

This year marks the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Town of Cobourg. As one of the events the Cobourg Branch of the ACO erected a plaque honouring Egerton Ryerson and his contribution to the architecture, education and life of the town. This plaque sits at the north end of Victoria Park and encourages visitors to walk north to see the former Victoria College building and to explore the nearby historic neighbourhood.

Egerton Ryerson was a young Methodist preacher who received an appointment as missionary to the Mississaugas of the Credit in September 1820. Such was his enthusiasm and energy for the post that he was able to persuade the people to build a house "to answer the dual purpose of a school house and a place for divine worship." They subscribed one hundred dollars toward the building within one hour, and Ryerson was able to persuade old friends in Hamilton, York and Niagara to raise the rest. Within six weeks the house was built and paid for while the government of the day was still debating whether to proceed.

With the tremendous resourcefulness and perseverance shown in this early example, Egerton began his connection to Cobourg when he was next appointed as the Methodist circuit or "saddlebag" preacher to the Cobourg area. A "saddlebag" preacher would rise early, write his sermon while on horseback, and deliver it in the next settlement on his route. Ryerson's circuit included Rice Lake, and Bowmanville to Brighton.

He rose to prominence when, in 1826, he opposed Bishop John Strachan on the question of educational funding in Ontario. Bishop Strachan wanted a large money grant for the exclusive use of the Anglican Church,



HONOURING EGERTON RYERSON

by Alistair Commins



Victoria College, Cobourg

whereas Ryerson championed equality of opportunity: a non-denominational and co-educational system. Ryerson began a vigorous campaign to secure a Royal Charter and funding for the establishment of the Upper Canada Academy in Cobourg, an alternative to the Anglican-supported Upper Canada College in Toronto. The Academy became Victoria University in 1841, with Egerton as its principal. To quote Canadian Geographic of 1987: "As unlikely as tiny Cobourg (population 800 in 1836) may have seemed for the site of a University of Victoria's stature, the choice was entirely in keeping with the school's Methodist, rural, reforming roots."

Ryerson was determined to improve education, teacher training, and to make good schooling accessible to all and not just the privileged few. Once he was appointed Assistant Superintendent of Education in 1844, he embarked on an extensive study of education in Europe and the U.S. His observations culminated in the passing in 1846 of the first of three School Acts which would revolutionize education in Canada, and lay the groundwork for the school system as we know it today.

Egerton Ryerson died in 1882. In 1892, to the disappointment of Cobourg's town fathers, Victoria College was federated with the University of Toronto, and thus began a series of alternate uses for the Greek Revival buildings once the birthplace of educational reform. However, in spite of a period of deterioration and neglect, it is gratifying to see that the building has been restored and has been repurposed for use as a retirement residence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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