

# *Under the Crimson Cloth: The Story of Canada's Confederation Table*

Canada's historic Confederation Table has returned to the province of Quebec for the first time in more than 100 years for a special exhibit - but its home is now Saskatchewan.

**Melissa K. Bennett**

In 2014, after more than 100 years in Saskatchewan and 100 years in the Saskatchewan Legislative Library Reading Room, the historic Confederation Table made a long journey back to central Canada.

It was a grey but mild day in Regina on November 4, 2014. Inside the provincial Legislative Building, in the Library Reading Room, technicians carefully wrapped the renowned artifact for transportation across the country. Under the watchful eyes of custodians, options were considered for best carrying Canada's heavy and large Confederation Table from the second floor Reading Room into the fine art transport truck waiting outside.

The Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly Service had agreed to loan the Confederation Table for an exhibit at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec, and historians and conservators at the Museum were eagerly awaiting its arrival. Once there, the table believed to have been used by the Fathers of Confederation at the Quebec Conference of October 1864, would take a place of honour in the exhibit *1867: Rebellion and Confederation*.

The 1864 Quebec Conference setting was vividly described by newspapers of the day – the panoramic view from the windows of the second floor reading room of Parliament House in Quebec City, and the “long narrow table, covered with a crimson cloth and littered with stationery, statutes, pamphlets, and books of reference, [running] down the centre of the room, leaving just space enough at the sides for the chairs of the delegates.” Over the course of the three week

conference, 72 resolutions regarding the constitutional provisions of Canada's confederation – which laid the foundation for Canada's democratic system of government – would be negotiated around the table.

The Confederation Table is a golden-hued oak and basswood library or refectory table constructed circa 1837 to 1864 in a Victorian Gothic Revival style. Its rectangular top, originally almost 16 feet long, has drawers on each side and rounded corners. Its feet and trestle supports are carved with Gothic arches.

Accounts indicate that the Confederation Table was among the furnishings used by the Government in Quebec City when the Quebec Conference was held. Given its shape, size, and location, it is probable that it was, indeed, the table under the crimson cloth. After the Quebec Conference, the table was chosen to be the federal Government's Cabinet table and was transferred from Quebec City to Ottawa, where it was used for that purpose for roughly two decades.

The Confederation Table began its Saskatchewan journey sometime between 1883 and 1892. Deteriorating and de-commissioned as the Cabinet table, it was brought to Regina by the Honourable Edgar Dewdney, Lieutenant Governor of the North-West Territories and Canada's Indian Commissioner. It resided in the Office of the Indian Commissioner, and was later used by the North-West Territories government, eventually becoming the House table for the Legislative Assembly. Facilities were limited and in 1908 the table was shortened by six feet in order to fit it into the space where the Legislative Assembly was meeting, prior to the completion of the Saskatchewan Legislative Building in 1912. In 1914, the table was retired as the Assembly House table and moved to the Legislative Library.

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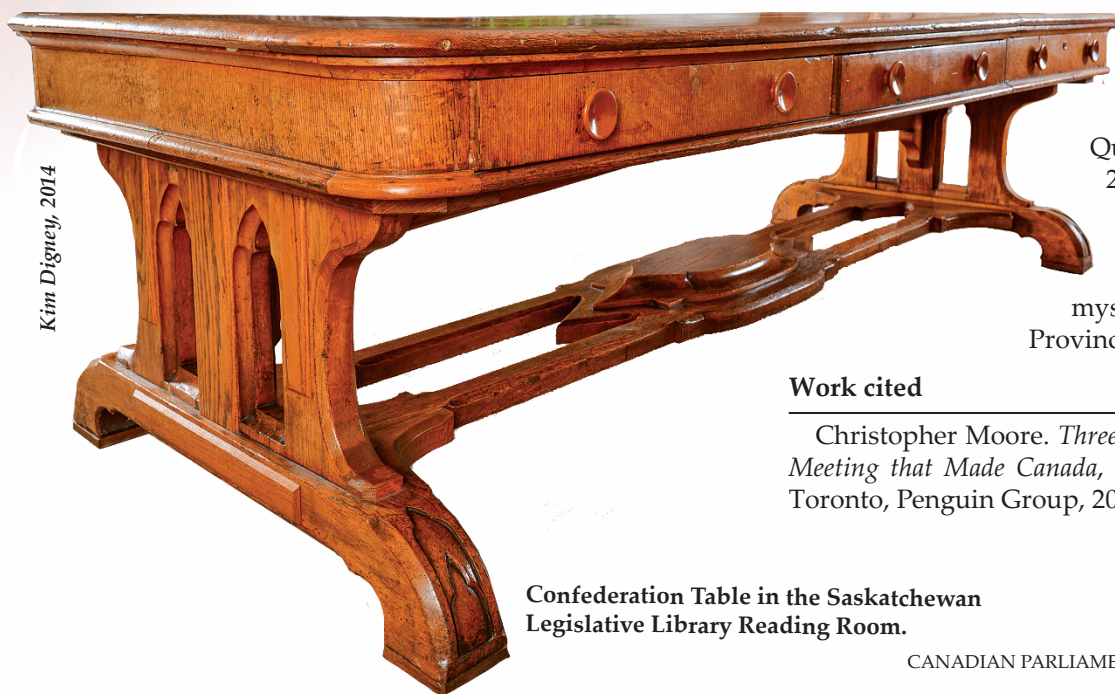




Depiction of the 1864 Quebec Conference – delegates around the table under the crimson cloth. *The Fathers of Confederation* painting by Rex Woods, 1968. Source: © House of Commons Collection, Ottawa.

In the hundred years since arriving at the Library, the Confederation Table evolved from a working table to a valued historical artifact. Oral history about the table's significance spread and recognition of its historic and symbolic importance grew. Countless school children, tour groups, and visiting dignitaries have gathered around the table to hear its story. Saskatchewan legislators appreciate the table's representation of Canadian heritage, democratic values and governing structures.

Historians refer to the mystery of the Confederation Table because of reliance on oral tradition in tracing its story. The term also hints at the complexity of the Confederation Table as a symbol. It was a witness to so many aspects of the coming together of Confederation in both eastern and western Canada. Its abrasions and scars, yet enduring strength and beauty, are a reflection of the hard process, compromises, and achievement of Confederation. In the table, we are reminded of the fulfillment and losses held in our history.



Kim Digney, 2014

The Confederation Table is on display at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec until January 3, 2016. It will then return home again to Regina and where it will continue to hold a place of honour, mystique, and heritage in the Province's house of government.

#### Work cited

Christopher Moore. *Three Weeks in Quebec City: The Meeting that Made Canada*, History of Canada Series, Toronto, Penguin Group, 2015, p. 43.

**Confederation Table in the Saskatchewan Legislative Library Reading Room.**