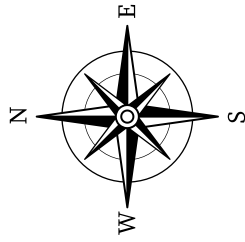


2026 LIVING LIBRARY



BYTOWN 200

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WILLIAM PITTMAN LETT

Section 34, Lot 28 NW

In 1820, a young family of a veteran Irish soldier, Lieutenant Andrews Lett, landed in the British North American Colony with a babe-in-arms. The child, William Pittman Lett, was destined to experience tumultuous changes in his fortunes and those of Bytown, Canada and the world on his long journey through the 19th century. For 73 years, spanning most of the century from 1819 to 1892, William witnessed British North America and Bytown evolve rapidly through to Confederation of the Dominion and Ottawa as the nation's capital.

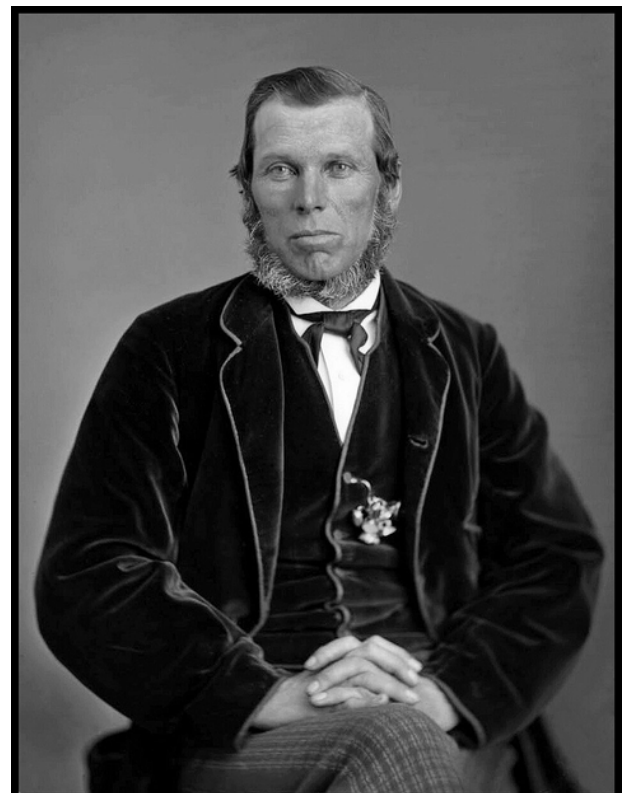
After a classical education, he became a radical journalist espousing the anti-Catholic Orange cause and pioneering theatre in Bytown. As Ottawa's first and longest serving civic clerk for 36 years, he became more circumspect. He lobbied for Queen Victoria to designate it the capital of the Province and then Dominion of Canada.

Lett witnessed the building of the Rideau Canal and was personally active in the evolution of Ottawa and its infrastructure from its humble beginnings as Colonel By's construction headquarters. A further moderating influence on his life came when William married twenty-one year old Maria Hinton on 22 October 1849. She was born on 29 October 1828, the second daughter of Jessie and Joseph Hinton (1798-1884) of Hintonburgh, the Warden of Carleton County. Their love was such that they eloped to be married in the Methodist chapel in Huntley and were temporarily ostracized from family and friends. Their growing family of nine children suffered the common anguish of losing young children to infectious disease.

A passionately patriot and militiaman, Lett engaged in public debates over the choice of national flag, annexation, slavery, temperance, poverty, and the politics of the British connection and Imperial wars. He was a highly moral person who came to acknowledge the evolving role of women through the century. Lett delivered his messages through public oratory, the newspapers and local societies.

His media were prose, speech, poetry and the power of holding the civic pen. d. He was Ottawa's official chronicler and the City's de facto poet laureate with a considerable lifetime production of poetry. Lett was also a socialite – he rubbed shoulders with the vice-regal, the political and the powerful, and was a friend of Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald. A devout Methodist, Lett mellowed his anti-Catholic views as the century progressed. Passionate about the natural beauty of the local waterfalls and forests, he wrote monographs on wildlife. He enjoyed fishing and hunting fowl and deer.

On September 3, 1881, Lett suffered the terrible tragedy of losing his true love, Maria, in a railway accident at a crossing near their home on Dalhousie Street. Lett survived her by more than a decade, and on August 15, 1892 he died, a much loved and highly respected member of Ottawa society. He was, undoubtedly, Ottawa's renaissance clerk and an important public commentator spanning the 19th century in verse and prose.



JOHN BOWER LEWIS

Section 34, Lot 8 E

Born in France, Lewis came to Canada with his parents in 1820. He studied law in Toronto and was called to the bar in 1839. While practising his profession in Bytown, he was, for a short time, solicitor for Carleton County. At the time of Confederation, he was one of the ablest lawyers in the country.

Lewis was elected councillor in Bytown's first election, in 1847, and he was chosen mayor in 1848. He was elected Ottawa's first mayor in 1855 and remained in that position until 1857. In 1863, he became commissioner of Ottawa's police force.

It was during his term that Queen Victoria chose Ottawa to be the nation's capital. John Bower Lewis signed the eloquent plea that Ottawa sent to the Queen on May 18, 1857, urging her to choose Ottawa. He died on November 20, 1874.



