



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

The decision to rename Ryerson University was made in 2021 and is now a done deal. The Friends of Egerton Ryerson do not seek to change it back, but to ensure that people know about the real Egerton Ryerson—both the pioneering contribution he made to education in Canada and his friendship with Indigenous people and support for their rights.

In 2018, the then Ryerson University president, Dr. Lachemi, had a plaque put up 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.

### But Did You Know?

- That Ryerson had NO connection with the harmful system, brought in after his death, but instead supported the voluntary, bilingual (Ojibwe and English) schools that Indigenous leaders and parents themselves wanted. They (and he) wanted better economic opportunities and the ability to communicate with government officials and settlers.
- Indigenous people were at a low ebb when Ryerson was sent as a missionary to the Missisaukas of the Credit in 1826. They had lost most of their land and 60% of their people. 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.

On his arrival at the Credit, Ryerson first lived in a wigwam. He then boarded with the schoolteacher’s family. He loved his time with the Ojibwe, right from the start, 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.” He supported their land claims and claims to exclusive fishing rights at the Credit.

- Ryerson not only learned Ojibwe, but was made an Ojibwe “brother,” by a chief, given the name “Cheechock,” which means “Bird on a Wing.” Two Ojibwe boys were named after him by their parents.
- Did You Know that there is not one scholarly source, meaning material based on historical documents, that implicates Ryerson in the residential school system? Rather, there is a two-

volume *Life and Letters*, three regular biographies, his own memoir, *Story of My Life*, 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

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 a 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. Yet even Sir John A., who *advocated* the separation of children for schooling, never legislated it.

Amendments to the Indian Act under later prime ministers made the system harsher. In 1920 an amendment made attendance at a school compulsory, but it could be day or residential. An amendment 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 principal of the residential school. Numerous other measures of cultural suppression were brought in along the way.

Ryerson's one writing on "industrial schools," 1847, was a 5-page handwritten letter, requested by an Indian Affairs official. Methodist Indigenous leaders wanted what they called "manual labour schools" and started two of their own. Ryerson's proposal was for teaching farming—agriculture then being by far the largest industry in Ontario. He 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 Ryerson of wanting to turn Indigenous children into a "racialized subservient class."

The Friends of Egerton Ryerson was started in 2021 to restore and defend his reputation. Join us!  
<https://friendsofegertonryerson.ca>