

THE BAREFOOT FERRY BOY

Malcolm Cameron 1808-1878

Over a political career spanning more than four decades Malcolm Cameron acquired a deserved reputation for being erratic, impulsive, unpredictable, inconsistent, and short-tempered, and, as the Toronto *Globe* commented in 1859, “*he never [did] things by halves*”.

Above all, Cameron was independent. On the hustings, he seldom offered a platform beyond “*vague promises to support the institutions on which the happiness of the province depended*”¹, but from moderate reformer he evolved into an early leader of the radical ‘Clear Grit’ movement. He fought for universal suffrage, voting by secret ballot, dissolution of the clergy reserves, removal of government support from all religions, and led passage of legislation that abolished imprisonment for debt. Cameron was always a study in contrasts. He detested the bigotry of the Orange Lodge while strenuously opposing Catholic schools. The son of an innkeeper and former employee of a distillery, he was an ‘Apostle of Temperance’ who introduced the first prohibition measure in the Canadian Parliament.



Malcom Cameron 1854
(Photo by R. D'Avignon)

*He who had arisen from poverty and obscurity to a place of honor and importance through his own endeavours, and owed nothing to advantageous circumstances, was not likely to favor oligarchical privileges, a state church, or irresponsible government of a family compact; consequently, he opposed those abuses with all his power, and contributed in no slight degree to a removal of disabilities that now leaves the government of Canada so essentially a government of the people.*²

Malcolm Cameron was born at Trois-Rivières, Lower Canada, on April 25, 1808, the son of British Army Sergeant Angus Cameron (1761-1822) and Euphemia McGregor (1773-1858). His father had been born at Kilmallie, Argyll, Scotland³, and arrived in Canada in 1805 among a handful of officers and NCOs of a broken regiment. In 1803 the Canadian Regiment of Fencible Infantry had been recruited in the highlands of Scotland for service in Canada but was disbanded after it mutinied at Glasgow the following year. The unit was, however, kept on the army establishment list and in 1805 its officers and some selected NCOs, including Sergeant Angus Cameron, were sent to Canada to undertake a new recruitment drive.⁴

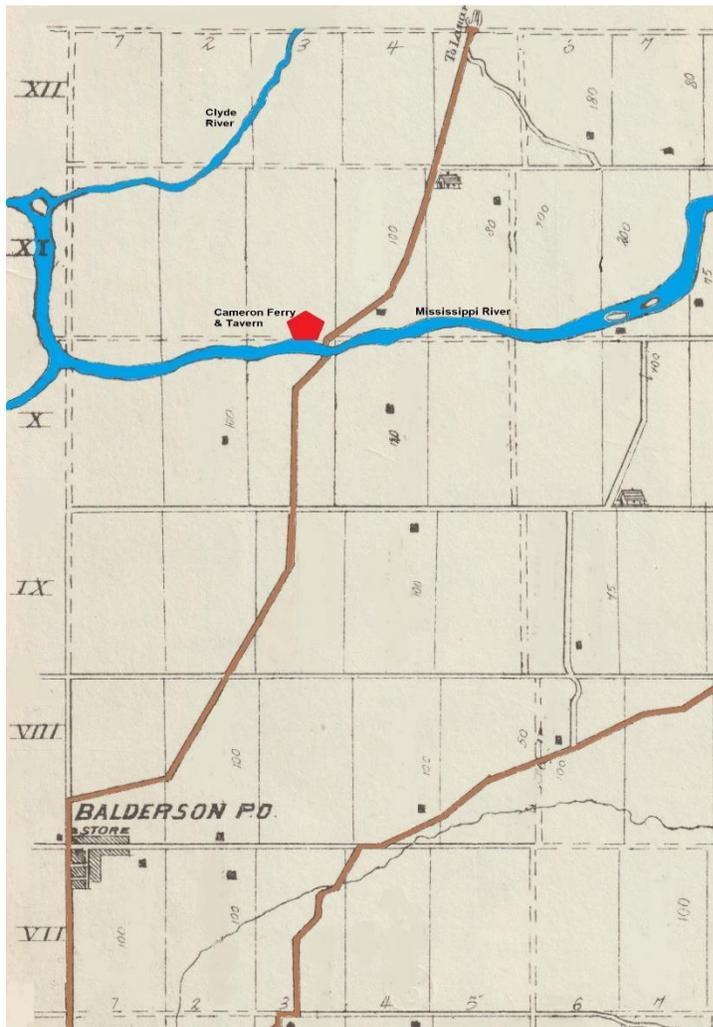
¹ *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Margaret Coleman).

