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"OLD TIME STUFF"

Reminiscences of the Ottawa of Earlier Days. Personages, Scenes and Incidents Recalled for Evening Citizen Readers

"Downing Street,

"21st December, 1857.

"Sir,—By my despatch of the 17th of April last, I informed you that Her Majesty had been graciously pleased to comply with the prayer of the address presented to her by the Legislative Council and Assembly of Canada, namely, that she would exercise the royal prerogative 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 various Memorials laid before them in consequence of your invitation to the Mayors of the several cities chiefly interested, have been fully weighed.

"I am commanded by the Queen to inform you that in the judgment of Her Majesty the City of Ottawa combines more 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, &c.,

(Sgd.) "H. LABOUCHERE.

"Governor,

"The Right Hon. Sir E. Head, "Bt.,

" " " "Canada."

The Dream That Came True.

From the year 1841, when the provinces of Upper and Lower Canada were reunited, Bytown had dreamed of being the permanent capital. From the year 1855, when the name Bytown went into the discard, Ottawa had dreamed the same dream. For sixteen years the civic aspirations had hovered the firmness of a dream. For sixteen years the claims of this place had been scorned by the members of the legislature. By residents of Montreal, Toronto and Quebec they were laughed at—made the subject of popular jibes. Even Kingston, which by the favor of the George-Georges under his royal prerogative had for a time been the seat of government, laughed at the thought of poor Bytown in the background, asking to be made the permanent seat.

Like Bolt From Blue.

But suddenly in 1857, when hope for Ottawa was covered by a mantle of dark despair, the choice fell upon Ottawa. Wearied by their inability to select a site which would be satisfactory to all of the warring elements in both the Canadas, the legislature decided to submit the question to Queen Victoria. Not for a moment did any of the advocates of Montreal, Quebec or Toronto think that the choice would lie other than on one of the former large capitals. Even Kingston was not considered to have a remote chance.

Rivals in Consternation.

Suddenly came the bolt out of the blue. Despised Ottawa had been selected. There was consternation in the three cities. Immediately the advocates of Montreal, Toronto and Quebec combined in an endeavor to thwart the selection of the queen. But in the end the wishes of the queen and the Imperial authorities prevailed and Ottawa became the permanent seat.

The story of Ottawa's long and persistent fight for the "plum" is a most absorbing one. The decision which brought the capital to Ottawa (as everybody will admit) had a most vital influence on the history of Ottawa. Just what this city would have amounted to had it not become the capital is problematical. But the fact is that from the day the civil service entered the new buildings the city began to grow and progress.

* * *

Most people are familiar with the pretty story of how the queen, after carefully studying all the written propaganda matter submitted by the rival civic claimants and examining the best maps of the Canadas then extant, had placed her finger on Ottawa and said, "Here is the spot." What is probably nearer to the truth is that the responsible advisers of the queen, covered by the burning of the Parliament Buildings at Montreal and other serious disturbances, and being desirous of not offending the peoples of the rival and troubled provinces, had decided on Ottawa as a compromise.

A Woman's Aid.

Another story, for which the late Sir Richard Scott is responsible, is that Lady Head, wife of the Governor-General, had had much to do with influencing the selection. Lady Head had visited Ottawa and liked it very much. Lady Head took a trip to England in 1857, and it is alleged used her influence both with the leading British statesmen and with Queen Victoria, but with what she on terms of personal friendship, if the story is true, it is another proof of the old adage, "Cherchez la femme."

The story goes that on the occasion of her visit to Ottawa, Lady Head was entertained (under canvas) on Major's Hill Park. She was so charmed with the view of the falls and Barrack Hill and the Laurentian Mountains in the background, that she made a sketch of it. (She was an artist.) It is said Lady Head showed this sketch to Queen Victoria and other cabinet leaders and that the sketch did much to influence the decision.

Strong Civic Address.

It is probable, however, that the strong civic address in which Ottawa set forth its claims helped greatly. Ottawa's case was a very strong one, and splendidly set forth. It was drafted by Sir Richard Scott (then Hon. R. W. Scott), who had been for many years in the forefront of the battle for Ottawa's rights and who was thus eminently fitted to present the city's case.

* * *

Let the story be told in its chronological sequence.

* * *

From the time of the cession of this country by France to Britain, up to 1791, Quebec had been the seat of government. In 1791 an imperial act was passed, dividing the country into Upper and Lower Canada.

Quebec Remained Capital.

Under this act Quebec remained the capital of Lower Canada. The first capital of Upper Canada was at the place now known as Niagara-on-the-Lake, then called Newark. Later the Upper Canada capital was changed to Toronto. Toronto remained the capital, till 1840, when the provinces were reunited under an Imperial act.

The act of 1840 gave the Governor-General power to name the place at which parliament should meet. Lord Sydenham, then the Governor-General, named Kingston. Parliament met there June 14, 1841. The choice of Kingston was very unpopular in Lower Canada. Both Montreal and Quebec had expected to be selected. The first in that Upper Canada, had stipulated in agreeing to unite that the capital should be in the west.

