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APPLICATION FOR ONTARIO HERITAGE TRUST PLAQUE

Colonel Darby Bergin MD, MP

1826 – 1896

This application for an Ontario Historic Trust plaque recognizes the contributions of Colonel Darby MD MP to the growth of Ontario and Canada as physician, politician, entrepreneur, and soldier.

He was the first commanding officer of the precedent unit of today's Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders.

He is recognized as a founder of the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps.

He was a member of the Roman Catholic Church.

He was born in York (Toronto). Following earning his degree in medicine, he was a resident of Cornwall until his death.

This application is sponsored by the Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry Highlanders' Regimental Foundation with support from the Alexandria – Cornwall Roman Catholic Diocese, area municipalities and historical societies.

Recognizing a Great Ontarian – Colonel Darby Bergin MD, MP

AIM

To recommend the installation of an Ontario Heritage Trust plaque in memory of Colonel Darby Bergin, Canada's first surgeon general, adjacent to his grave in the cemetery of the Precious Blood Parish, (Alexandria – Cornwall Diocese), Glen Walter, Township of South Glengarry.

BACKGROUND

Summary. Darby Bergin was born in York, Upper Canada (Ontario) in 1826 and died in Cornwall, Ontario in 1896. His parents were of Irish descent. He was the eldest child of Mary Flanagan from Charlottenburg Township, Glengarry County and merchant William Bergin. Darby Bergin attended Upper Canada College after which he studied medicine at McGill. He received his MD shortly after his 21st birthday. He set up a medical practice in Cornwall to be near his maternal relatives. During his lifetime, he was a physician, a local politician, a federal politician, entrepreneur, and soldier. He was Cornwall's foremost Roman Catholic Irishman. He never married. On October 22, 1896, he died of an unidentified illness. In the Harkness History of the United Counties of Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry, it is noted: "As an indication of the esteem in which he was held, his funeral was one of the largest ever seen in Cornwall". It was estimated that between 7000 and 8000 people attended the funeral, and the procession to the cemetery at Flanagan's Point was over two miles long. He is buried with family in a cemetery amongst the pines that traces its history back to his Flanagan ancestors.

Physician. As mentioned above, Darby Bergin was a graduate of medicine from McGill. He practiced his profession in Cornwall as a physician, surgeon, and accoucheur (child birth). He was the first president of the Eastern District Medical Association. He served as the president of the St. Lawrence and Eastern District Medical Association. For the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, he was an examiner in midwifery and surgical anatomy. Dr. Bergin served as Vice President (1880 – 1881) and President (1881 – 1882 and 1885 – 1886) of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario. He was one of two doctors who played a humanitarian role in support of Irish immigrants (typhus) and First Nations in Akwesasne (smallpox). Probably in respect of Dr. Bergin, Cornwall's Irish were loyal to Canada during the Fenian troubles.

Politician

Local Politics. Darby Bergin was an active member of his community. He started his political service as a school trustee and a member of the Town of Cornwall's council.

Federal Politics. He first served in Canada's parliament as a Federal Liberal member. With some conflict in the riding, he switched sides, and on his death was the Conservative Member of Parliament for Stormont. His record of service as a Member of Parliament was for the years 1872 – 1874, 1878 – 1882, 1882 – 1896. He opposed the Canada Temperance Act. He promoted legislation for improved safety in the workplace perhaps motivated by Cornwall's textile industry. While his private members bills to regulate the hours of work of the employment of women and children were not successful, his efforts

were the basis of provincial legislation such as the Ontario Factories Act of 1884. He was very interested in transportation.

Entrepreneur. Along with his brother and a local veterinarian, he operated the Stormont Stock Farm raising trotting horses and Shorthorn cattle. He promoted the Ontario Pacific Railway serving as president from 1886 until his death. This venture later became the New York Central line from Cornwall to Ottawa. He promoted improvements to the Cornwall Canal.

Soldier

Local Militia Commander. Colonel Bergin's military career began when the country was facing an unsettling time with the Trent Affair (1862) and the Fenian Raids (1866). His military career started in 1850 as the Regimental Surgeon for the 3rd Battalion, Stormont Militia. In 1851, he was with the 4th Battalion, Stormont Militia. He served in the 1st Volunteer Militia Rifle Company of Cornwall as Regimental Surgeon from 1858 until 1862. In 1862, he became the officer in charge of the Cornwall Infantry Company. During the Trent Affair, he raised the 1st Rifle Company in Cornwall serving as commanding officer with the rank of Captain. This marked his change in role from surgeon to infantry commander. He was promoted major in 1866. On 3 July 1868 with the creation of the 59th Stormont & Glengarry Battalion of Infantry, he became its first commanding officer. He was promoted lieutenant colonel in 1869 when the 59th was 439 strong with "a fair brass band of 12". He held this appointment until 1885. The 59th Battalion is the precedent unit of today's Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Highlanders.

Surgeon General. Some feel that his most important military appointment was as Surgeon General for the North – West Rebellion expedition. He took over the task from another doctor who felt the task of providing medical services to General Middleton's Expedition was impossible without help from Americans. Bergin was still an MP at the time when serving as Surgeon General. Bergin created a medical service out of chaos. The problems he faced were substantial. The service was dismantled after the expedition, but Bergin advocated for the creation of a permanent medical corps to help prevent the situation of 1885. Unfortunately, the absence of military needs after the Rebellion resulted in little heed being paid to his report on the organization and employment of medical services for the militia. However, the Canadian Army Medical Corps came into being in 1904. Colonel Bergin had helped to lay the foundation of our Army Medical Corps. In Colonel G.W.L. Nicholson's coverage of the first 70 years of the Corps, he states that the official histories of the Corps for the two world wars are in agreement with believing that the contributions made by such people as Colonel Bergin during the North – West Rebellion laid the foundation of the Canadian Army Medical Corps. To emphasize this belief, a historical pageant was part of the Corps' Golden Jubilee, and Colonel Bergin as the first surgeon general was there on his charger.

In 1886, Darby Bergin was promoted to colonel.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Ontario Heritage Trust place a memorial plaque at the Precious Blood Cemetery, Glen Walter, honouring Colonel Bergin's contributions to his community of Stormont County and to Canada.

CONCLUSION

Prior to the creation of the St. Lawrence Seaway, a lake that was part of the St. Lawrence River system was named in honour of Colonel Bergin. With the flooding of that part of the river, Bergin Lake no longer exists.

Colonel Darby Bergin is an Ontarian for whose burial ground should have an Ontario Heritage Trust plaque recognizing his many services to his community, province, and country.



The Bergin Monument – Precious Blood Cemetery

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