



The Toronto Railway Historical Association's position on the renaming of Union Station

In 19th century cities where land was scarce and there was little room for new downtown development, it was common for fiercely competitive railway companies to each build a separate passenger station along with associated yards and facilities. Had that been permitted in Toronto, most of the south end of the city would have been one vast railway yard. When two or more railway companies were persuaded to cooperate and build a shared station, it was usually referred to as Union Station and that's how Toronto's facility got its name.

The current Toronto Union Station is the third station to bear that name. The facility opened in 1927 after almost a quarter century of legal, political and financial wrangling between the City of Toronto and the two railways that built the station. The fact that these three antagonists could finally agree on a "union" station is a significant milestone in Toronto's history. It is not just some generic name that has no significant meaning. Yes, there are other cities in North America that also have a Union Station, just as there are many cities and towns that have a Queen's Park and a Church Street and a Riverdale but nobody is suggesting that we change the names of those places that are also so important to Toronto's heritage.

The first Toronto Union Station was located west of York Street and opened on June 21, 1858. That's 156 years of Toronto history that should not be casually swept aside in a misguided effort to honour Canada's first prime minister. Let us consider some of the historical dramas that have played out at Toronto's Union Stations over the past century and a half:

- In 1864, welcoming the delegates who attended the Charlottetown and Quebec City conferences to establish the terms of Confederation for Canada were welcomed at Toronto Union Station upon their arrival from Ottawa. A huge crowd escorted the delegates from the station to the Queen's Hotel on the north side of Front Street.
- Families seeing off their loved ones who were going to fight in the Boer War, World War I, World War II, Korea and Afghanistan.
- King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, later the Queen Mother, boarding the Royal Train for their triumphant tour of Canada and the United States during the first visit of a reigning monarch to North America in 1939.
- Families greeting their soldiers returning from those same wars, many wounded, and some after being locked up for years in an enemy POW camp.
- General Dwight D Eisenhower, only 18 months after leading the Allied invasion of Normandy on D-Day, triumphantly greeted at Union Station, five years before he became the 34th president of United States.
- The coffin bearing the remains of William Lyon Mackenzie King, Canada's longest serving prime minister, being carried through the Great Hall 23 years after he had walked across the same floor accompanied the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, on the very day that Union Station opened.

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- Families of immigrants - none of them speaking English – carrying everything they own and arriving in Toronto to spend the rest of their lives.
- A long line-up of travelers in front of the Amtrak ticket counter buying railway passage to New York City on September 12, 2001, because there aren't any planes flying into the U.S. the day after the terrorist attacks.

These seminal events in Toronto's history did not unfold at Macdonald Station but at Toronto Union Station. In 1975, Union Station was declared a National Historic Site. The name Union Station is permanently etched in meter-high letters above the 22 limestone columns facing Front Street and that name will be there as long as the station stands.

The Toronto Railway Historical Association believes that John A. Macdonald should be commemorated upon the 200th anniversary of his birth. It would be insulting to Macdonald's legacy if a historical site was renamed in his honour and the 200,000 people a day who use the facility ignored the change, a fate likely to befall a renamed Union Station. One only has to consider the hundreds of thousands of people a day who travel along Highway 401 and who would be baffled if they were informed that they were driving on the Macdonald-Cartier Freeway.

One of Macdonald's greatest physical legacies to Canada was the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway that connected Montreal with the Pacific Ocean, brought British Columbia into the nation, and cemented Confederation. The closest this transcontinental railway ever got to Toronto was 250 miles.

A far more appropriate venue to honor Macdonald would be the new plaza in front of Union Station, a site that heretofore has not had a name. This plaza is being redeveloped into a much more attractive and pedestrian-friendly precinct by the City of Toronto at a cost of several million dollars. It is flanked on the south by Union Station and on the north by the Royal York Hotel.

From the 1850s until 1927 the site of the Royal York was occupied by the Queen's Hotel. Before Confederation, Ontario was known as Canada West and the provincial Parliament Buildings were located just down the street from the Queen's. The hotel was a popular meeting place for influential legislators including Macdonald and many other Fathers of Confederation. Macdonald lived at the hotel when he was in Toronto and several important political meetings that would lead to Confederation were held in the Queen's Hotel.

It would be far more appropriate for people to enjoy this new Sir John A. Macdonald Plaza and contemplate the Toronto connection with Canada's first prime minister than it would be to rename a facility that only opened 36 years after his death. Let us not try and erase one part of Toronto's history in order to substitute it with another.

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