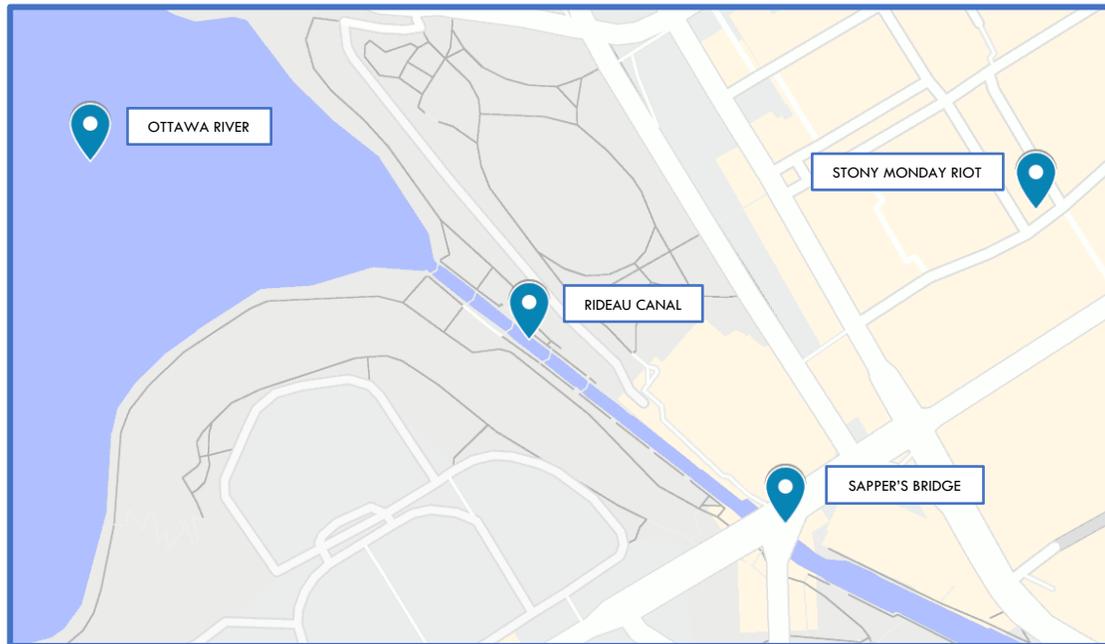


City History Hunt: Brawling Bytown



Rideau Canal

The construction of the Rideau Canal brought many European settlers and immigrants, mainly French and Irish. The disparities between the French and Irish began with the Rideau Canal, as the Irish were given more dangerous jobs. Many of the poor Irish workers couldn't afford land or housing upon arrival in Bytown, leading them to build rough shanties along the canal and Parliament Hill.

Fights were common amongst canal workers and other inhabitants of Bytown; however, they often grew into larger feuds due to the various religious, ethnic, and linguistic differences of Bytown's residents. John By didn't want this affecting the canal's construction, so he installed a boxing ring on LeBretton Flats in an attempt to reduce the brawls between the French and English.



Ottawa River

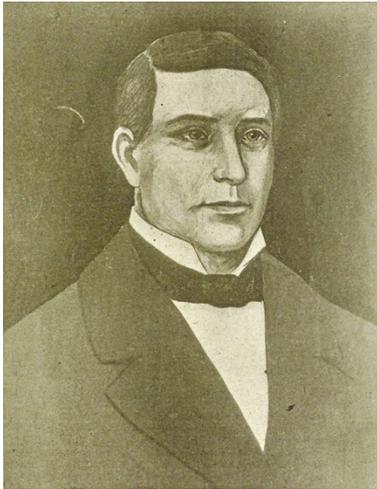


Figure 1: Joseph Montferrand
(National Library and Archives of
Quebec)

After the completion of the Rideau Canal, the lumber industry became the leading source of employment in Bytown. However, there were not enough jobs for all the former canal workers and the lumber barons had a preference for French Canadians. A gang of unemployed Irish emerged called the Shiners who attempted to take over the lumber industry through intimidation and violence. This began a period of great violence in Bytown known as the Shiner Wars. Peter Aylen, “King of the Shiners”, quickly began leading the gang in sending threats of severed horse ears to their rivals. Yet, many of the Irish also remembered him as a very kind man. The French had their own leader, Joseph Montferrand (Big Joe Mufferaw). Much of the folklore surrounding Montferrand is based on real events.

Stony Monday Riot

The animosity between the French and Irish continued, however, as working-class citizens, they both mostly resided in Lowertown and shared religious and political values. A new rivalry emerged between the French and Irish Reformers of Lowertown and the wealthy English and Scottish Tories of Uppertown. The canal became a physical division of religion, politics, and socio-economic status in Bytown. The tension between the Reformers of Lowertown and the Tories of Uppertown culminated in the Stony Monday Riot of 1849. The riot took place on Monday September 17th, 1849 in the ByWard Market area of Lowertown. Hundreds of citizens of Bytown took up sticks, stones, fists and firearms in this violent event. Although many were injured, there was only one death. The army had to be called in to break up the riot, however, many of the participants were dissatisfied with the abrupt and anti-climactic end to the brawl.





Figure 2: Image from a postcard depicting Sappers Bridge and Parliament buildings (Bytown Museum, P4236 a)

Sapper's Bridge

After the Stony Monday Riot was broken up, the Reformers and Tories called in support from the surrounding areas in preparation for another confrontation. The two sides met two days later on Wednesday September 19th, 1849 on Sapper's Bridge, the remains of which are still visible under the Plaza Bridge. The two parties came prepared, with canons, muskets and pistols, expecting a much larger and bloodier riot. However, 71 members of the Royal Canadian Rifles Regiment arrived and were able to stop the violence before it even began.



Tag us in photos of your history hunt!

@bytownmuseum