² *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, Vol-1 (1900)

³ Angus Cameron was the son of John Cameron (1729-c1815), born at Clunes Farm, Lochiel Estate, Inverness-Shire, Scotland, and died at Kilmallie Parish Inverness-Shire, and his wife Mary Ann Fraser (c1742-1815). Kilmallie Parish is located partly in Inverness-shire and partly in Argyll.

⁴ That he was an NCO and considered reliable after the mutiny strongly suggests that Angus Cameron had served in some other unit of the British Army prior to enlisting with the Canadian Regiment of Fencible Infantry.

By the time his youngest son Malcolm was born in 1808, the regiment had been reconstituted and Sergeant Cameron was posted at Trois-Rivières, Lower Canada (Quebec), serving, according to several sources, as 'hospital sergeant'⁵. When the American War of 1812-1814 broke out the Canadian Fencibles numbered 736 all ranks, but during the war its men were disbursed in small units across both the upper and lower colonies. They served as marines on Great Lakes Royal Navy vessels, militia instructors, artificers with the Royal Artillery, supply convoy escorts, etc., although a few detached companies did see action at Châteauguay (1813), Crysler's Farm (1813), Lacolle Mills (1814).



The Canadian Fencibles were disbanded at Kingston in June 1816 and on August 10th Angus Cameron (55), accompanied by his wife Euphemia (43), daughters Christina (12) and Mary Ann (11), and sons Alexander (15), Malcolm (8) and John (2) arrived at the Perth Military Settlement.⁶ To that date Euphemia had borne Angus at least nine children but four of those, all sons, had died as children. Two more daughters, Marion and Euphemia, were born in Drummond Township in 1817 and 1818.

The Cameron family was allocated land at Drummond Township C-11/L-6(NE)⁷ on the banks of the Mississippi River and Angus soon established a rudimentary ferry service across the river. Initially only those few settlers of 1816-1819 who drew lots along the west end of Drummond Township Concessions 11 and 12 had much call to cross the river, but in 1820, when the British Army Settling Department cut a road from Perth to Lanark Depot, opening the Townships

⁵ Margaret Coleman, writing in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

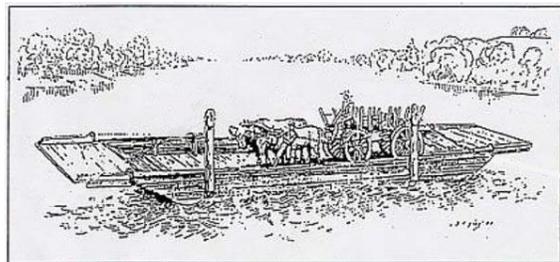
⁶ Angus and Euphemia were the parents of at least 11 children – John (b.1798), Duncan (b.1799), Alexander (1801-1835), Christina (1804-1886), Mary Ann (1805-1890), William Ellis (1806-1807), Malcolm (1808-1876), Angus (1810-1811), John (1814-1834), Marion (1817-1890) and Euphemia (1818-1842).

⁷ In order to complete the 200 acre allotment due to Cameron at the rank of Sergeant, he was also given a lot at Leeds C-6/L-3(SW).

of Lanark and Dalhousie to settlement, the ferry business boomed. More than 3,000 incomers⁸ and their supplies had to cross the river at least once and most made multiple trips back and forth. Angus built a tavern and inn at the ferry landing and 12-year-old Malcolm was set to rowing the ferry. In later years, Tory political opponents mocked him as *"the barefoot ferry boy"*, but he proudly embraced the title as a badge of honor.

