

# THE **BEECHWOOD**<sup>WAY</sup> MAGAZINE

## *The History of Beechwood Cemetery*



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# The History of Beechwood Cemetery

By (Late) Thomas Ritchie, Nicolas McCarthy, and Erika Wagner

Beechwood Cemetery opened in 1873, fourteen years after Queen Victoria chose Ottawa to be the capital of the Province of Canada, and six years after Ottawa became the capital of the Dominion of Canada. These events brought politicians and other leaders to Ottawa, many of whom stayed and were buried in Beechwood, making the cemetery a repository of Canadian history.

When it opened, Beechwood was located well beyond what were then Ottawa's boundaries. From 1873 on, the city council had decreed those burials were not permitted within the city limits, a ruling based on the fear that burial grounds harboured deadly diseases such as cholera, typhoid and smallpox, causing the epidemics that periodically broke out. The council also decreed the closure of Ottawa's main cemetery in Sandy Hill (actually four adjacent burial grounds, one each for the Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians), and the Sandy Hill cemeteries eventually became Macdonald Park.

The relocation of a body from Sandy Hill was the subject of the second entry in Beechwood's "Record of Interments," dated August 21, 1873. Two brothers were buried that day; the first, age four, having died two days before his burial. The other had died, also at age four, two years earlier and had been buried in Sandy Hill, and was subsequently removed for burial with his brother. The early pages of Beechwood's Record of Interments frequently refer to "Removal from Sandy Hill."



The Beechwood Cemetery Company of Ottawa created Beechwood Cemetery. Its shareholders were prominent residents of the city, led by Joseph M. Currier, whose business interests included lumber and other mills, the Ottawa Daily Citizen newspaper, the Victoria foundry, as well as banking and insurance enterprises. He also served as a member of the city council, a member of the provincial legislature and a member of parliament. After his death and burial in Beechwood, Currier's house became the official residence of Canada's Prime Ministers.

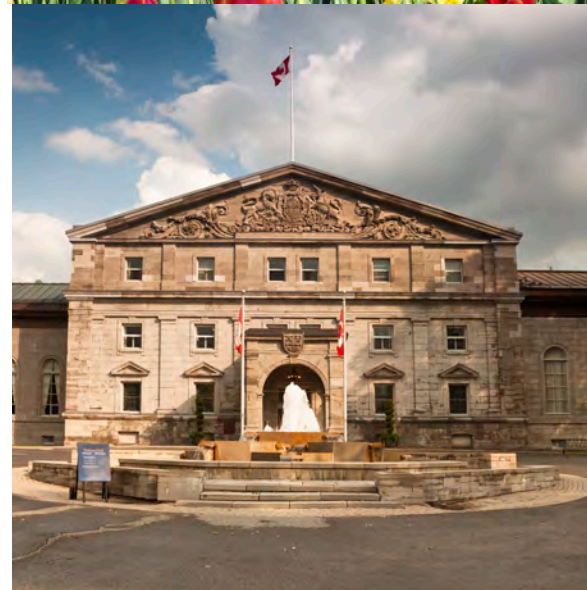
Other Beechwood shareholders included Currier's business associates Robert Blackburn and Benjamin Batson, merchant George Hay, lawyer McLeod Stewart and Dr. John Sweetland. The doctor, a native of Kingston and a graduate of Queen's University, moved to Ottawa in 1867 and became active in its affairs, serving as the sheriff of Carleton County, as the head of many civic associations and as the president of Beechwood Cemetery, where he was buried.

The cemetery is located in what was once Gloucester Township, in the area known as Junction Gore, bordered on the west by the Rideau River and on the north by the Ottawa River. The lots in this area were laid out in the 1790s and extend from the surveyor's "base line" to the Rideau River. Long after the lots were established, the surveyor's base line became St. Laurent Boulevard.

