

Summary of The Early Life and Career of John A. Macdonald 1824 – 1838

The Quinte Years 1824 – 1835

Hay Bay

John A. Macdonald was only nine years old when his family moved from Kingston to the Bay of Quinte in 1824. For the next eleven years, he called this region along the eastern shores of Lake Ontario his home. He lived with his father and mother, Hugh and Helen, and his sisters, Margaret and Louisa in a modest clapboard house on Hay Bay. For two and possibly three years, he walked three miles to school in Adolphustown with his sisters. The school was a small, one-room log cabin run by an elderly Scotsman who handed out birchings and rebukes generously.

Schooling in Kingston

Sometime later, John was sent to the formal Midland District Grammar School in Kingston for one or two years then to the John Cruikshank School for another year. During this time, he boarded for a time with two elderly Scottish ladies and visited his uncle Lieutenant-Colonel Donald Macpherson on the Cluny estate outside of Kingston. But his heart was always with his family in the Quinte region and he visited as often as he could. John returned home during the long school vacations to help his father in the stores at Hay Bay and Adolphustown. Here John A. met many of the local farmers and local merchants and learned about life in Loyalist Upper Canada. From his father and adult cousins, he also learned about the politics of Upper Canada and the opportunities for advancement in this colonial society -- especially in the field of law.

Beginning the Study of Law at 15

When most students today are entering grade 10 at the age of 15, John A. travelled by steamboat to York (Toronto) and to take the entrance examination to the Law Society of Upper Canada. He passed that first test and soon began articling with the law firm of George Mackenzie, a prominent Kingston lawyer.

During that same year, his father saw an opportunity to advance in society by renting the Van Alstine gristmill at the Stone Mills across the bay from Adolphustown. The elder Macdonald was no stranger to mills since he'd worked previously in the textiles industry in Glasgow.

Legal Advisor in Napanee

For the next two years, John A. excelled in his studies of law and earned the respect of many clients. When Mackenzie opened a branch law office in the hamlet of Napanee on the Bay of Quinte, the seventeen year old Macdonald was entrusted with the task of providing legal advice and documents to fee paying customers. Today, Macdonald would be referred to as a paralegal.

John A. relished the assignment -- especially since he was not far from his parents at Glenora. In Napanee, he visited often with Allan Macpherson, one of his three cousins in the Quinte region. His adult cousin was known locally as the "Laird of Napanee" because of his involvement in many of the town's activities and commercial enterprises. He provided useful advice to the young teenager on how to succeed in society during this period of colonial rule. John A. accepted his new assignment with enthusiasm and learned from his employer and mentor that legal advice was the stock and trade of those working in the legal profession. He worked in town for about a year and continued his study of the law in his spare time. He was now able to visit his family in the County more often and felt at home in the Quinte region.

Opportunity in Picton

In his eighteenth year, John A. heard that his cousin, Lowther Pennington Macpherson, was suffering from a debilitating lung disease. Lowther approached John about taking over his law practice while he recovered. John agreed and resigned from the Mackenzie firm to move to Prince Edward County, where his family lived. He practised law in Picton for two years as a *pro tem* lawyer under the guidance of Lowther, who was convalescing nearby. John enjoyed the new job and grew confident in his abilities. He lived for part of the time with his family at Glenora and most of the time with the Macphersons in Hallowell.

John's Mischief and First Trial

By now, he was a promising young lawyer with considerable talents, but he was also known to get into some mischief as teenagers tend to do. On one occasion, he played a prank on a local doctor who was known to be quite outspoken on political matters. Although there are no details of exactly what happened, there was a skirmish of some kind. Local magistrates apparently witnessed the incident and later charged both Macdonald and his co-assailant with assault. The doctor went to trial first and was found guilty, but fined only a token six pence -- perhaps to indicate that the incident was minor. John A. went next and was found not guilty. The court records show little except that he had actually won his first court case before a judge and jury on October 8, 1834 in the Court of Quarterly Sessions.

