



FRIENDS OF
**EGERTON
RYERSON**

The Egerton Ryerson You Never Heard About at Ryerson University (Now TMU)

The decision to rename Ryerson University has been made and the name change started. But what about the real Egerton Ryerson? The one Ryerson students, faculty and staff never heard about, but were instead bombarded with false accusations, some from the university president himself!

The university president, Dr. Lachemi, had a plaque put up in 2018 next to the Ryerson statue that accused him of being “instrumental in the design and implementation of Canada’s Residential school system” adding the words “unthinkable abuse and neglect, “medical experimentation,” “punishment” and “death,” to make him into a monster.

Did You Know:

- That Ryerson had NO connection with the harmful system, brought in after his death, but instead supported the voluntary, bilingual (Ojibway and English) schools that Indigenous leaders themselves wanted. They (and he) wanted better economic opportunities for Indigenous people and the ability to communicate with government officials and settlers. Bilingual schools made sense.
- Indigenous people were at a low ebb when Ryerson went to live with the Mississaugas of the Credit in 1826. They had lost most of their land, their numbers were down (the Ojibway had lost 60% of their people) and alcohol had become a serious problem. Ryerson helped them with economic development. He had been a “farm boy” and taught them sustainable farming and carpentry he had learned at home. He worked with them in the fields and in house building. Together they got a school built, this before Ontario had a public school system.
- When Ryerson lived with the Ojibway, conditions were tough—he and they lived in wigwams, yet, as he recorded in his journal, *“I was never more comfortable and happy.”* They *“received me with affection and enabled me to embrace them as brethren and love them as mine own people”* (cited by Burwash, *Egerton Ryerson*).
- Ryerson not only learned Ojibway, but was made an Ojibway “brother,” by a chief, given the name “Cheechock,” which means “Bird on a Wing.” Two Ojibway boys were named after him by their parents.
- That Ryerson supported the land claims and claims to exclusive fishing rights of the Mississaugas of the Credit.
- Did You Know that there is not one scholarly source, meaning material based on documents, that implicates Ryerson in the residential school system? Rather, there is a two-volume Life and Letters, several biographies and numerous books and articles by education experts and historians that relate his contributions, without a mention of residential schools. (A list is provided on the website.)
- Did you Know that there was not *one* expert on Ryerson on either the Ryerson University Task Force or the Victoria University Panel that recommended the name changes?

The Real Villains of Canada's Residential School System

Not Ryerson, but there were real villains for the residential school system: the initial advocates for them, and those who got them started, and—yes—made them even worse over time. Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, was the major proponent of assimilation. He commissioned Nicholas Flood Davin, in 1879, to visit the American reserves that had succeeded in "forced assimilation," which required separating children from their families.

Residential schools were legislated under Macdonald in 1884, two years after Ryerson's death.

An amendment in 1920 made attendance compulsory, then one in 1933 made the RCMP responsible for enforcement, to find, apprehend and return Indigenous children who ran away. In 1936, Indigenous parents lost the guardianship of their children to the principals of the schools. Numerous other measures of cultural suppression were brought in along the way.

Ryerson's Letter on "Industrial Schools"

In 1847, Ryerson was asked by an Indian Affairs official to provide him with ideas on residential schools, then wanted by Indigenous leaders to teach farming to their members (they already had day schools). Ryerson obliged with a handwritten, 5-page, letter suggesting "industrial schools" to teach farming—agriculture then being by far the largest industry in Ontario.

Ryerson outlined the farming skills needed, plus the care of mechanical equipment and book-keeping. He outlined also the academic subjects to be covered (a considerable list). In summer, there would be long hours of work on the farm, paid work, so that attendees would have a nest egg to help them get started on leaving. He looked to Indigenous people becoming, at the least, skilled "agricultural labourers," up to "overseers of some the largest farms in Canada," and "prosperous farmers on their own account."

Yet this admirable proposal has been distorted, by the (then) president of Victoria University at University of Toronto, Dr Robins, into Indigenous students becoming mere "agricultural labourers." The Panel of Four he appointed went even further, to accuse him of wanting to turn Indigenous children into a "racialized subservient class."

Friends of Egerton Ryerson

Friends of Egerton Ryerson was started in 2021 to restore and defend his reputation.

Whatever happens under the new university name, Egerton Ryerson deserves to be celebrated for his important work in founding our public school system, free public libraries, friendship with Indigenous people and support for the schools they wanted, preservation of their language and their demand for self-government.

Join us! <https://friendsofegertonryerson.ca>

