

Our freedom martyr

by Richard Matthews Jr.
This is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Peter Matthews, late of Pickering Township, Ontario.

He was born in Belleville, in the Bay of Quinte Region of Upper Canada in the year 1790.

He was the first born child of Captain Thomas Elmes Matthews, a United Empire Loyalist, and Mary Ruttan Matthews, a United Empire Loyalist herself.

His grandfather was Captain Peter Ruttan of Adolphustown who was a Loyalist as well as a descendant of French Huguenots.

Childhood

Peter was of the first generation to be born in the new country of Canada following the "American Revolutionary War". He spent his childhood working on the family farm with his father and brothers.

The first 10 years were hard ones for the family, as the farm was unspoiled virgin land. Peter married Hannah Major while they were both in their teens.

Volunteered

They were always known by friends and neighbors as good Baptists.

When the War of 1812 came, the Matthews men were eager to defend their new country. The father and oldest sons volunteered.

The father served as a lieutenant in the 3rd Regiment of York (Township, Upper Canada) Militia.

Peter and his brothers Thomas and Daniel served and fought in various battles in the Niagara region. This was a sad time for the family, as two the sons were killed.

The Bay News, March 1990.



National Archives of
Canada collection

REBELS MARCHING DOWN YONGE STREET

Battles

Thomas fell at Lundy's Lane and Peter helped bury him near where he fell. Daniel died in service in the Niagara region also.

Peter and his father returned home safely after the war to work the family farm. Peter's wife Hannah dies young, as life was difficult in those early days.

Peter later married for a second time, and as a result of the two marriages had eight children.

The family was unhappy with the services provided to the rural inhabitants by the government in Toronto. Peter got involved in local reform politics in a small way, and was drawn into the events preceding the Rebellion of 1837.

He was active in the political union movement in the summer and fall of 1837 which was designed to pressure the British government to grant reforms.

Rebellion

The organizer and leader of the rebellion, William Lyon MacKenzie, chose Peter as his captain from the "Home District Area". Peter led the men from Pickering and nearby townships who joined.

December 7, 1837 came, and the rebellion was crushed. Peter and 10 of his men escaped for a couple of days.

But he was captured on December 10, 1837 at the farm house of John Duncan in the third concession of East York. Like many of the rebels, Peter was defended by the ex-patriot Robert Baktwin. Peter was advised to plead guilty.

Hanged

Pleading guilty played into the government's hands and sealed Peter's fate. He was convicted and sentenced to hang in Toronto on April 12, 1838.

The 12th of April arrived, and the hangman was ready for his two victims, Peter Matthews and Samuel Louni.

The other political prisoners were called to the gratings of their cells to witness the executions which were to take place in front of the goal.

With head erect, with calm eye and firm tread, each of the doomed men mounted the scaffold steps.

Liberties

The last words they had spoken to their comrades were full of hopefulness for the liberties of Canada, and they gloried in the sacred cause for which they were about to die.

Two noble hearts were stilled forever. Their wives were widowed, and their children were made orphans on that fatal day.

Let those call them rebels who will, but surely the Canadian people, whom they loved so well, should only think of them as patriots in life, and as martyrs in their cruel death.

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For Reference

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