Each lot contains about 200 acres (80 hectares) of land. Three of them, and the halves of two others, were purchased by Thomas MacKay, a stone mason turned contractor who constructed the locks that join the Rideau Canal to the Ottawa River. After their construction, he stayed in the community that had taken root near the locks, called Bytown.

MacKay built lumber and other mills, subdivided a part of his land to form the community of New Edinburgh, and at his house nearby (dubbed 'MacKay's Castle') he enjoyed playing his bagpipes. After his death, MacKay's castle was purchased by the government for use as the residence of the Governor-General, with the name changed to Rideau Hall.

Thomas MacKay owned the waterfront half of Lot No. 3 while Hector McPhail, also a stone mason who worked on the Rideau Canal, owned the other half, which he purchased for use as a farm. When he sold it to Joseph Currier for the new cemetery, McPhail was allowed to continue to live on the property, which consisted of about 100 acres (40 hectares).





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In 1886, the cemetery purchased an adjoining part of Lot No. 3 from MacKay's estate, and in 1893 purchased more land from MacKay's son-in-law, Thomas Coltrin Keefer, an eminent engineer. He was the designer of the waterworks of many cities, including Ottawa's. The graves of MacKay, McPhail and Keefer can be found in Beechwood.

The cemetery company appointed engineer Robert Surtees to transform McPhail's farm into a cemetery. Surtees arrived in Canada from England in 1856 and served as the assistant engineer of the city of Hamilton before moving to Ottawa, where he undertook landscaping and other projects, including an extension of New Edinburgh. He later served for more than two decades as Ottawa's city engineer. Surtees' engineering background suggested that Beechwood should not be a rectangular grid of laneways between the graves. Instead, he provided a network of winding lanes that criss-crossed the property, probably following the contours of the land, which was divided into numerous irregularly shaped burial areas. This natural flow of roads amongst the gentle hills is the reason Beechwood Cemetery has become a classic example of a rural 18th century cemetery.

Scottish-born architect James Mather, newly arrived in Ottawa, designed staff residences at the cemetery which are still in use today. He may also have designed the office building at the cemetery which, in 1876, replaced the cemetery's first office on Sparks Street.

Other buildings on the property included a shop and a vault for the winter storage of coffins until the spring thaw allowed for grave-digging. Mather went on to become a prominent Ottawa architect, the designer of churches, schools and the residences of many leading citizens. He also served as president of Beechwood Cemetery, where he was eventually buried.

The act of the provincial legislature that incorporated the Beechwood Cemetery Company required it to sell its land in "lots, plots or parcels," but the land sold had to be used "exclusively as a cemetery or place of burial for the dead." The cemetery's duty was to ensure that "all funerals within the said cemetery are conducted in a decent and solemn manner."

Disorderly persons and those who damaged or destroyed monuments, trees or other property could be brought before a justice of the peace and, if convicted, be fined a sum between two and fifty dollars, while non-payment meant that the person "may be committed to gaol for any period not less than six days nor more than three months..." Visitors to the cemetery could not "play at any game or sport, or discharge firearms (save at a military funeral) in the said cemetery...or wilfully disturb any persons assembled for the purpose of burying any body therein." If convicted of such offences, the same fines and gaol-time applied.









In the late 1920s, an important construction project started at Beechwood: the erection of a large mausoleum which provided hundreds of burial spaces. A building of considerable architectural merit, it was built by a company separate from the cemetery, Canada Mausoleums Ltd. After a few years of operation, in a time of depression and financial difficulties, the Canada Mausoleums Ltd. went under and the mausoleum became the property of the cemetery.

Its Gothic architecture, first introduced to Ottawa when the Parliament Buildings were constructed, represents a revival of certain features of ancient buildings, particularly elaborately carved stonework depicting mythological creatures and the use of finely crafted stained glass windows. Beechwood's mausoleum provides a final resting place for many important Canadians, including Father of Confederation William McDougall.

In 1962, the mausoleum took on an additional function when its lower level was made into a crematorium. Although in many societies, such as those of ancient Greece and Rome, cremation was the main means of the disposal of human remains, North American acceptance of cremation developed slowly.

