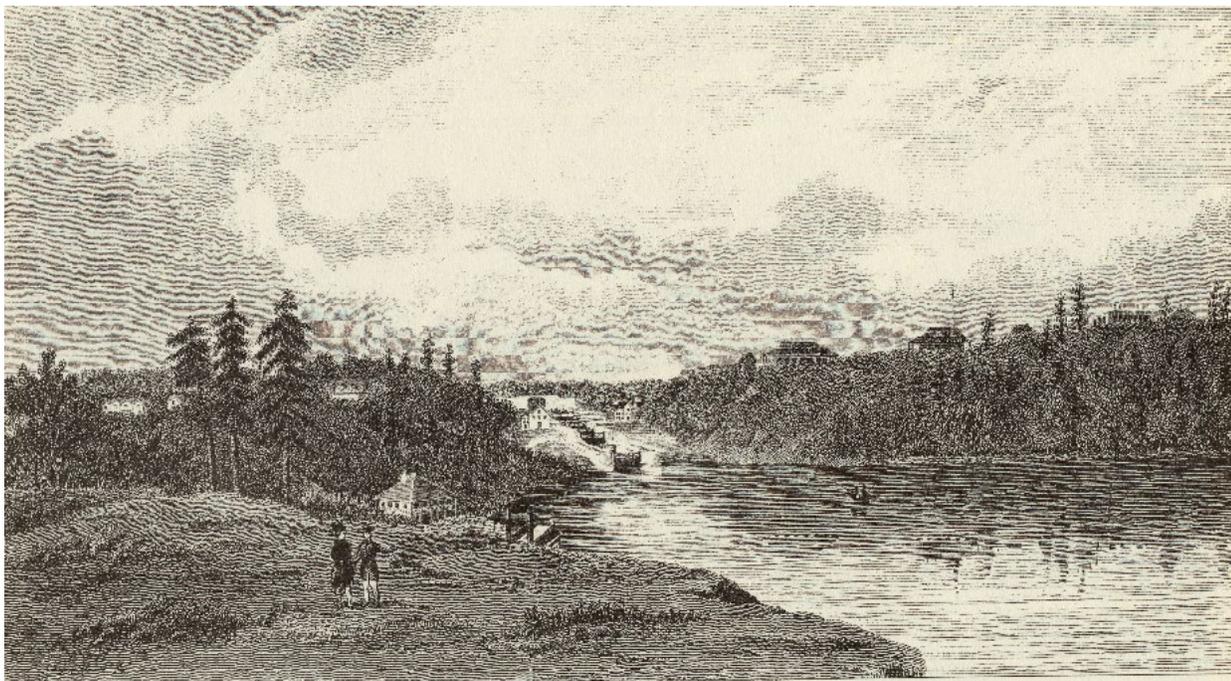


A mill

at the Rideau falls, near Bytown, 1842
City of Ottawa Archives | CA-11890



Locomotive on the Bytown & Prescott Railway, 1861
Library and Archives Canada | C-3187



Looking across the Ottawa River to the Entrance Locks of the Rideau Canal
Six Months in America, G.T. Vigne

Disappointed Hopes: Lobbying for Ottawa

Ottawa, even after it became a city in 1855, failed to win any real political ground during the long and bitter capital debate, 1841-56, during which the legislature voted on the matter a stunning 154 times.

Local politicians put forward motions eight times for Bytown/Ottawa to be named capital. Every motion was soundly defeated, even after frustrations with the perambulating system between Quebec City and Toronto became apparent. When voting occurred for other cities, Ottawa supporters schemed against a majority vote by splitting their votes amongst other contenders.

Ottawa might never have become capital had the legislature not finally agreed to disagree. The only hope, they concluded, was referral of the decision to disinterested outsiders.

“Every man thinks his own goose a swan” – Member of the legislative assembly.

The Capital Dream: Power, Prestige and Prosperity

Why did the five cities struggle so hard to win capital status? The answer lies in the 19th century idea of a “capital.”

Canada was a young country in the mid-1800s, comprising just part of today’s Ontario and Quebec. It was a largely rural country, and its communities tended to be small and lacking in grandeur.

