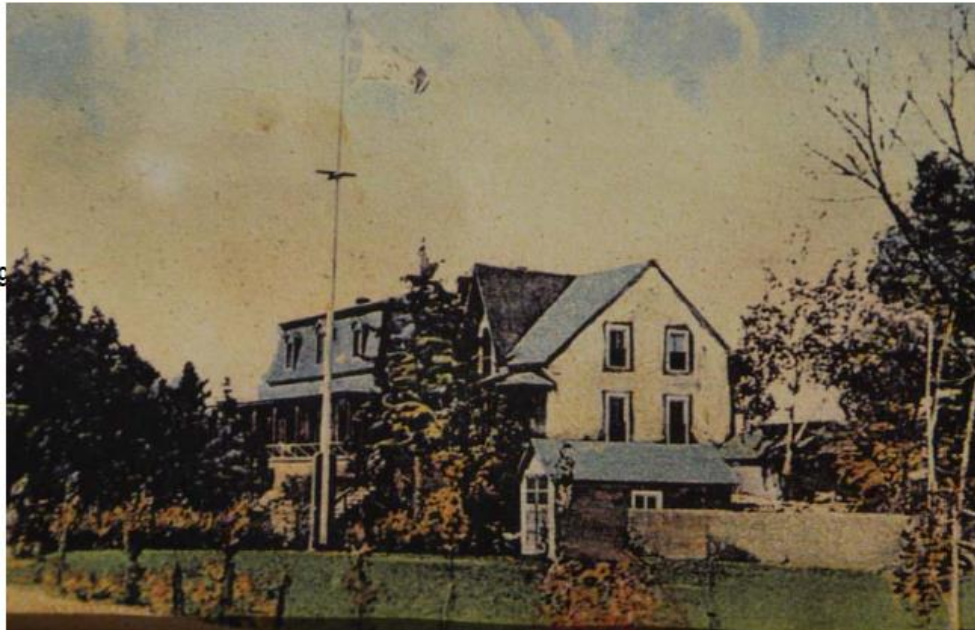


Welcome to *Les Rochers* !

The former summer home of Sir John A. Macdonald



From 1873 to 1890, this house was the summer residence of Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John Alexander Macdonald. Together with his wife Lady Agnes and their young disabled daughter Mary, they would make the 650 Km journey from Ottawa almost every summer. Typical of the Victorian era, an entourage of household staff (secretaries, butlers, maids, nurses, horsemen) accompanied them. At that time the property was quite a bit larger than today, stretching some distance along the rocky ridge. There were stables and an ice-house to the east of the main house. Local traffic consisting of horses, carriages, and wagons would have passed by on the road.

Les Rochers

The original house was constructed circa 1850 and occupied the area where the kitchen now stands. Sir John A. Macdonald and his family were renters for nine summers before purchasing the property in 1882. Macdonald doubled the size of the house, adding the west wing (where the living room and guest rooms are located at present) as well as the magnificent gallery.

Les Rochers contains many interesting architectural details: the wide doorways may indicate that the house was adapted for their daughter's wheelchair, the large and prominent windows suggest that the house was designed for the summer enjoyment of the panoramic views and fresh air. The fact that the original floors, windows, fireplace and fixtures are still intact testifies to the quality of the construction by talented craftsmen and to the care that subsequent occupants have taken to preserve this heritage.

Life at Les Rochers

Summers in St. Patrick for Sir John and his family generally meant arriving in late June and staying until early September. Although it was a long journey, it is not hard to imagine the family wanting to leave the hot, stressful city to spend quiet restorative time at this summer retreat in such a naturally beautiful and healthful setting.

When John A. was in residence, he spent part of each day in his small office, attending to business with his secretary, but he also made time for reading and walking. Communication was maintained with Ottawa by telegraph.³ Sir John's personal secretary and biographer, Sir Joseph Pope, described their life in St. Patrick this way: *Lady Macdonald later observed that Les Rochers had been Sir John's favourite place, where he took such infinite rest and pleasure*¹.

Sir John and his family

Sir John's daughter Mary *became very fond of the house. Sometimes she was carried down to the shore, but as a rule, she was content to sit in her chair on the big porch and watch the river traffic.*² Sometimes, Mary's companion was her step-niece Daisy (daughter of Sir John's son, Hugh, by his first marriage) who spent a lot of time with her grandparents, John and Agnes, both in Ottawa and in St. Patrick.

Roughly three miles east of the house, in the town then known as Fraserville (renamed Rivière-du-Loup in 1919), is St. Bartholemew's Anglican Church where Sir John and his family worshipped. The family occupied the front pew and Sir John's chair is on display there. Lady Macdonald often helped out with church bazaars. St. Bartholemew's is open to the public during the summer, and enquiries can be made at the Manoir Fraser, located at 32 rue Fraser (at the intersection of rue du Domaine).

At the time, Fraserville was a booming lumber town with English and French speaking residents developing the economy. The region was a strong agricultural center and summer tourism was very important. City folk flocked to the area for the "spa-like conditions" to relax and enjoy the restorative air and waters of the St. Lawrence River.

St. Patrick

St. Patrick became a summer retreat in the 1860s and descendants of some of the first residents (some six generations) continue to spend their summers here. Most of the summer houses are built on the north side of the road, giving occupants splendid views of the river and sunsets. The very first landowners were farmers who sold craggy, rocky land on the edge of the cliff for the construction of these houses. Those rocky features are probably at the origin of the name that the Macdonalds gave this house: *Les Rochers*.

¹ Pope, Sir Joseph in *The Role of the Deputy Minister*, J. H. Bieler, Canadian Public Administration, Vol 4, 1961, pg. 153

² Reynolds, Louise, Agnes, *Lady Macdonald* (Samuel Stevens, 1979), pg. 94

It's not clear what drew original summer inhabitants to St. Patrick, though Viscount Monck, Canada's Governor General from 1861 until 1868, reportedly had a hunting cottage here and was one of the first enthusiasts of St. Patrick. The presence of the Macdonalds drew friends and business associates to build close by. Through the years, other political leaders, such as Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent, came to love this community as their special summer place. Prime Ministers John Diefenbaker and Joe Clark have visited to pay homage. In 1967, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada placed a bronze plaque in front of Les Rochers.

The completion of a deep water wharf at Rivière-du-Loup made it possible for people to arrive by ship and ferry and in 1860 the Grand Trunk Railway reached Rivière-du-Loup. And the restorative properties of the invigorating salt air (often prescribed by doctors to their patients) should not be underestimated... the story goes that Sir John A. and his good friend, Sir Henry Bate, commissioned a doctor from Baltimore to find the healthiest place in the country. He recommended St. Patrick.



Photo by Herbert Tilley, in James Hanzay: *The Life and Times of Sir Leonard Tilley*

The Macdonalds and the Tilleys at Rivière du Loup, 1890
(Left to right) Lady Macdonald, Sir Leonard Tilley, Lady Tilley, Sir John Macdonald,
L. P. de W. Tilley; one of very few informal portraits of John A., who spent
many short holidays at Rivière du Loup.

Photo source: *You'll Never Die John A.!* by Edwin Clarence Guillet (Macmillan, Toronto, 1967)