

Remember Me

A series on forgotten Canadian Legends

WILLIAM MERCER WILSON

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William Mercer Wilson is a little known figure in Ontario history who helped build the province — and the country — in a subtle way.

Wilson is the originator of the Masons in Ontario.

That is significant because back in the mid-1800s most of the movers and shakers in government and business belonged to the organization, known at the time for its secret meetings and hand signals.

Sir John A. Macdonald was a Mason. So was the Mohawk military and political leader Joseph Brant as well as many mayors, bank managers, newspaper publishers, premiers, and lieutenant-governors.

"If you look at the history of both the U.S. and Canada, Free Masons are involved in all formations of politics and business," said Dale Smout, historian of the lodge Wilson headed up in Simcoe, Ont.

In the 1800s, Mason lodges existed in Upper and Lower Canada, but they were ruled by the Grand Lodge of England.

Communication was a problem. It took a letter eight months to get from England to, say, Norfolk County, where

Wilson lived, and another eight months for a reply to go back. Decision-making was difficult.

Wilson decided Ontario Masons should govern themselves. He traveled across the province and convinced other lodges to join a new grand lodge just for Ontario.

They agreed and in 1855 Ontario's Masons had their first governing body and Wilson, appropriately enough, was their first grand master.

Wilson was well-connected with those in power. The lodge in Simcoe still has a handwritten letter to Wilson from Sir John A. Macdonald discussing Masons business.

Wilson was also something of a dashing figure. In the Rebellion of 1837, he led the Norfolk Cavalry Troop and helped capture the enemy ship, the Caroline, in Niagara.

Back in Simcoe, Wilson was immensely popular. He was a lawyer, newspaper publisher, Crown Attorney, and a reeve (top-ranked local politician) of the community, which at the time was a village of 2,000.

When he decided to pull out of politics, he was presented with a petition with hundreds of signatures from village residents demanding he run for office again.

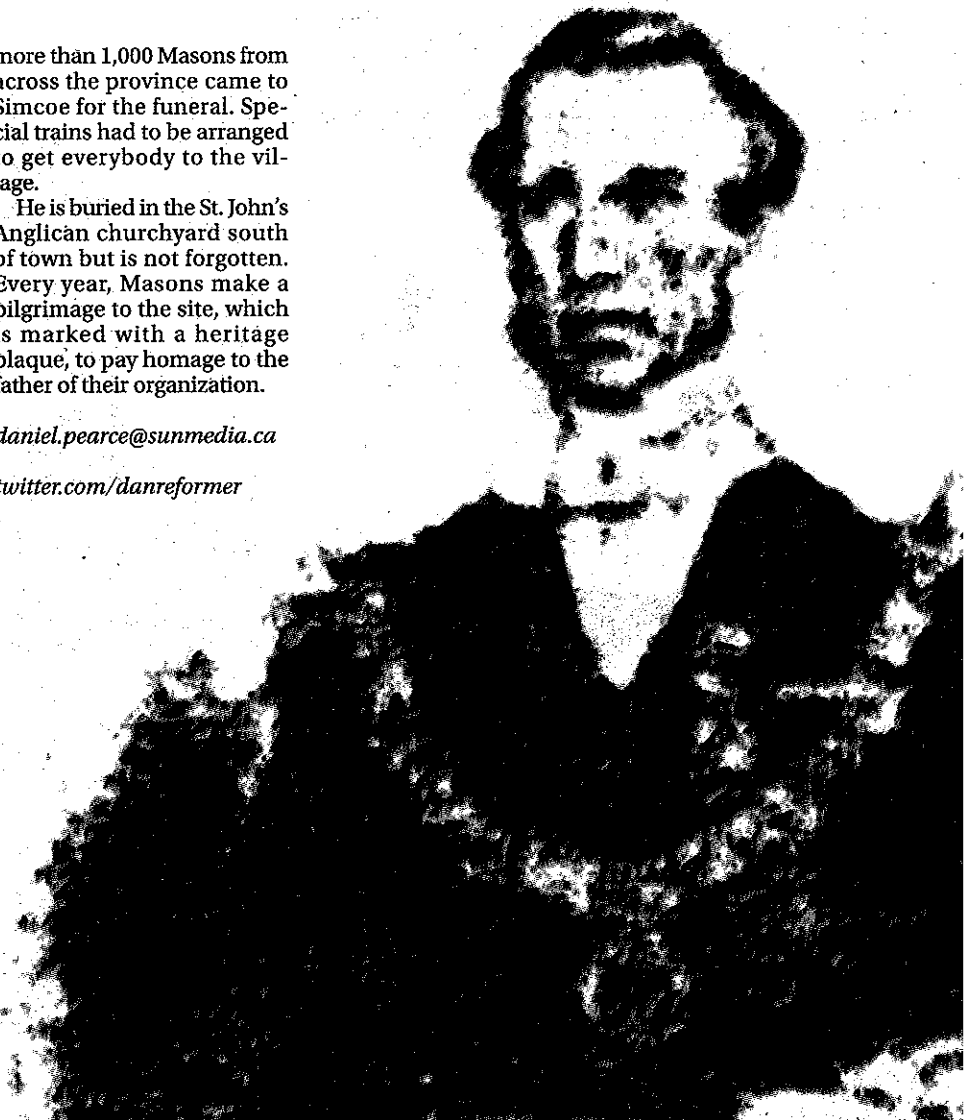
When Wilson died in 1875,

more than 1,000 Masons from across the province came to Simcoe for the funeral. Special trains had to be arranged to get everybody to the village.

He is buried in the St. John's Anglican churchyard south of town but is not forgotten. Every year, Masons make a pilgrimage to the site, which is marked with a heritage plaque, to pay homage to the father of their organization.

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Mason's grand master

A shining star in history

1813

Born Aug. 24 in Perthshire, Scotland

1832

Came to Canada

1853

Called to the bar

1860

Serv

1875