But Canadians had ambitions. They looked to Europe and the world’s great Capitals – especially London and Paris – as centres of political, social and economic power.

The citizens of Ottawa wanted to participate in that prestige. They yearned for prosperity. They believed that capital status would bring a new surge of economic and cultural energy to their community.

“...the location of the [seat of government] at this central point would tend to develop equally the growth of the two Canadas in the very region where a stimulus is imperatively required...”

– Richard Scott, *Memorial*, 1857

The Decision: A Fair Compromise

“I am commanded by the Queen to inform you that in the judgement of Her Majesty, the City Ottawa combines greater advantages than any other place in Canada for the permanent Seat of the future Government of the Province...” – Henry Labouchere to Governor General Sir Edmund Head, 31 December 1857.

In autumn 1857, memorials from each of Canada’s five contending cities – including that written by Richard Scott on Ottawa’s behalf – were submitted to the Queen’s attention. She also read a private memorandum on the subject written by the Governor-in-Chief of the day.

Sir Edmund Head returned to Britain in 1857, visited the Colonial Office and, in his confidential report,

recommended Ottawa as capital in the strongest possible terms. "Ottawa is the only place," he wrote, "which will be accepted by the majority of Upper Canada and Lower Canada."

Queen Victoria, after careful consideration, agreed. She chose Ottawa as Canada's new and permanent seat of government.



Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in the 1850s
Library and Archives Canada | C-52232

N^o. 60.
 Downing Street,
 31 December 1857.

Sir,

By my Despatch of the 17th April last I informed you that Her Majesty had been graciously pleased to comply with the prayer of the addresses presented to Her by the Legislative Council and Assembly of Canada, namely, that She would

Government
 The Right Honble
 Sir E. Head Bart
 to to to
 to Canada.

renewe the Royal Decree by the selection of some place for the permanent Seat of Government in Canada.

This question has now been considered by Her Majesty and by Her Government, with that attention which its great importance demanded. The statements and arguments contained in the numerous Memorials laid before Her in consequence of your invitation to the Mayors of the several Cities which

interested, have been fully considered.

I am commanded by the Queen to inform you that in the judgment of Her Majesty, the city of Ottawa combines greater advantages than any other place in Canada for the permanent Seat of the future Government of the Province; and is selected by Her Majesty accordingly.

I have the honor to be
 Sir,
 Your most obedient
 humble servant
 (Whitaker)

Letter, Henry Labouchere, Colonial Secretary to Governor General Sir Edmund Head, 31 December 1857

Library and Archives Canada | R178



Sir Edmund Walker Head

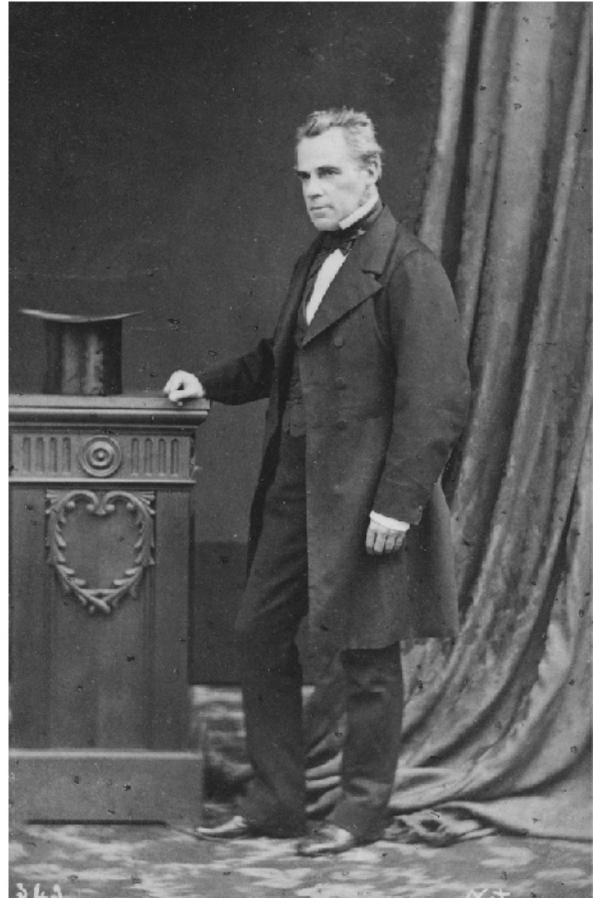
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Uproar! The Struggle Continues

Ottawa for capital! The reaction of Canadians ranged from anger and resignation all the way to rejoicing. It took more than two years, however, to bring Canada's legislature to ratify the decision.

