

MOUNTAIN'S ROLE IN REMEMBRANCE DAY CREATION
by Robert Williamson

Previously, this historical column told the story of Hamilton Mountain's connection to the invasion of Canada across the Niagara River in 1866 at the Battle of Ridgeway. The story involved the 13th Hamilton Battalion Volunteer Militia, predecessor of the RHLI (Royal Hamilton Light Infantry) along with the Caledonia and York Rifle Companies of neighboring Haldimand County. Also featured was the story of the Mountain's 13th militia veteran, William Wells, who built St. George's Anglican Church in 1864 on Rymal Road East for the Hannon community neighborhood.

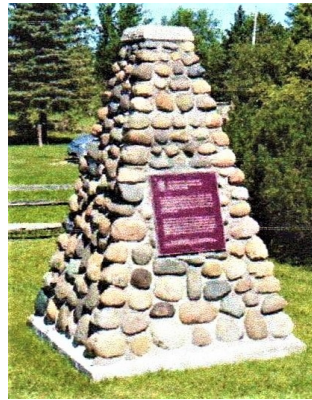
For the month of November, it is now appropriate to show how these stories brought to light the role that Hamilton Mountain played in the creation of Remembrance Day. The concept originated in the United States after the American Civil War in 1865 and was officially designated Decoration Day. The graves of fallen civil war soldiers were decorated with flags and flowers on May 30th every year. After 1918, while most **countries** involved in World War One set November 11th aside for Remembrance, the Americans retained their Decoration Day on May 30th and designated November 11th as Veterans Day to commemorate the service of all veterans. **By 1971, Decoration Day became Memorial Day in all parts of the United States.**

During the American Civil War 1861 - 1865 it should be noted that the northern union raised an army larger than the population of Canada, while British troops were drawn away to conflicts elsewhere such as the Crimean War, forever immortalized with, "The Charge of the Light Brigade". Consequently the Colonial government of Canada created a Canadian militia, compounding all the other complicated administrative problems involved with Canada's Confederation. Thus, the Minister of Militia, John A. Macdonald, "Yes, **THAT** Macdonald", sent inexperienced, under equipped, under trained and poorly led Canadian militiamen into their first battle of national defense against the Fenian raid from Buffalo.

As a result it was not a glorious affair and became a muted piece of Canadian military history. The role of our local veterans at Ridgeway went unrecognized even though their participation achieved a strategic victory when the invaders decided to return to the U.S.A.

But the local militia who fought at Ridgeway refused to be forgotten. They formed the "Veterans of 66 Association", held parades and protest demonstrations annually on June 2nd, the anniversary of Ridgeway. Following the United States example, it became designated "Decoration Day" in 1890 with a Canadian Volunteer Militia Monument erected in Queen's Park, Toronto, the provincial capital. Finally in 1921, the Ridgeway Battlefield site was commemorated by the federal government and designated as a National Historic Site with a plaque on a rock cairn.

After the horrors of the first World War, Canada's perception of war memorials became more solemn. In 1919 when King George V called for the British Empire to come to a halt for two minutes silence in honor of those killed, it set a trend for the future. A motion was introduced in the House of Commons to formally institute November 11th with its two minutes silence as "Armistice Day". However, by 1931, Decoration Day and Armistice Day merged into Remembrance Day on November 11th and finally recognized by the Holiday Act of 1985 as a National holiday.



Ridgeway Monument
courtesy Ontario War Memorials.

Before concluding the story of Remembrance Day's origin, one other regional connection should be drawn. John McCrea born in nearby Guelph in 1872, just six years after the Battle of Ridgeway, joined the Canadian Militia in 1889. While serving in the Medical Corps in World War One, he composed his iconic poem, IN FLANDERS FIELDS. Inspired by McCrea's poem, an American **YWCA member**, Moina Michael, proposed that the poppy become the symbol of Remembrance on Decoration Day to raise funds by the American Legion to support disabled veterans. Thus the poppy became the international symbol of Remembrance.

As for William Wells, Hamilton Mountain's veteran of Ridgeway, he is buried in St. Peter's Cemetery on Mohawk Road West next to Westcliffe Mall. Sadly, even though Ridgeway was designated as a National Historic Site in 1921, like all the other local Ridgeway militia veterans, as of 2019, Wells is not recognized with a Canadian Ridgeway Battle Honour, nor are those militiamen who died as a result of the battle, listed in the Federal Book of Remembrance.

Mountain Memories by award winning writer Robert Williamson appears monthly for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society <Hamiltonheritage.ca>. Credit to Neil Bell's treatise, "Canada's Forgotten Remembrance Day".