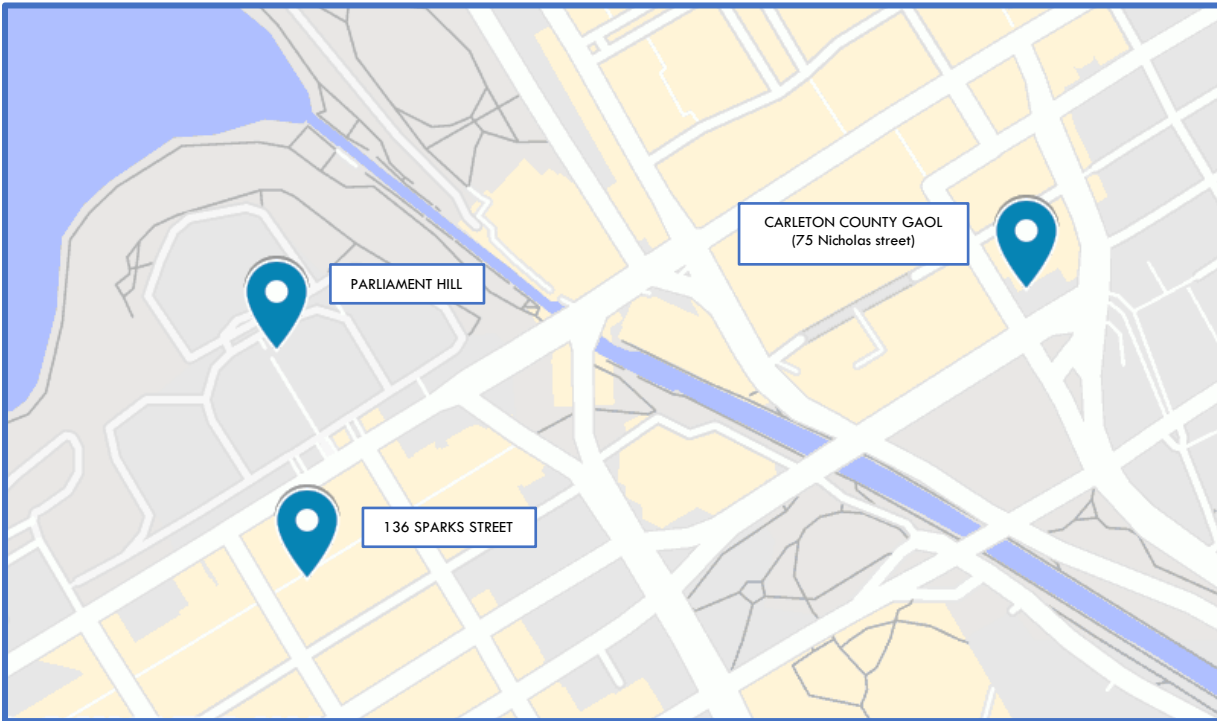


City History Hunt: Thomas D'Arcy McGee



Parliament Hill

Thomas D'Arcy McGee was born in Ireland in 1825. From an early age, he was interested in the history of Ireland, which influenced his early political ties to Irish nationalists. McGee attended school in Boston where he published his first books at the age of 19, most of which were on Irish history and literature. In 1857, D'Arcy McGee emigrated to Montreal where he continued to be outspoken about politics, urging Canadians to sustain ties with the British Empire. A year after arriving in Canada, he was elected to the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada and later became the Minister of Agriculture, Immigration, and Statistics for the Conservative government formed in 1863.



McGee was supportive of Confederation and was present at the Charlottetown and Quebec City conferences, calling for the educational rights of religious minorities in the Canadas at the latter. He was an advocate for multiculturalism before it was a widespread ideology by speaking about ensuring equality of representation and a constitution that would guarantee religious and civil rights. Through this McGee played a significant role as a Father of Confederation in garnering support from the Irish.



136 Sparks street

With a drastic change from his early political beliefs, McGee began denouncing Irish nationalists, especially the Fenian Brotherhood because of their violent means. This brought him many enemies amongst Irish separatists and the Fenians in Ottawa who saw him as a traitor.



In the very early hours of April 7, 1868, D'Arcy McGee was walking back to his boarding house on Sparks street after a late parliamentary debate on Parliament Hill. During the debate, McGee urged Nova Scotians not to reject Confederation in a speech that was well-received by many in attendance. After parting ways with another Member of Parliament, McGee made his way to the door of his boarding house where he was shot at the back of his head at close-range. Mrs. Trotter, the widowed owner of the boarding house was unlocking the door, thinking her son, a Parliamentary page, had returned home. She found McGee on her doorstep as others rushed to the scene after hearing the gunshot, however, the assassin had fled.

Figure 1: The Toronto House owned by Mrs. Trotter at 71 Sparks street where McGee was staying and assassinated (Bytown Museum, 1996.999.61)

Carleton County Gaol (75 Nicholas street)

Although no assassin was originally claimed to have been seen at the site, it only took police 24 hours to have arrested suspect James Patrick Whelan. There was lots of evidence pointing towards his being the assassin even if it was just circumstantial. It was assumed that he was part of the Fenian Brotherhood, he had previously threatened McGee, he had been in attendance at the late night sitting of House of Commons and had heard McGee's nationalist speech, he had earlier been seen with a gun, the gun was found to be fired around the time of the assassination and police found him with the gun in his pocket. Further, boot prints outside the



boarding house were matched with his, a lumberjack later claiming to have witnessed the murder identified Whelan as the assassin and detectives heard Whelan admit, "I shot that fellow" while in his cell in the Carleton County Gaol.

The trial of James Patrick Whelan lasted eight days the following September and was largely impartial, with the jurors all being Protestant while Whelan was Catholic. Whelan insisted on his innocence throughout the trial but did admit he was present at the shooting and knew the assassin. Still, Whelan insisted he would rather be hanged and believed to be guilty than hold the legacy of an informant. At the end of the trial, Whelan was found guilty and was sentenced to death by hanging at the Carleton County Gaol where he was later buried. The hanging was viewed by a crowd of five thousand people on February 11, 1869 and would be Canada's last public hanging.



Figure 2: Photograph of James Patrick Whelan taken at 260 Murray street (Bytown Museum, P3209)

McGee's funeral in Ottawa is considered one of the largest funerals in Canadian history and the largely attended Montreal funeral was held on what would have been McGee's 43rd birthday. Although Whelan was convicted, there is still some doubt due to the evidence being largely circumstantial, leaving this the greatest murder mystery in Canadian political history.



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