For two or three years Cameron attended school at Perth a few months each winter, but soon after his father died in 1822, he undertook to make his own way. In 1824, at age 16, he went to La Prairie, Lower Canada, where he found work in a store and the opportunity to learn the mysteries of mercantile book-keeping. Mistreated by his employer, he shortly moved across the river to Montreal and worked briefly as a stable boy, before returning to Perth where he secured employment as a clerk at the brewery and distillery of William Morris (1786-1858)⁹.

By 1828 Cameron had saved enough from his wages to enter into a short-lived partnership in a general store at Perth with his brother-in-law, Henry Glass (1799-1866)¹⁰. The following year, Cameron joined in partnership with John Porter (c1795-1858) and Robert Gemmell (1810-1894) to open a general store in a frame building at #1 Gore Street West (on the northwest corner of Gore and Foster Streets). The firm sold dry goods, hardware, groceries, and crockery *"at Montreal prices, as the goods have been bought in the best markets for cash"* and offered to accept *"butter in payment for goods"*.¹¹ Gemmell, Porter & Cameron were also active in the timber trade.



Cameron expanded his business interests into trading in real estate around Perth and prospered. In April 1833, while in Scotland purchasing goods for the store, he married his cousin, Glasgow born Christina Keith McGregor (1808-1868).

When Malcolm had left for Montreal in 1824, his mother, Euphemia, moved her family into Perth from the ferry landing and carried on with the tavern and stopping-house business. A year or two after the move to Perth, her son, John, born at Montreal in 1814, left Perth to advance his education. He returned in 1833 as a 19-year-old medical doctor. He established his home and practice in a stone building at 25 Drummond Street East, on the bank of the Tay River, that had been built by Roderick Matheson to house a distillery. Matheson was one of the settlement's leading merchants of the day, but he was also a veteran of the Canadian Fencible Regiment where he had served for seven years, rising from the rank of drummer-boy to Paymaster Sergeant. Doubtless, he had known John and Malcolm Cameron's father well.¹²

⁸ The 'Lanark Society Settlers'. See, *The Third Wave* elsewhere on this site, <https://www.perthhs.org/documents/neighbour/shaw-third-wave-web.pdf>.

⁹ Located at the corner of Gore and Harvey Streets, the site had been the location of the 'King's Store' during the earliest days of the Perth Military Settlement. Cameron worked at the distillery at about the time William Morris sold the business to William Locke (1800-1862).

¹⁰ Married to Christina Cameron (1804-1886).

¹¹ *Perth Courier*, August 7, 1834.

¹² During the American War of 1812-1814 Matheson served with the Glengarry Light Infantry Regiment where he was commissioned a Lieutenant.

When the Perth Settlement's first newspaper, the Tory leaning *Bathurst Independent Examiner*, established in 1828 by local Grammar School teacher John Stewart, failed in the spring of 1834, Dr. John Cameron purchased the business, probably with minority participation by his brother Malcolm. In August it was re-launched as the *Bathurst Courier & Ottawa Gazette*. Published and printed at John Cameron's Drummond Street address, its inaugural issue promised "an independent weekly ... the slave or tool of no party"¹³. Just six months later, however, on Christmas Eve 1834, John Cameron died of scarlet fever.



Elder brother Malcolm Cameron stepped into the breach, hired James Thompson (1812-1912) as editor, and carried the publishing business forward. But it proved an unprofitable venture. The merchants of Perth were largely 'Tory' supporters of the Family Compact regime and refused to endorse the more independent, even 'Reform', opinions of the Cameron-owned *Bathurst Courier* with their advertising shillings. Historian Margaret Coleman, who wrote Cameron's profile for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, contended that Cameron's politics were "greatly influenced by Scottish 'Radicals' who had settled around Lanark" – i.e., the 'Society Settlers' he had ferried across the Mississippi, who socialized in his parent's tavern and who later traded at his Perth store. The *Bathurst Courier* was sold to its editor, James Thompson, in 1836.

Malcolm Cameron had made a trip to the western region of Upper Canada in 1833 and was much impressed by what he found there. In 1835, for the sum of £400, he purchased 100 acres of land from the local Indian Agent at what is now the center of downtown Sarnia, and in the same year opened a general store at Port Sarnia, managed by an agent.