JAMES & ESTHER SLATER

Section 48, Lot 1

Born on September 10, 1813, in Manchester, England, James Dyson Slater was part of the generation of professional engineers whose technical expertise underpinned the transformation of colonial Canada from frontier to functioning society. He emigrated with his parents to British North America in 1830 or 1831, settling a few miles from Niagara Falls—an environment defined by waterpower, canals, and large-scale infrastructure.

Slater trained as an engineer at a time when formal engineering education was still emerging, gaining practical experience that soon placed him at the centre of major public works. Between 1841 and 1845, he served as assistant engineer on the Welland Canal, overseeing the location and construction of the section from Port Dalhousie to Thorold. This assignment positioned him within one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects in Upper Canada, designed to overcome the Niagara Escarpment and link Lake Ontario with Lake Erie.

In 1845, Slater moved to Bytown following his appointment as assistant engineer on the Ottawa River improvement works. These projects were essential to the region's timber economy and transportation network and included the construction of dams, timber slides, bridges, and roads along the river system. Slater's work placed him at the operational heart of the Ottawa Valley, where engineering solutions directly shaped settlement, commerce, and safety.

Recognized for his technical competence, Slater was appointed a provincial land surveyor in the spring of 1849. He practised in this capacity until 1858, contributing to the orderly subdivision, valuation, and development of land during a period of rapid expansion around the emerging capital. Surveying, engineering, and administration were closely linked professions in this era, and Slater moved fluidly among them.

In 1858, Slater reached the most senior phase of his career when he was appointed superintendent of the Rideau Canal, a position he held until 1872. The canal—originally built for military defence after the War of 1812—had by then become a vital commercial and transportation artery. As superintendent, Slater was responsible for its maintenance, operation, and adaptation during a period when railways increasingly challenged the canal's economic role. His long tenure reflects both administrative skill and institutional trust.

Slater's integration into Bytown's civic and social life was reinforced in 1847 when he married Esther Sparks, the youngest daughter of Nicholas Sparks and Sarah Sparks. While this prominent family connection may explain the naming of Slater Street, his public service provides a more substantive rationale. From 1863 to 1870, Slater served as chairman of Ottawa's public school board, demonstrating a sustained commitment to education and civic improvement at a formative stage in the city's development.



JEANETTE RUSSELL SIMPSON

Section 41, Lot 120 NW

Born in Montreal in 1847, Jenny Russell Simpson emerged as one of Ottawa's most consequential stewards of historical memory. The daughter of Andrew Russell, she grew up in an environment attuned to public service and national institutions. Her formative training as an artist—guided by her uncle Alexander Jamieson Russell, equipped her with a discerning eye for visual culture and documentary value. His work for the *Canadian Illustrated News* and other publications shaped her understanding of how images could carry history forward.

Simpson came to Ottawa in 1866 and soon married John Barker Simpson, son of the Hon. John Simpson. While family life anchored her locally, her professional commitments extended nationally. An accomplished artist in her own right, she was at times employed as a copyist by the Public Archives of Canada, contributing to the preservation and accessibility of primary sources at a moment when Canada's archival infrastructure was still taking shape.

Her most enduring impact, however, came through historical and museum work. From 1915 to 1921, Simpson served as English secretary of Historic Landmarks of Canada, affiliated with the Royal Society of Canada. In this role, she helped professionalize heritage advocacy and broaden its public reach—work that positioned Ottawa as a centre of national commemoration.

Between 1923 and 1932, Simpson was curator of the Bytown Museum, then operating as the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Ottawa. Her tenure marked a turning point. She systematically expanded and organized the collection, secured important acquisitions—including the celebrated Bust of Lady Macdonald (1874)—and authored the institution's first comprehensive catalogue, *Guide to the Bytown and Ottawa Historical Museum*. First published in 1926, Ottawa's centenary year, and reissued in 1929, the guide documented 481 artefacts and established professional standards for cataloguing and interpretation.

Simpson's leadership extended beyond collections management. Largely through her efforts, the Society secured possession of the historic Registry Office, a decisive step that transformed a small volunteer-led collection into a credible municipal museum with a permanent home.

Her advocacy also carried international significance: in 1909, she represented the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Ottawa at the American Historical Association meeting in New York—the first official representation of a Canadian historical society at this prestigious forum.



SPECIAL THANKS

The Beechwood Cemetery Foundation would like to extend a very warm and heartfelt thanks to Artistic Director Megan Piercey Monafu, Director Erin MacDonald and the Ottawa School of Theatre for their long-standing commitment to making this event truly spectacular. All the actors also do a fantastic job, and we are grateful for their involvement!

Presented by: Ottawa School of Theatre

Director: Erin MacDonald

Crew: Biz MacDonald, Pierre Ducharme, Chantal Gregoire

Bios written and researched by: Erika Wagner



Actors

Honouring William Pittman Lett

NELSON FERGUSON, HAYDEN SOVINSKY, ALINE ROMANOS,
EMMA MIKHAIL, ISLA RODRIGUEZ & VICTORIA CHAPPET

Honouring John Bower Lewis

GENEVIÈVE MACKINNON, TATIANA MIKHAIL &
SANDRINE LAURENCE ROUSSY

Honouring Jenny Simpson

MONIKA LAVALLÉE, ELLA ZHANG, NAOMI GUILBEAULT, LILY
YASSIN, CALIXA LAVALLÉE & LAURENT GONZALEZP

Honouring James and Esther Sparks

PAUL FREDERICK, MARIA O'REILLY, VIOLETTE FERGUSON,
CLARA BARTOLO, RENÉ TORRES, ALEXI CHARTRAND