In 1858, a motion against Ottawa passed in the legislature, 64 to 50. The government of John A. Macdonald and George-Etienne Cartier resigned, but the administration formed by the Opposition lasted only days. The Governor General recalled Macdonald and Cartier, both firm supporters of Ottawa, and the struggle continued. Attack followed attack, with Richard Scott lobbying front and center for Ottawa. The last challenge came in May 1860 and was defeated by a healthy margin.

Finally, the thorny question of Canada's capital was settled.



John

A. Macdonald (left) and George-Etienne Cartier jointly headed the government in 1838.

Library and Archives Canada | C-003811

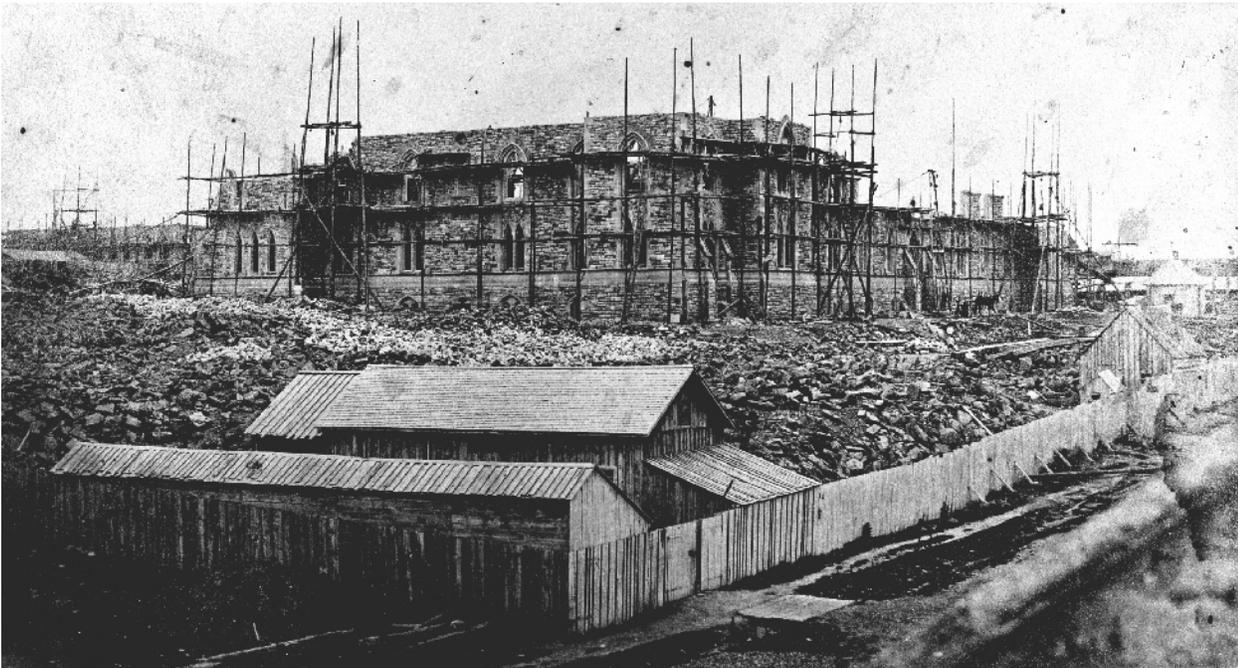
Library and Archives Canada | PA-074102

Confederation: Reopening the Debate?

The capital debate ended in 1860. Or did it? In just a handful of years, the issue threatened to rise once again to the surface during negotiations for a new federation of Canada and the Maritime provinces.