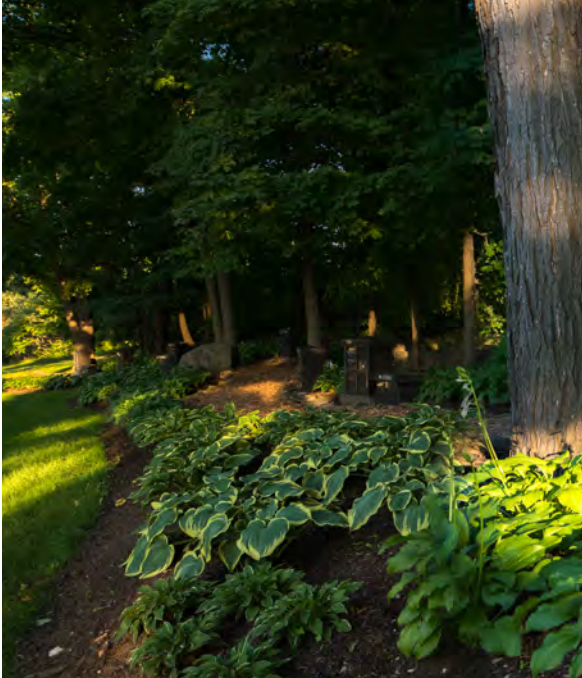
When Beechwood's crematorium opened, there was little demand for its service, and after ten years only about one in five Beechwood burials was of cremation ashes. The ratio has now become about equal numbers of caskets and urn burials. When the crematorium was installed, a part of the mausoleum's main level became a columbarium where urns rather than coffins were stored. The need for additional storage space led to the development of burial grounds specifically designed as urn gardens, laid out as landscaped settings of burial areas integrated with gardens, shrubberies, lawns and pathways.

As of 1874, Beechwood Cemetery was known for the gardens and the delicate floral displays. During the summer of 1874, stories about visiting Beechwood's Gardens was a constant in the Ottawa Journal, and visitors were issued passes to enter the cemetery grounds.

The Botanical Cremation Gardens opposite the cemetery's reception centre, present a spring display of tulips, later replaced by other flowers. The area's beauty attracts many visitors. An urn in these gardens contains the ashes of Tommy Douglas, a Premier of Saskatchewan and a leader in Canadian politics. Many people have chosen the Botanical Gardens as their final resting place including Marion Dewar, former mayor of Ottawa, NDP president and leader on human rights issues both national and internationally.







Other Beechwood garden areas, such as the Hosta Gardens and the Rockeries, located where a stone quarry once operated by harvesting the rich mineral rocks of the Ottawa Valley years prior. Today, the Beechwood Cemetery has one of the largest collections of Hosta in Ontario and Quebec blooming along the rock walls, attracting avid horticulture appreciators from all over Canada.

The natural forest areas on the northern edge of Beechwood's property provide a contrast to the carefully cultivated lawns and gardens. When, in 1998, an ice storm brought down many trees, the wood from them was salvaged and used for furnishing of the expanded reception centre. A marshy area near the property's southern edge has been set aside as a study area with an open-air classroom to enable school children to observe plant and animal life.

Called the Macoun Marsh, it was named in honour of botanist John Macoun who came to Canada in 1850, later joining Canada's first scientific agency, the Geological Survey of Canada. His work, which took him across the country, revealed much of the nature of Canada's plant and animal life. Macoun, who is buried at Beechwood, has been named "Canada's greatest exploring botanist."

Despite Beechwood being created as a protestant cemetery, the Beechwood Cemetery quickly changed to be non-denominational, an attractive feature for many Ottawa groups and societies. The burial of the first person of Chinese origin in 1903 led in the 1920s to the establishment of a burial place for members of the Chinese community, an area given its distinctive character by the construction in recent years of a Pagoda of Remembrance.

