

On Tuesday, October 2, 1962, a provincial plaque commemorating James Baby was unveiled on the grounds of his former home (now the Duff-Baby House) at 221 Mill Street in Windsor, Ontario. This was one in a series of plaques erected throughout the province by the Ontario Heritage Trust (formerly the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario).

The unveiling ceremony was arranged and sponsored by the Essex County Historical Association; Mr. R. Alan Douglas, President, acted as program host. Participants in the event included: the Reverend J.F. McCaffrey, S.J., Director of the Martyrs' Shrine at Midland, a member of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board; The Honourable William Murdoch, MPP Essex South and Speaker of the Legislative Assembly; Mr. Maurice Belanger, MPP Windsor-Sandwich; His Worship M.J. Patrick, Mayor of Windsor; and Mr. David Botsford, curator of Fort Malden National Historic Park. The plaque was unveiled by Miss Jean Beasley, then-owner of the Baby house.

In 1986, the Ontario Heritage Foundation (now the Ontario Heritage Trust and successor to the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board) and current owner of the Duff-Baby House, replaced the original plaque with a revised bilingual marker that reads:

JAMES BABY 1763-1833

The first member of Upper Canada's French community to gain prominence in government circles, Baby was born in British-controlled Detroit, the son of a well-established trader. He was educated in Quebec and, after returning to this area, entered the mercantile business. In 1792, through his family's influence, he received lifetime appointments to the Executive and Legislative Councils, Upper Canada's pre-eminent political bodies. Three years later Baby moved from Detroit to the south shore and in 1807 took up residence in this commodious 18th-century house. For his long and loyal government service he was granted the post of Inspector General of Public Accounts in 1815. To attend to the duties of this position, Baby moved to York (Toronto), where he lived until his death.

JAMES BABY 1763-1833

Premier membre de la communauté française du Haut-Canada à avoir de l'importance dans les milieux gouvernementaux, M. Baby, né à Détroit, alors sous la domination britannique, était le fils d'un commerçant prospère. Après des études à Québec, il retourna dans sa région où il travailla dans le commerce. En 1792, la

position influente de sa famille lui valut des nominations à vie aux Conseils exécutif et législatif, les deux organes politiques prédominants du Haut-Canada. Trois ans plus tard, M. Baby quitta Détroit pour la rive sud et, en 1807, emménagea dans cette spacieuse demeure du XVIII^e siècle. Pour ses longs et loyaux services au sein du gouvernement, il obtint, en 1815, le poste d'inspecteur général des comptes publics. Pour remplir ses fonctions, il déménagea à York (Toronto), où il vécut jusqu'à sa mort.

Historical background

Jacques Baby (commonly known as James, the anglicized form he himself preferred) was born in British Detroit on August 25, 1763. His father, Jacques Baby, *dit* Dupéront, was a well-established Indian agent and trader. After the conquest of New France in 1760, he quickly adjusted to life under the British regime. His loyalty as a British subject, particularly during Pontiac's uprising in 1763, brought him to the fore of the old French settlement. Dupéront was appointed a captain and interpreter in the British Department of Indian Affairs in 1777; two years later, became acting commissary. The Baby family was also well placed in Quebec where Dupéront's brother, François Baby, commanded a good deal of influence as a businessman, militia officer, office holder, politician, *seigneur* and landowner. Young James Baby was educated at the Sulpician seminary in Montreal and at the seminary at Quebec, graduating in 1782. After a European tour of several years, Baby returned to Detroit where he established himself in the family's commercial enterprises. In time, he amassed considerable personal wealth.