The partnership with Porter and Gemmell at Perth was dissolved in August 1837 and Cameron moved to Port Sarnia. Over the next few years, he acquired large acreages of forested property inland from Lake St Clair that he divided into settlement lots. Using his connections back at Perth, the *Bathurst Courier* in particular, he promoted the advantages of the western region. His promise of "land with no rocks" found a particularly receptive audience among the Lanark settlers he had floated across the Mississippi River less than two decades earlier as "the barefoot ferry boy". After years of struggle with the rock and swamp of the Lanark highland townships they were still poor subsistence farmers and their now grown sons were seeking to start farms and families of their own where no vacant tillable land remained.

¹³ Bathurst Courier, August 29, 1834.

In the late years of the 1830s and through the 1840s hundreds of families abandoned the Lanark Settlement, trekked west, and purchased land from Cameron or secured Crown grants in what is now the counties of Lambton, Kent, and Huron. Malcolm Cameron bought the timber they cleared from their new farms and built mills to saw it and grind the grain they grew. He expanded into maritime transport, building six of his own ships to carry goods the length and breadth of the Great Lakes, from Chicago to Quebec City. He sent huge cargos of oak staves to Jamaica for the manufacture of rum barrels and, at one point exported 20% of all Canadian oak timber delivered to Britain.

Cameron made a fortune from his business ventures and from real estate development and speculation. In 1839, even though the land had never been surrendered to the Crown, with the connivance of Indian Agent Colonel Joseph Brant Clench (1790-1857), he negotiated with three local chiefs to buy four square miles (2,540 acres) of the Chippewa Reserve in what is now south Sarnia.¹⁴

As an early property developer, merchant and industrialist Cameron is regarded, along with Alexander Vidal (1819-1906) and George Durand (1805-1880), as one of Sarnia's founders. He named most of its streets between George and Wellington - Christina after his wife, Euphemia after his mother, Lochiel for his clan chief. A street was also named 'Colina' for this daughter but has since disappeared. Cameron also financed and constructed the first road from Sarnia to London, completed in 1840.

In 1847 Cameron profited further as one of the contractors who built the Great Western Railway. Constructed 1847-1855 it was the first railway chartered in what is now Ontario. The mainline ran from Niagara Falls, to Hamilton, then west to London and southwest to Windsor, with branches from Hamilton to Toronto and from London to Sarnia. The railway served as a bridge line between the New York Central and the Michigan Central Railroads.



Great Western Railway, First Mail Train, 1854
(Photo courtesy of Toronto Historical Association)

In 1854, Cameron persuaded John Raeside Gemmill (1810-1891)¹⁵ to move his Lanark *Observer*¹⁶ newspaper from Perth to Sarnia where it became the Reform supporting *Lambton Observer and Western Advertiser* (later the *Sarnia Observer*).¹⁷

¹⁴ In 1995 the courts upheld a compensation claim by the Aamjiwnaang First Nation and in 2020 the Federal Government agreed to pay the Aamjiwnaang \$35.7 million.

¹⁵ John Raeside Gemmill was the son of the Lanark Settlement's first Presbyterian minister, Rev. Dr. John Gemmill (1760–1844).

¹⁶ The *Observer* was the Lanark Settlement's first newspaper, a semi monthly devoted to literature, science, politics, agriculture, and general intelligence, it was published at Lanark Village in 1850-1851 and at Perth in 1852-1854.

¹⁷ Cameron also encouraged his brother-in-law and former business partner Henry Glass to move to Sarnia. Glass became a successful dry goods merchant, the second Mayor of Sarnia and was twice elected Warden of Lambton County.

Cameron launched his political career in 1836 while he still living at Perth, when he was elected by the constituency of Lanark to the Upper Canada Assembly as a moderate Reformer. Perth pastor and diarist Reverend William Bell (1780-1857) left an account of that election that paints a picture of such political contests in Malcolm Cameron's day.

The general election ... kept the town in an uproar for the next week. There was, however, less violence than had been expected at Perth; but at Richmond such was the violence of parties that one man was killed and several severely hurt.