In another development of the 1920s, one of Ottawa's Lutheran churches obtained a burial plot for members of its congregation. Other groups with burial areas in Beechwood include: the Home for Friendless Women, the Union Mission for Men, the Protestant Home for the Aged and the Protestant Orphans' Home. A monument bearing a symbol made up of the linked letters FLT, standing for Friendship, Love and Truth, marks the burial plot of the Independent Order of Odd Fellows. A nearby monument identifies the Masonic Burial Plot. This monument, an interesting example of symbolism, shows tools of the mason's craft: an ancient mason's level, a square and a compass to scribe circles.





In 1977, attempts were made by some Beechwood shareholders to have unused land sold for a housing project, an action strongly opposed by others. The result was a decade of litigation, the defeat of the proposed land sale and the eventual change in the cemetery's status from that of a private company to its operation as a not-for-profit charitable organization.

The Beechwood Cemetery Foundation was created in 2000 for the purpose of safeguarding the cemetery's future, increasing public awareness of the cemetery and the important events of Canadian history associated with persons buried within it.

Today, the Foundation hosts over a dozen annual events at the cemetery.

One of the greatest achievements of the Beechwood Cemetery Foundation is the construction of The Beechwood National Memorial Centre (BNMC) which serves as a testament to history, culture and, most importantly, a peaceful space to honour those who have passed.

The focal point of the building is the Sacred Space, designed to represent the nine major faiths of the world and held up with wood beams in the same shape as traditional Indigenous long houses. There is also a large rock in the centre of the room, brought to Ottawa from the Arctic during the last Ice shift. The rock offers those grieving a grounding element. The Sacred Space serves as a gathering place for anyone of any religion, faith or culture wishing to conduct a funeral or memorial service in a place considered sacred.







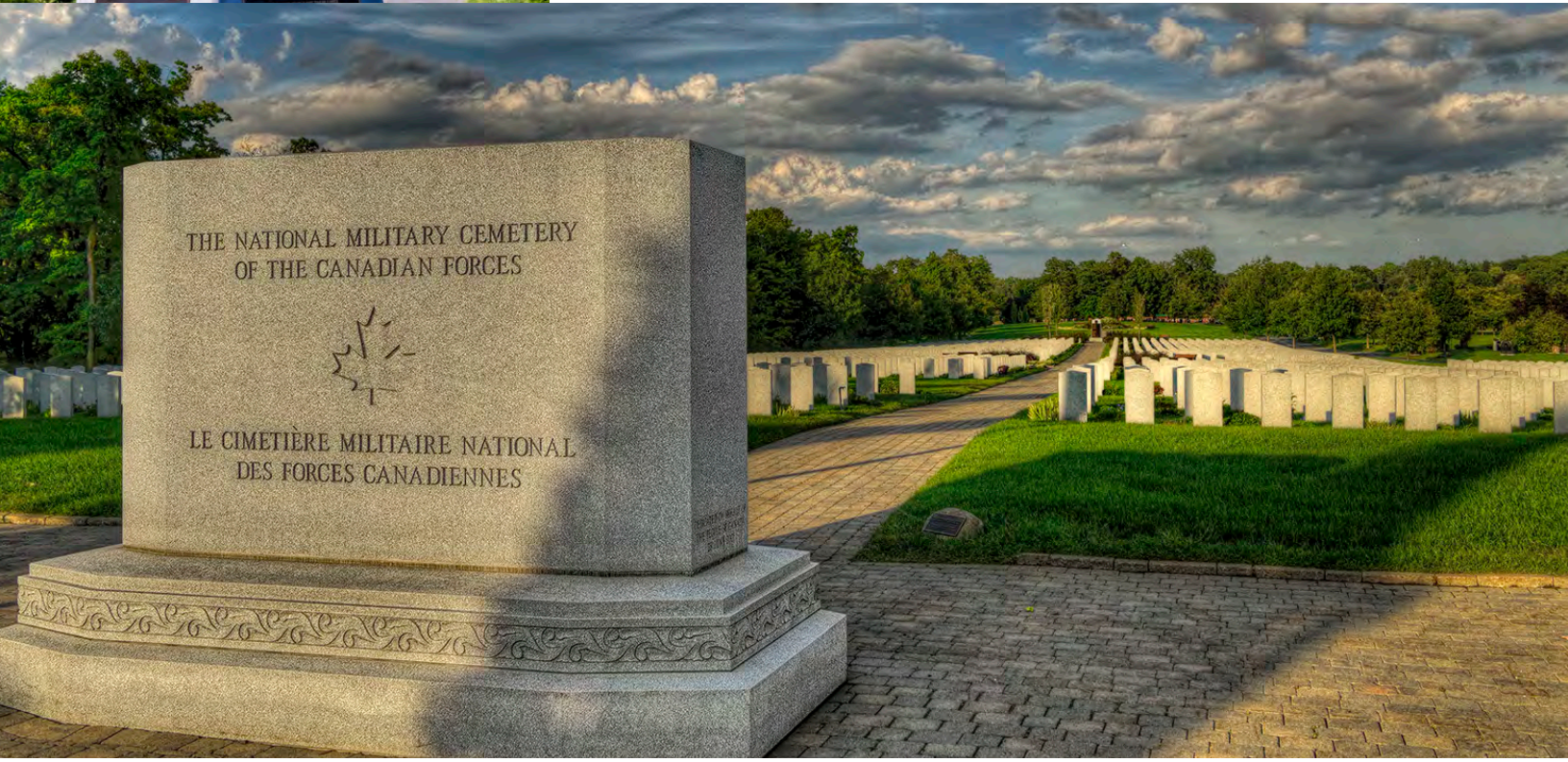
Canada's military heritage and Beechwood's long association with the military is omnipresent in the BNMC. The Hall of Colours displays Canada's Military Regimental flags and includes a large stained-glass window, titled: Hope in a Broken World, which depicts the war experiences and the role of chaplains throughout military history. The Hall also features a black granite plinth.

