

Living in the Birthplace of Canadian Democracy

Another provincial election is on the horizon. We take pride in our Canadian system where people can have their say. But things were not always that way, and some have said that the little community of Sharon, East Gwillimbury, is “the birthplace of Canadian democracy.” John Ralston Saul and others have based their comments on the story of the Children of Peace who built the Sharon Temple.

The Sharon Temple itself, a remarkably beautiful place, was also a radical statement about how the world around it should work. It was square in shape to stand for square dealing and honesty. Its equal sides and equal number of windows said that all people were equal. Its interior, with movable chairs all facing toward the centre, meant that no one person could become the centre of attention. Its layout and ritual encouraged all to participate if they felt they had an important idea to share—even women, at a time when they were not permitted to speak in churches and were denied the right to vote.

In the 1820s, William Lyon Mackenzie, Upper Canada’s most famous political reformer, visited the village and praised the community of the Children of Peace in his influential newspaper, *The Colonial Advocate*. Time after time, the Children of Peace helped assure Mackenzie’s election as their representative, even when he was turfed out for speaking against political corruption.

When Mackenzie, in frustration, led a band of reformers down Yonge Street in 1837, many of the younger male members of this community followed him. Two of the three “rebels,” James Kavanagh and James Henderson who were killed in the ensuing battle, were among them. Others faced prison sentences and still others were sent into exile, never to return. Mackenzie’s right-hand man, Samuel Lount, a blacksmith from Holland



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Landing, was captured and hanged for treason.

In the short term, the Rebellion of 1837 was a disaster, but it made Great Britain, the mother country, sit up and take notice and send Lord Durham to investigate.

Proposals for creating “responsible government”—that is, government where the Governor and Council would be responsible to the elected members of the Assembly—was not granted immediately, however. It was left to reformers such as Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine to lead the way; but again, David Willson and the Children of

Peace played a major role. Baldwin and Willson worked closely together, persuading electors to support the reform agenda.

At one point, Lafontaine needed a seat in the newly combined legislature of Canada

East (Quebec) and Canada West (Ontario). David Willson and the Children of Peace ensured that he was elected right here. Imagine, persuading their neighbours in the 1840s to elect a representative who lived in

Quebec and whose native language was French!

Once elected, Baldwin and Lafontaine worked together to finally achieve the principle of responsible government and show that Canadians of different language, religion and culture could work together.

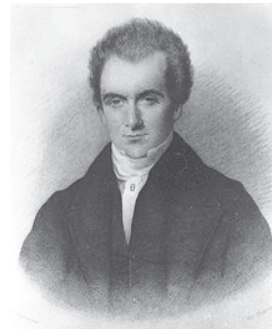
Suddenly the idea of a wider Confederation, Canada as we know it today, became possible.



William Lyon Mackenzie



Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine



Robert Baldwin



Megan Houston is the Education and Outreach Co-ordinator at the Sharon Temple Museum. Megan is available for onsite tours and outreach within the community. If you are interested in booking a school field trip, group tours or a talk for your organization, please call: (905) 478-2389.