

Sketches of Parliament and Parliamentarians Past

This column is the first of a regular series of historical vignettes exploring Canadian parliamentary traditions, legislators and legislative buildings. Drawing on the knowledge of an established network of Canadian parliamentary librarians and researchers, we also welcome reader suggestions or questions about interesting parliamentary curiosities of the past and particular parliamentary quirks which could become the basis of future columns. Please contact revoparl@ontla.ola.org.

Susanne Hynes

In each Canadian capital many people take great pride in a building that symbolizes parliamentary democracy and government. Legislative buildings attract tourists, lobbyists, school children and demonstrators. People come to them to learn, to influence, and to take in the special ambience of a place where their elected representatives make decisions affecting them all. They also, at times, come to protest.

We begin with a turning-point story in Newfoundland's parliamentary history that illustrates the importance and the vulnerability of the most public of buildings, the Legislative Building. The story was submitted by Kimberley Hammond, Legislative Librarian for Newfoundland and Labrador, who is working on a book about the history of the Newfoundland Legislative Assembly. Her province was the first encountered by Europeans and the last to join Confederation. It has been at times very strategic, and at times almost forgotten by the larger powers most closely associated with it: Great Britain, Canada, the United States and France. The Colonial Building was its seat of government until 1956.

Notable is one short sentence in the newspaper reports for the day: a youth stole the mace during the April 5, 1932 riot – and a citizen made him bring it back!

The column closes with the story of Upper Canada's mace, which was looted more than one hundred years earlier by American troops who burned Upper Canada's "Palace of Government" during the war of 1812. It took much longer for this mace to be returned.

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Demonstration at the Colonial Building

In the early 1930s the economic situation in the Dominion of Newfoundland was grim. A combination of the debt incurred through participation in the Great War, the decline in the price of fish, and the effects of the Great Depression, found the Government of the day on the verge of bankruptcy, in debt to the tune of about \$100 million dollars. To coincide, a series of political scandals left the population disenchanted with politicians and politics.

On April 5, 1932 what started as a peaceful demonstration against the government dissolved into a riot. Merchants had given their employees a half day off and a parade that grew from 2,000 to more than 3,000 men, women and youths marched along the main streets ending up at the Legislature. The building was breached and the 20 policemen inside could not stop the trouble. The newspapers the next day tell the story.



On April 5, 1932, a crowd moved towards the Colonial Building in St. John's to listen to speakers prior to the riot.

The Rooms Provincial Archives Division A 19-21



Newfoundland's old hand-painted wooden mace was gifted by the British authorities to the newly elected House of Assembly in 1833.

"Before the Speaker left the Chair and adjourned the House, the first stones were thrown through the windows downstairs and soon the battering of the doors leading to the Ryall residence, the Reporters room, Opposition rooms and those occupied by Miss Morris [Legislative Librarian] began. In less than an hour every pane of glass was broken, ... and a rush was made by the police and assistants to quench the fires. With pickets and sticks the sashes were smashed, the rooms were ransacked, and efforts were made to gain access to the Assembly room upstairs. ... Typewriters, bookcases, books and documents as well as chairs and tables were flung into the grounds and the scene this morning is likened to that of a gigantic explosion had occurred within the precincts of the Assembly building." *Evening Telegram*, 5 April 1932, p. 4

One youth, running away with the Mace, was grabbed by a spectator who compelled him to replace it. Another youth managed to get the sword of the Sergeant at Arms and advanced to the front of the building, holding it high in his hand.

The resulting damage to the Colonial Building was estimated at \$10,000 and many people were injured in the fray. The Prime Minister, Sir Richard Squires, managed to escape with the help of local clergy but resigned the next day.

The subsequent administration under Frederick Alderdice sought the help of Canada and Britain. They agreed to help with the debt so long as Newfoundland agreed to a commission of enquiry to determine a longer-term solution. After 78 years of responsible government, on December 2, 1933 the House of Assembly met for the final time, having effectively voted itself out of existence a few days prior. It was meant to be a brief arrangement, but it would last 15 years.

The Mace of Upper Canada and the War of 1812

Upper Canada's "Palace of Government" located on Palace Street in York (now Front Street in Toronto) was completed in 1796 and held sessions of the Legislature

right up until the invasion by United States forces on April 27, 1813 during the War of 1812. Among the forces defending the town was a full company of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment, part of a 750-man force that was overwhelmed by 2,650 Americans.

For 11 days the invaders, under General Henry Dearborn, flew the Stars and Stripes over the town of York. Many buildings, including the Palace of

Government, were looted and burned.

And, to crown all, before they re-embarked they set fire to the two houses erected for the accommodation of our Provincial Legislature and Courts of Justice... which had been erected and fitted up at an expense of several thousand pounds. These with the office containing all the Journals, a large collection of books and other appendages connected with such an establishment, were all consumed by the flames; and the bare walls alone remain.¹

Before they set the building aflame the invaders took the speaker's mace and the carved lion above his chair as trophies. One account maintains another trophy was taken: what the looters thought was a human scalp hanging above the speaker's chair but which was, in reality, his periwig.

The United States preserved the mace and the Royal Standard (which has not been returned) at the Naval Academy at Annapolis.²

On May 4, 1934 President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a message to Congress suggesting the mace be returned to Canada, and was it was presented to the Lieutenant Governor in Toronto on July 4, 1934 — 121 years after it was taken.

- 1 Letter signed "Falkland", Kingston Gazette, August 17, 1813, in Frank A. Dieterman and Ronald F. Williamson, "Government on Fire", Toronto: eastendbooks, 2001, p. 19.
- 2 Franklin D. Roosevelt: "[Message to Congress Requesting Authority to Return a Mace to Canada](#)," May 4, 1934. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. URL: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=14862>