Politicians of the day wanted a fast decision. They were terrified of a return to past divisiveness, with city pitted against city and region against region. Just as important, however, were considerations of cost. Between 1859 and 1860, Canada had invested \$2.6 million on the construction of legislative buildings in Ottawa and was not keen on duplicating this outlay at another site.

In 1867, Ottawa was confirmed as the capital of a newly confederated Canada.



Parliament Buildings under construction

City of Ottawa Archives | CA-0147

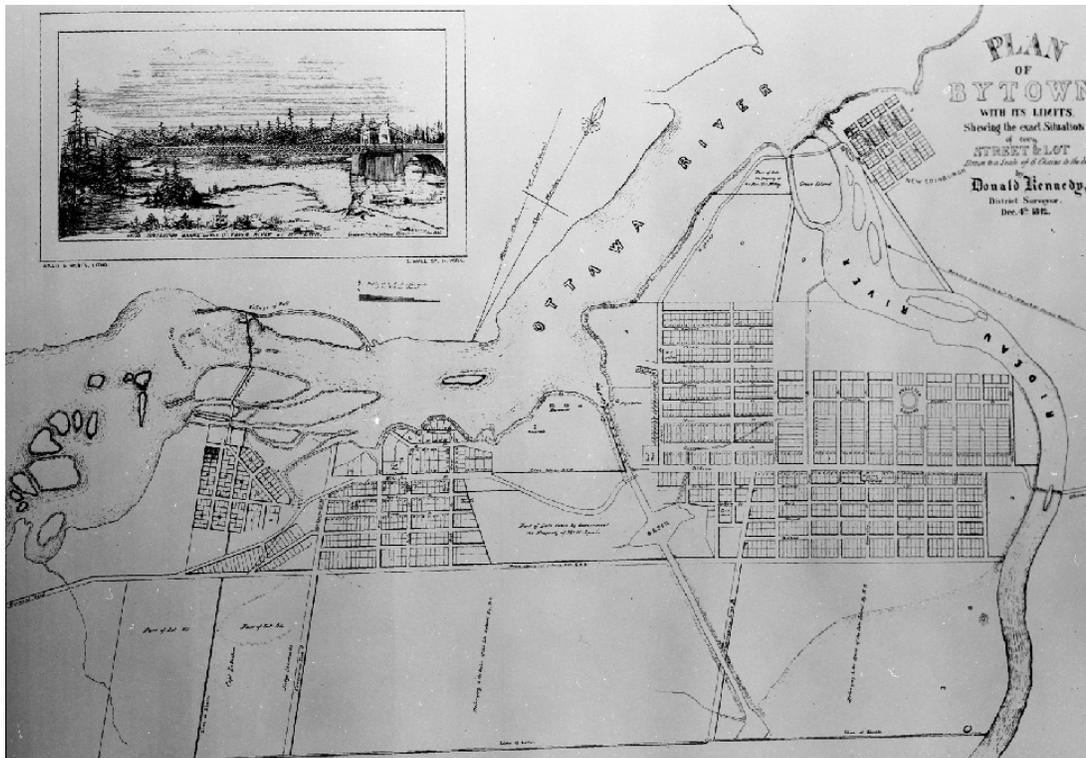
Ottawa's Quest for the Capital

"We, your majesty's dutiful and loyal subjects of the City of Ottawa, in the Province of Canada, beg leave to approach the approach the floor of the throne... to lay before our sovereign the claims of the City of Ottawa for selection as the future capital of this growing province..." – Richard Scott, *Memorial*, 1857

These famous words opened an 1857 memorial to Queen Victoria. In that document, Ottawa citizen Richard Scott argued eloquently for Ottawa as Canada's new seat of government. If he were here to welcome you today, no doubt he would note how Ottawa has grown into its national role over time and ask you to agree that, "It was indeed a good choice."



Bytown in 1855, looking west to the Chaudière Falls.
Library and Archives Canada | C-000601



Plan of Bytown, 1842
City of Ottawa Archives | CA-0994

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