

CULTURAL MOMENT FOR SEPTEMBER 8, 2026 CELEBRATES JAMES McMULLEN – THE ‘TALL SYCAMORE’ FROM MOUNT FOREST



Long before he walked the halls of Parliament Hill, James McMullen was helping shape the future of Mount Forest.

Born in County Monaghan, Ireland, in 1833, McMullen came to Canada with his family as a teenager. He eventually settled in Mount Forest, where he became a merchant and prominent member of the community, serving in municipal government and as reeve.

McMullen was also an early champion of economic development in the growing community.

In the late 1870s, he became vice-president of the Georgian Bay and Wellington Railway, an ambitious project intended to build a railway from Durham through Mount Forest to Palmerston. Local residents and businessmen invested

heavily in the proposed line, believing improved railway connections would bring new opportunities to the area.

McMullen's interest in the local economy was evident again after fire destroyed Martin & Son's sawmill in Mount Forest in 1881. The mill employed about 20 men and generated additional business in town. At a public meeting following the fire, McMullen stressed the importance of the operation to Mount Forest and was chosen to lead a five-person committee to work with the owners on a plan to rebuild. The committee ultimately proposed a \$5,000 municipal loan, although the assistance was never approved.

His influence on Mount Forest extended even further. In 1879, McMullen presented the petition to the Ontario legislature requesting that Mount Forest be incorporated as a town. On March 11, 1879, that request became reality.

In 1882, McMullen took his community involvement to Ottawa, beginning an 18-year career as the Liberal Member of Parliament for Wellington North.

There, the tall Mount Forest politician earned a memorable nickname: "The Tall Sycamore from Mount Forest."

McMullen became known for carefully scrutinizing government spending, including relatively minor expenses. His political opponents even joked that when he visited Rideau Hall, he would take stock of the spoons, looking for evidence of extravagance at taxpayers' expense.

There is no indication McMullen actually counted the silverware. The writer who recorded the story described the joke as an unfair reflection on McMullen and credited his careful scrutiny with helping keep government expenditures down.

McMullen was also willing to take positions that were not universally accepted at the time. During debate over extending voting rights to women, he spoke in support, specifically pointing to the contributions of daughters working on Canadian farms.

After narrowly losing Wellington North in the 1900 federal election, McMullen's political career continued. In 1902, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier appointed him to the Senate, representing North Wellington.

A decade later, his standing in the community was still evident. When Laurier visited Mount Forest for a major rally in 1912, the former prime minister asked that McMullen be found before entering the arena. Laurier then walked inside arm-in-arm with Senator McMullen to thunderous applause. Future prime minister Mackenzie King was also there that day.

McMullen died at his Mount Forest home, Maitland Hall, on March 18, 1913. He was 79.

From merchant and local economic booster to reeve, Member of Parliament and senator, James McMullen spent decades advocating for his community.

But perhaps his most enduring local legacy came before Ottawa ever called: James McMullen helped build the community that he would eventually represent on the national stage.

Submitted by the Wellington North Cultural Roundtable.