No election here was ever so arduously contended. It lasted all the six days allowed by law. At the close, Cameron had 559 votes, Powell¹⁸ 552, Thom¹⁹ 515, Radenhurst²⁰ 384.

In our garden we had a very large specimen of the scotch thistle in full flower, which Mr. Fraser requested for the chairing²¹ of Mr. Cameron. He held it upright, dressed out with roses and shamrocks; while Mr. Radenhurst held a cross of St. Andrew, dressed in a similar way.

Mr. Powell's party [Tory] did not choose to have the object of their choice chaired along with a dam[ned] Radical, as they called Mr. Cameron.²² So, they very wisely went in different directions, to prevent the parties coming in collision. Powell's party made a horrible noise, but did very little mischief.

After dark, however, Smidt, a poor Dutchman, was stabbed and nearly killed by a rival partisan without the smallest provocation.

From the outset Cameron sided with the opposition to Governor Sir Francis Bond Head (1793-1875) and the Tory Family Compact, but in 1837 when William Lyon Mackenzie (1795-1861) launched armed rebellion in Upper Canada he enlisted with the loyal militia.

In 1842 Cameron was named to the post of Inspector of Revenue. However, he resigned in protest a year later when, with creation of the Province of Canada through the union of Upper and Lower Canada, the government decided to move the capital from Kingston to Montreal. He nevertheless continued to represent Lanark in the Legislative Assembly until the election of 1847 when he was returned as the member for Kent.

In 1848 he was appointed Commissioner of Public Works but resigned that post in 1849 as he found his views more and more in line with the opposition Clear Grits, supporting abolition of the clergy reserves and trade reciprocity with the United States.

¹⁸ John Ambrose Hume Powell (c1802-1843)

¹⁹ Dr. Alexander Thom (1775-1845).

²⁰ Thomas Mabon Radenhurst (1803-1854).

²¹ In the 19th century it was traditional for the winning candidate, draped in appropriate laurels, to go door-to-door, carried in a chair by his singing and chanting supporters, to thank those who had voted for him and to mock those who had not.

²² In 1836 the constituency of Lanark was represented by two seats in the Assembly so, as the top two vote getters, both Malcolm Cameron (Reform) and John A. H. Powell (Tory) were elected.

At the election of 1851 Cameron was returned once again, but this time for the constituency of Huron. He was named to the portfolio for agriculture, in 1852, a position attached to the presidency of the council. He then served as Postmaster General in 1853-1854 and, as such, automatically served on the Board of Railway Commissioners. He was named a government director for Canada West when the Grand Trunk Railway Company was formally organized.



Malcolm Cameron (1808-1876)
(Photo Lambton County Archives)

As was permissible at the time, in the 1854 election Cameron ran in two ridings simultaneously, South Lanark and Lambton. He only campaigned in Lambton and failed to be elected in either. His political career went on hiatus for over three years. During this time, while he remained a large landowner, he reduced his real estate activities, retired from the shipping business, and sold his Sarnia store. By early 1857 the first rumours were circulating that his finances were 'irretrievably embarrassed'.

When an election was called in 1857 Cameron re-entered the fray as an independent candidate in Lambton and was narrowly elected. For the next year he voted with the Macdonald-Cartier government, but in March 1859 executed an about-face and joined George Brown's Reformers in condemning legislation that would increase tariffs. That November he spoke to a Reform Convention, advocating, for the first time, a federation with other British American territories to create "*the nucleus of an empire extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific*".

In June 1860 he accepted the Reform nomination for the Legislative Council seat for St Clair and won by acclamation. During the two and one half years he sat on the council he continued to urge federation and westward expansion.

From 1863 Cameron was again out of politics. For the next six years he served as Queen's Printer, jointly with Georges-Pascal Desbarats (1808-1864).

In politics, six years can be a long time out of the public eye, and confederation in 1867 had much changed the political landscape since he had last held elected office in 1862. In 1869, when Cameron sought a seat in the federal riding of Renfrew, he was defeated. In 1871 he returned to his roots with an attempt to win the South Lanark seat in the Ontario Provincial Legislature, but that campaign ended in defeat, as did an 1872 attempt to win the federal seat in Russel. Two years later he finally succeeded in winning the federal seat for South Ontario²³. He died just two years later while still in office.