The RCMP National Memorial Cemetery was officially dedicated on October 17, 2004, in partnership between the Ottawa Division of the RCMP Veterans' Association and the Beechwood Cemetery Foundation. The Cemetery features a beautiful granite memorial, a parade square and a statue on a monument dedicated to the memory of fallen officers.



In 2007, Beechwood helped establish the National Military Cemetery to create a link between those who died on active service, whose death was related to service, or who served honourably and who wanted to rest with their peers in the grounds of Sections 19, 27, 29 and 103.

Because of its location in Ottawa, Canada's capital city, Beechwood became the final resting place for many Canadians who, in various ways, have shaped the history of our country. For this and many other reasons, Bill C-17, an Act to recognize Beechwood Cemetery as the National Cemetery of Canada, passed in the House of Commons in 2009 with all-party support.





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The Ottawa Police Association and the Ottawa Senior Officers' Association, with the support and collaboration of the Ottawa Police Service and The Beechwood Cemetery Foundation, initiated the development of the Ottawa Police Service Memorial Cemetery which officially opened in October 2011.

In 2017, the CSIS National Memorial Cemetery was created by the tri-partnership between CSIS, the Pillar Society and Beechwood Cemetery Foundation. The CSIS National Memorial Cemetery will be a place of national commemoration for current and former CSIS employees and all Canadians.

Beechwood is proud to promote our Nation's Capital and the rich, diverse heritage of Canada. As such, Beechwood operates on a not-for-profit basis so that all can take comfort knowing that the funds are used for the maintenance, preservation, and enhancement of this National Historic Site.

While many people visit Beechwood for private reflection, many also come to enjoy our botanical gardens, including our annual spring display of more than 35,000 tulips and our spectacular fall colours. Others come for historic tours and to pay tribute in our sections designated for Canadian military and police services. School groups and individuals visit Macoun Marsh, our unique urban wetland. Concerts are hosted in our Sacred Space or behind the Mausoleum. Beechwood truly is a special place.

