

Egerton Ryerson

Adolphus Egerton Ryerson is remembered as the **prime mover for public education in Upper Canada**, and so for much of the rest of Canada as well.

He was born in 1803 in what is now Norfolk County, to a United Empire Loyalist family. Having converted from Anglicanism to Methodism, at 17 he became a Methodist missionary or circuit rider in York region surrounding Yonge Street. The circuit took four weeks to complete on foot and horseback, as it encompassed areas with roads in extremely poor condition. **Ryerson's religious beliefs informed almost all that he did** as an educator, politician, and public education advocate.

He first came into prominence in 1826 when he spearheaded an attack on the assumptions and prerogatives of the Church of England, which claimed to be the official church of the colony and exclusive beneficiary of the income from clergy reserves.

Ryerson had a **long and powerful association with Cobourg**. Initially he was active in the establishment of The Upper Canada Academy which was officially opened in 1836. It was intended as an alternative to the Anglican-supported Upper Canada College and offered pre-university instruction to both sexes. In 1839 Ryerson was appointed its principal.

The Academy became Victoria College in 1841 when it received a Royal Charter from Queen Victoria. With this new status, the College became the second institution in Upper Canada to receive degree-granting powers. It awarded the first B.A. earned through study in Ontario.



Initially women were excluded from the College.

It was not until 1877 that Mary Crossen, the first woman permitted to take lectures with male students, was awarded the degree of M.E.L (Mistress of English Literature) by Brookhurst Academy and Victoria College jointly. In 1850 Ryerson became President of the College, but left in 1854.

Meanwhile, Governor General Sir Charles Metcalfe asked him to **become Chief Superintendent of Education for Upper Canada** in 1844. Ryerson's study of educational systems elsewhere in the Western world led to three School Acts that revolutionized education in Canada.



“On the importance of education generally we may remark, it is as necessary as the light – it should be as common as water and as free as air.”

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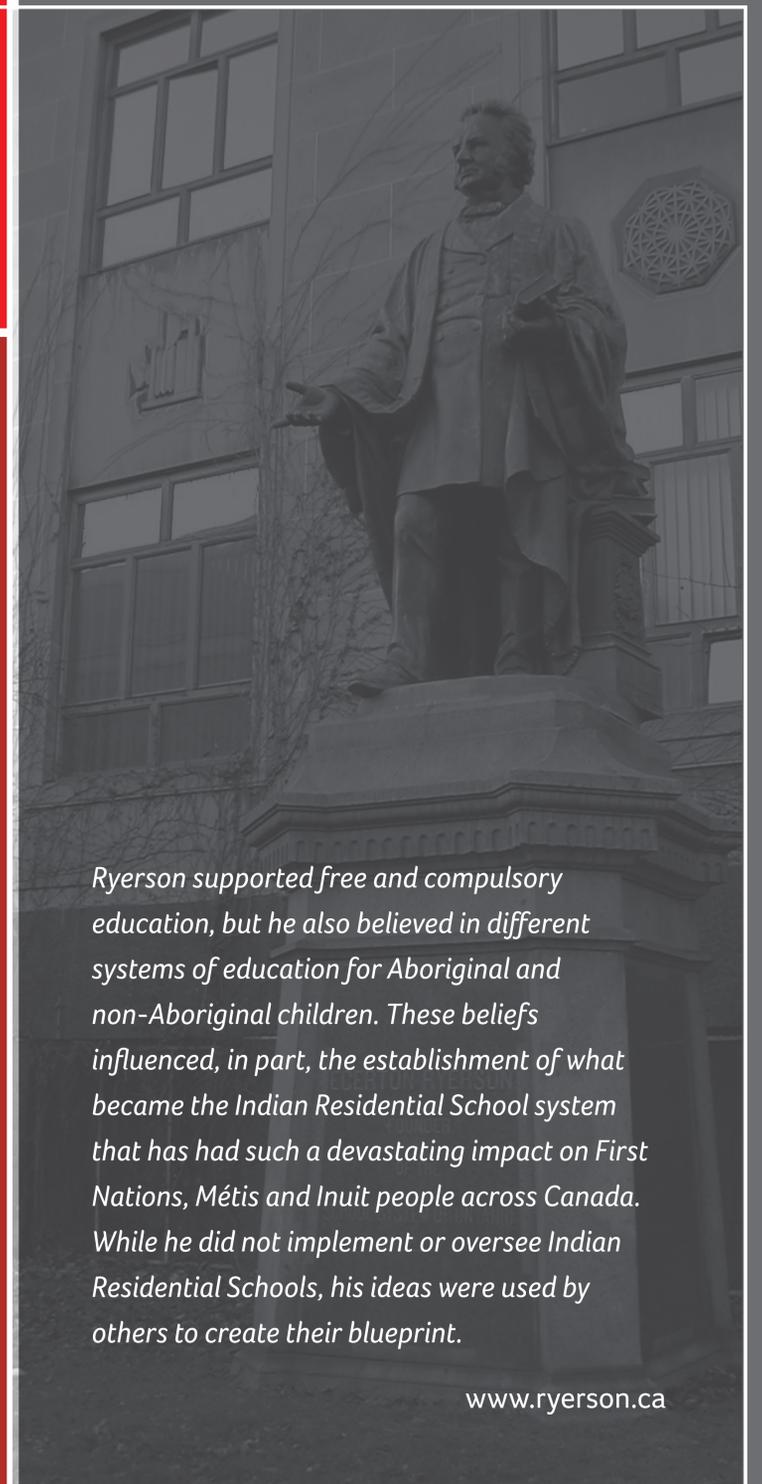
With the intent of providing education for all children, Ryerson **began lobbying for the idea of free schools** in 1846. In proving his point that free education was a necessity, he was able to show that in Toronto alone, less than half of the 4,450 children were regular school attendees. His arguments were persuasive enough that the principle of free education was embodied into the School Law of 1850.



Credit: Armstrong, Beere & Hime/Library and Archives Canada/PA-186728.

In 1852 Ryerson’s passion for education led him to establish the **Normal School in Toronto for training teachers**. It included model schools for in-class training and later, fulfilling the dream of Charles Fothergill, **the Museum of Natural History and Fine Arts was established there**. Ryerson developed its collections by acquiring artwork, statuary, and scientific apparatus during several trips to Europe in the 1850s. This was the first publicly-funded museum in Canada, and after Confederation became the Ontario Provincial Museum, **the forerunner of today’s Royal Ontario Museum**.

Egerton Ryerson was something of a renaissance man, including writing, publishing, farming and sports among his other accomplishments. He retired from public life in 1876, and died in 1882 having left an indelible mark on Canada's education system.



Ryerson supported free and compulsory education, but he also believed in different systems of education for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. These beliefs influenced, in part, the establishment of what became the Indian Residential School system that has had such a devastating impact on First Nations, Métis and Inuit people across Canada. While he did not implement or oversee Indian Residential Schools, his ideas were used by others to create their blueprint.

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Victoria College and Faraday Hall c.1878