John Becomes an Attorney in Picton at Age of 20

Four months after winning this case in Picton, Macdonald journeyed to York (Toronto) to receive his first accreditation in the Law Society as an attorney. By now he was ready to begin his own law practice, but he had obligations in Picton. There, he continued to run his cousin's law office for several more months, but sometime in the summer of 1835, he handed over the law practice to Lowther's younger brother John Alexander Macpherson and moved to Kingston, where he opened his own law practice on Quarry Street.

His time in the Bay of Quinte region had come to an end. The next year, Lowther died suddenly during a sea voyage, still seeking treatment for his chronic lung disease. The Macdonald family-- realizing that John had now become the principal breadwinner for the family -- moved to join him in Kingston. John A. Macdonald was now ready to face the challenges of his new profession. He was about to discover that he had the right knowledge, skills and values to succeed in this new society in British North America.

Macdonald's Early Trials in Kingston – 1836 – 1838

John Called to the Bar in Kingston at Age of 21

In those days, death was everywhere and little could be done to change the difficult circumstances of the family. John A. Macdonald completed additional academic requirements of the Law Society and in the winter of 1836 he was called to the bar. He could now practice before the King's Bench. He took on four cases during this period and won two of three winnable cases. His future law partner Alexander Campbell once said of him:

His power before a country jury was always marked chiefly if not wholly owing to his knowledge of the jurymen and his appreciation of their habits of thoughts and ways of speaking. He was in tone of voice and manner as thoroughly a Bay of Quinté boy as if he had been born there. (Archives of Ontario, Campbell Papers)

In fact, from the age of five, when he arrived in Upper Canada, he learned to speak with a North American accent, rather than a Scottish accent as his parents did. His knowledge of the local idiom, more than classical rhetoric made him a more effective lawyer than his colleagues in the rapidly growing town of Kingston.

Four Trials

Over the course of the next two years, he defended a child molester and eight young men who were on the wrong side of the Rebellion of 1837. He lost the first and won the second. He also brought suit against Colonel Dundas, Kingston's commandant of the Kingston garrison, for the illegal arrest of John Ashley, the gaoler of Fort Henry following the escape of fifteen political prisoners. John A. Macdonald was successful in that suit and soon became the talk of the town. He also assisted Nils Von Schoultz in a court martial for leading the Hunter invasion of Upper Canada near Prescott in 1838. Although Von Schoultz pleaded guilty and was subsequently hanged, Macdonald was recognized as a courageous individual willing to take on unpopular and difficult cases in the defense of the rule of law. Donald Creighton, the acclaimed Macdonald biographer, summed up his reputation in Kingston in 1838:

Without any question he was the preferred legal advisor of the Scottish community and it might even be argued now that he was one of the most popular lawyers in the town as a whole. He was getting to be known professionally as an ingenious young man, persuasive with juries, adroitly clever in the management of cases—"a dangerous man to encounter in the courts", as one of his contemporaries phrased it long afterwards. (*The Young Politician*)

Macdonald Becomes Interested in Politics

He was only twenty-three, but by now his talents were clearly evident. He was an exceptional individual who succeeded because of his indomitable work ethic, his exceptional intellect and his likeable nature. He gained a reputation as a leader among men. He met every challenge head on and succeeded where others failed. He was also dedicated to bettering the civil society in which he lived. Upper Canada, at that time, was a colony run by a Lieutenant Governor and an unaccountable executive council. The legislative assembly in the colonies of British North America had limited powers—especially over money bills. All this was about to change in the aftermath of the Rebellion of 1838-38. Although John A. Macdonald was a lifelong Tory and loyal to

British colonial authority, he also saw that things needed to change. He foresaw the need for responsible democratic government in British North America but learned to accept it with cautionary pragmatism.

Years later, he told the House of Commons: “There is no maxim which experience teaches more clearly than this, that you must yield to the times. Resistance may be protracted until it produces revolution. Resistance was protracted in this country until it produced rebellion.”

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