²³ The Townships of Whitby and East Whitby, Pickering, the Town of Whitby, and the Village of Oshawa.

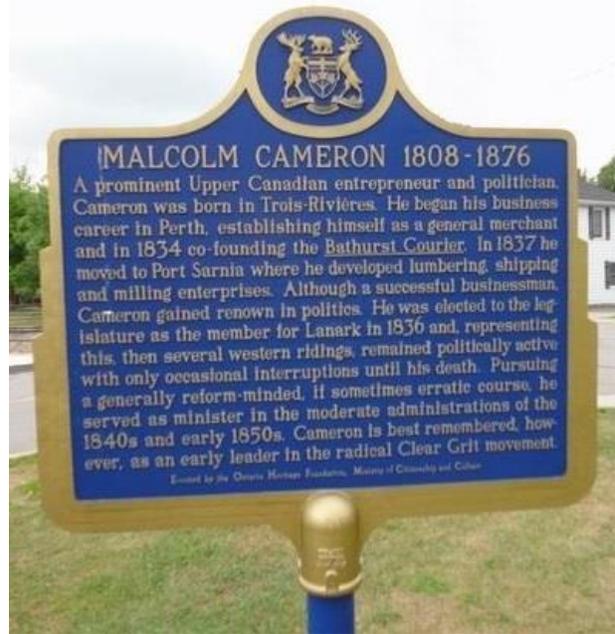
When he died, Cameron was still a director of the Royal Mutual Life Assurance Company, president of the Ontario Central Railway, and a director of the Ontario and Quebec Railway and of the Cobourg, Peterborough & Marmora Railway & Mining Co. However, although at one time a very wealthy man, a multi millionaire in modern terms, he died deeply in debt. He owed large amounts to banks, trust and loan companies, and individuals, and his taxes were arrears. He left a bankrupt estate owing \$191,000.²⁴

Malcolm Cameron was the father of two children. His son, Malcolm Colin Cameron (1831-1898), born at Perth before his father's 1833 marriage in Scotland, may have been the result of a youthful liaison but is generally believed to have been adopted. Malcolm Jr. was a businessman, lawyer, and politician. He was Mayor of Goderich and then Member of Parliament for Huron South 1867-1875 and 1878-1882 and for Huron West 1882-1887, 1891-1892 and 1896-1898. In 1898, he was appointed Lieutenant Governor of the Northwest Territories but died at London, Ontario, before he could take up his post.²⁵ Malcolm Sr.'s daughter, Christina Colina Cameron (1835-1884) was born at Perth and died, unmarried, at Sarnia. His wife, Christina Keith McGregor, also died at Sarnia in 1868.

Canadian journalist, author, and historian John Charles Dent (1841-1888), reflecting upon the life and career of Malcolm Cameron, wrote that Cameron was,

... honest, earnest, and on the whole, a well-meaning man, who did a great deal of useful work in his day but was not always easy to manage, and was restive under discipline.

Malcolm Cameron's contributions to the economic, political, and social development of Canada are memorialized by Ontario Heritage Foundation plaques at both Perth²⁶ and Sarnia²⁷. Cameron Township in Quebec was also named in his honor²⁸.



Ontario Heritage Foundation plaque at Drummond Street East and Colborne Street, Perth.

- **Ron W. Shaw (2022)**

²⁴ About \$5,000,000 in 2022.

²⁵ Malcolm Cameron's grandson, Malcolm Graeme Cameron (1857-1925), son of Malcolm Colin Cameron (1831-1898), represented Huron West in the Legislative Assembly of Ontario 1902-1908.

²⁶ Located at the Tay Basin, near the Mammoth Cheese monument, at the corner of Drummond Street East and Colborne Street.

²⁷ Located in Alexander Mackenzie Park at the foot of George Street immediately north of the Alexander Mackenzie Monument.

²⁸ Since 1980 part of Bouchette, Quebec.