Trouble for Kingston.

As soon as parliament met trouble began to brew for Kingston.

On Aug. 23, 1841, a petition was presented to parliament praying that Her Majesty be asked to cause parliament to meet alternately in Toronto and Quebec. The petition was sent to a special committee which reported favorably; they were, they said, "prepared with the conviction that such a measure would be acceptable to the great body of the inhabitants of Canada."

On Sept. 14 it was decided by the house to present an address to Her Majesty asking for the change. The address was adopted on a vote of 24 to 24. Among the arguments in favor of the change set forth by the address were:

"Representatives of Eastern and Western Canada would thus become better acquainted with the respective inhabitants; their habits and views, their wants and expectations, and so become able to understand their just desires, etc."

Derbyshire of Bytown and Johnson of Carleton voted against the address.

Must Erect Buildings.

During the session of 1842 a despatch from Her Majesty's secretary of state was received, stating that Her Majesty could not agree to the alternative location scheme, unless the government of Canada would agree to provide money for the erection of suitable buildings at the two points.

Following the receipt of Her Majesty's message, a resolution was passed which adopted the principle of the right of the house to fix the place of meeting of the legislature. That was non-contentious and was adopted without dissent.

Motions then were put and lost declaring (1) that Toronto was a preferable place for the legislature to meet, and (2) declaring that Kingston did not afford the proper facilities for a meeting place for the legislature.

A motion to select Montreal for the permanent home of parliament was next put and also defeated.

Bytown Tried.

Then Messrs. Johnston and Derbyshire made a motion that Bytown be selected. This motion was swamped, 4 to 57. The record does not contain any reference to the derision which greeted Bytown's try, but one can easily imagine the derisive laughter with which Mr. Johnston's motion would be greeted.

It would take too much space to record all the motions which were made, but negatived. But finally the tired citizens carried by a vote of 51 to 27 a motion declaring in favor of Montreal. On this motion Mr. Derbyshire, who, though representing Bytown, lived in Montreal, voted for Montreal.

By a vote of 41 to 22, parliament agreed to furnish the necessary funds for the erection of suitable buildings.

Too Far Removed.

On Nov. 4, 1843, a message was read from the Governor-General in answer to the resolutions adopted in 1842, stating that it was "the prerogative of the crown to fix the place for holding every session of the legislature," and that Her Majesty's ministers could not approve of either Toronto or Quebec, both being too far removed from the centre of the province.

Following the message from His Excellency there was laid on the table a report from the executive council (the higher body, holding the same position as the Senate, then being elective). This report discussed at great length the merits of the various aspiring cities. The report was very contradictory.

Bytown "Impossible."

Of the claims of Bytown to recognition, the report admitted that "the advantages of its local position to the Rideau Canal gave it reasons for consideration, but that it was inconveniently located as regards both provinces." The report then intimated in polite language that Bytown was simply "impossible."

On Nov. 23, 1844, the legislature met in Montreal. The address of the legislative council passed in 1843 had in the meantime been approved by Her Majesty.

Then Came 1849.

For four years the legislature met in Montreal. During that period the permanent buildings had been erected, and all looked rosy for Montreal.

Then came 1849—tragic '49. The year '49 saw the culmination of the trouble over the Rebellion Losses agitation. The Rebellion Losses Bill was an aftermath of the rebellion of 1837. The bill provided for compensation to those who had suffered losses during the "unfortunate but necessary or wanton destruction of property." It provided that persons who had been convicted of treason and been transported to Bermuda should be compensated.

Caused a Furore.

In Upper Canada the bill was intensely unpopular. It was regarded not only a few of those who had been convicted in the rebellion had been transported to Bermuda and that therefore the bill opened the door to serious abuse.

The bill had been before parliament a short time before the whole Upper Canada was in ferment. The debates in the legislature were most acrimonious—the most acrimonious in the first 1840 was a back bitter bill, however, passed by a vote of 41 to 15.

Cries for Disallowance.

Petitions were publicly flowed in, by the hundreds. Lord Elgin, however, gave the royal assent to the bill. The bill was signed April 25, 1849. Rioting at once flared up all over the two provinces. In one of the riots Parliament Buildings were wrecked and subsequently burned. The library of parliament and nearly all the public records were destroyed.

Governor Rotten-Egged.

Lord Elgin was publicly insulted. He was pelted several times with rotten eggs on the streets. The riotous persisted for a long time. Then an agitation set in to have parliament sent alternately to Toronto and Quebec — every four years.

Sir John Macdonald sponsored a move to have the legislature meet once more in Kingston. The Ottawa and Carleton members also made another effort in favor of Bytown. Both moves were decisively defeated.

Afraid of Montreal.

The members were afraid to return to Montreal. It was decided to meet for the remaining two years of the four-year term in Toronto, and that Toronto and Quebec should be visited each alternate four years.

About this time Lord Elgin undertook a tour of the provinces, in, it is alleged, an effort to sound public opinion on the question of the permanent site. Bytown was on his itinerary.

"Story Monday" Revealed.

During following year (1852