

## CULTURAL MOMENT FOR OCTOBER 7, 2024 CELEBRATING CHARLES RANKIN



*Charles Rankin*

Charles Rankin was born in 1797 in Ireland and came to Montreal with his parents after the War of 1812. He was appointed as the Deputy Provincial Land Surveyor (PLS) for Upper Canada in 1820, and began surveying the Garafraxa Colonization Road (known today as Highway 6) from Oakville to Owen Sound in 1837.

He married Elizabeth Leech in 1840. They had one daughter, Mary, and they eventually settled in Owen Sound.

Rankin is one of the most well-known and accurate surveyors for Upper Canada. His story and association with Chief Nawash was retold by Kate Rowley at a Tree Trust ceremony on Saturday, September 21, 2024 in Mount Forest behind the old Foodland. It's a history of our First Peoples and their contribution to our natural and physical heritage.

It is well known that the Department of Indian Affairs (operating as part of the British War Office) gave no consideration to the knowledge of Indigenous Peoples. However, early surveyors were different. Setting out into rough Ontario wilderness required that they were more respectful of the knowledge, experience and skills that leaders like Ojibway First Nations Chief Nawash might offer. Charles appears to have been fairly welcoming to the chief, and he is said to have thought that the chief "had aided him with the most accurate information of the courses of the rivers and streams of the area."

When surveying the Garafraxa Road in 1837, Rankin charted his well-known "digression" around Luther Swamp; he travelled on "a north-western course to avoid the swamps of Luther, intending to run north as soon as the swamps were passed." At that turning point and reaching a river with rapids, he was joined by Chief Nawash, who had travelled south through the woods from his settlement near Owen Sound to meet the surveyor on his request. Nawash told Rankin that the river was part of the 'Saugin', and Rankin marked it so in his report.

The government thought Rankin's digressions had made his road line too crooked and would be very expensive to lay. They had it re-surveyed in 1841 for a more direct route. The surveyor John McDonald, working on his own, disregarded Nawash and Rankin's notes and falsely identified the same river as part of the Maitland. He was mistaken, and a government exploration party was sent down the Saugeen River in canoes in 1844 to solve the discrepancy. Chief Nawash was accurate, and the settlement that had become known as Maitland Hills for several years was soon changed to the much more appropriate name of Mount Forest. It is one of so many small stories of Indigenous history that had every influence on the location and identification of early settlement in Ontario towns.

His death records are disputable. He may have died March 15, 1886 and be buried alongside his parents in Toronto, or he may have died on October 12, 1888 and be buried in Owen Sound. Part of his legacy is in the formation of Highway 6 and a river in Bruce County which is named after him.



*Chief Nawash*