

Sir George-Etienne Cartier, lawyer, co-premier of the Province of Canada (Canada East, now Quebec), Father of Confederation (1814-1873)



George Etienne-Cartier was born in 1814 in Saint-Antoine-sur-Richelieu, Lower Canada (now Quebec), to a family of wealthy grain exporters and millers. According to personal family legend, he was also a descendant of Jacques Cartier. He was educated in Montreal at the Sulpician College and was called to the bar in 1835 and began to practise immediately as a lawyer. He was involved from an early age in the railway business, representing the famous Grand Trunk Railway as a client.

Throughout Cartier's early life both Upper and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec, respectively) were in effect governed by wealthy families and business owners—the Family Compact in Upper Canada, and the Chateau Clique in Lower Canada. Both groups were known for serving their own economic interests, their conservatism, and opposition to democracy. In Lower Canada, the Chateau Clique was dominated by Anglophones such as John Molson and James McGill, who wanted French Canadians to assimilate to English culture.

George-Etienne Cartier was strongly against the anti-democratic sentiments of both governing systems and joined the radical *Fils de la Liberté* to fight against them in the Rebellions of 1837 in both Upper and Lower Canada, which caused the British government to unify both colonies into the Province of Canada, which a single legislative assembly to represent both to the Governor General. Cartier played a significant role in the more serious armed rebellion in Lower Canada and only narrowly escaped punishment by escaping in exile to Vermont. In 1838, he successfully petitioned the new unified government for a pardon and resumed practicing law in Montreal.

After the rebellion Cartier soon became active in politics, managing campaigns and advising local politicians from 1841-1848, when he ran and was elected as a Liberal after he was satisfied with the power transferred from the Crown to Cabinet in decisions affecting the province. From 1857-1862 he served alongside John A Macdonald as co-premier of the Province of Canada, in effect presiding over the portion that is now Quebec. In 1861 he became the leader of the *Parti Bleu*—essentially the French Canadian precursor to the Conservative Party. He and his *Bleus* joined with Macdonald's Conservatives to form a Union government, taking the first steps toward reducing regional political instability in Canada and toward Confederation. He attended the major Confederation conferences in Charlottetown, Quebec City, and London, and is credited as being largely responsible for securing French-Canadian support for Confederation.

Despite Cartier's close personal friendship with Prime Minister John A Macdonald, he argued from the opposite side of his colleague and friend on the topic of whether Canada should have a strong centralized government or strong, decentralized provincial governments. Cartier argued for the latter while Macdonald was in favour of the former. Both eventually persuaded their colleagues into a compromise that resulted in the beginnings of the federated system of government that Canada has today.

In the early years following Confederation, George-Etienne Cartier often served as acting Prime Minister when Macdonald was ill, or on a drinking binge, or both. In these instances he played a key role in negotiating the transfer of Rupert's Land from Hudson's Bay Company to Canada in 1869, drafting the Manitoba Act which brought the province into Confederation in 1870, and the drafting of the British Columbia Act, which had the same effect in 1871.

Throughout his career as a lawyer and politician, George-Etienne Cartier promote the development of railways throughout his career, evidenced by his legal support for Grand Trunk Railway, his appointment to railway committees as a politician, and his early promotion of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway, which he thought would all-but guarantee the territory's entrance into Confederation.

American railway promoters in Boston and Philadelphia opposed Cartier East-West railway plan in favour of their own, and financed a Cartier political rival in his riding, leading to his electoral defeat in 1872. Louis Riel, who would be executed by the Macdonald government in 1885 quickly resigned his seat in Manitoba for Cartier to take. The next year, in 1873, these same American railway promoters released secret election fundraising telegrams of Macdonald's and Cartier's to the president of the Canadian Pacific Railway, resulting in the "Pacific Scandal." At this time kidney disease was rapidly progressing in Cartier, and he died shortly after the scandal erupted in parliament, and forced his political ally John A Macdonald's government to resign.

One of George-Etienne Cartier's most significant contributions to Canadian popular history was his persuasion of the Queen to choose Ottawa to be the capital of the Canada in 1857, a decision entrenched with Confederation. His reasoning was that Ottawa was more defensible militarily than Toronto, Montreal, Kingston, or Quebec City, because the only access to the city by water was through the relatively narrow Ottawa River. It was additionally on the border between the two provinces that would form the Dominion of Canada, and was also on the planned transcontinental railway route.