The division of the old province of Quebec into Upper and Lower Canada in 1791, and the subsequent establishment of a new civil administration in Upper Canada, augured well for Baby. Government officials decided that they needed to identify and cultivate a spokesman from the province's large French Roman Catholic community, someone who could ensure the loyalty of the "Canadiens". Sir John Johnson's list of possible appointees to the new province's executive and legislative councils therefore included the caveat "it will be advisable to add one or two Canadians from Detroit". By November 1791, four of the five appointments to the executive council had been chosen. The first lieutenant governor of Upper Canada, John Graves Simcoe, recommended that Baby be named

to the first vacancy both in the Executive & Legislative Councils, as I understand that he is the most proper Person in that District, from whence it is but Justice that a French Gentleman of undisputable Loyalty should be selected.

James Baby was sworn in as a member of the Executive Council of Upper Canada on July 9, 1792. Three days later, he was made a member of the Legislative Council.

As the first French-Canadian to gain prominence in government circles, Baby met with some opposition in Detroit. In September 1792, a prominent local merchant, John Askin, warned that if Baby were appointed lieutenant-colonel of the Detroit militia, "many People would give up their Commissions ... it would Cause some Uneasiness in the Country." Instead, Baby was appointed lieutenant of the County of Kent and, as such, became a member of the new aristocracy being promoted by John Graves Simcoe. As county lieutenant, Baby made recommendations on the appointments of magistrates and militia officers and supervised their activities. Some of the regular officers of the British garrison at Detroit resented the fact that Baby was given such authority, which only compounded the antagonism felt toward him in the region.

In 1794, in the face of hostile movements on the American border, the legislature passed a bill placing each lieutenant at the head of the militia in his county. Baby's actions as colonel of the 1st Regiment of Kent militia at times seemed to have run counter to the self-perceived interests of the Canadien community. For example, when Commodore Grant was unable to secure volunteers to man the ships of the provincial marine, Baby enforced old Canadien laws that had been repealed and sent several Canadiens on board the King's vessels as militiamen. Although he received praise from government officials for his actions, Baby's standing among the Canadiens was diminished.

After the British fort at Detroit was transferred to American control under the terms of Jay's Treaty in 1794, Baby abandoned his business and property in the region and by the fall of 1795 had moved to Sandwich (Windsor), the new seat of government for the western district. His decision to leave Detroit caused him considerable financial hardship. After the death of Indian agent Alexander McKee, he wrote to Simcoe to "implore your credit towards obtaining for myself the vacancy" of the office of deputy superintendent general of Indian affairs. Baby was one of three entrusted with the appointment, but it was withdrawn two months later.

In July 1799, his future brightened somewhat when he received a Crown grant of 3,000 acres of land as a member of the executive council. In 1802, Baby married Elizabeth Abbott and settled in Sandwich, establishing a store and raising a family of six children. In 1807, he purchased the commodious two-storey home of Scottish merchant and fur trade Alexander Duff on Russell Street East at Mill Street. The Baby family lived in this house until about 1815.

In addition to his responsibilities on the executive and legislative councils, Baby attended to the duties of a number of other local posts, including surrogate court judge, justice of the peace and district commissioner for the purchase of merchantable hemp. During the war of 1812, he saw some active service in his capacity as county lieutenant and militia colonel.

In 1815, as a reward for his years of government service, Baby was appointed inspector general of public accounts for Upper Canada. He then moved his family to York (Toronto) where, in the years to follow, he numbered among his friends such like-thinking members of the "family compact" as John Strachan, Thomas Clark and John Beverley Robinson, among others.

Although a minor figure politically, Baby remained a symbol of the loyal Canadien, attending to his duties regularly and conscientiously. He received other appointments over the years, including that of arbitrator for Upper Canada in its customs dispute with Lower Canada in 1822. Baby was a strong adherent of the Roman Catholic faith; he acted at times as Bishop Alexander Macdonell's mediator with the Maitland administration, and spearheaded the drive to build St Paul's Church, the first Roman Catholic church in York.

James Baby died at York on February 19, 1833, the oldest legislative and executive councillor in the province. John Strachan wrote in tribute of his friend:

It is with extreme concern that we announce to the public the loss of so valuable and respected a member of this society as the Honourable James Baby. He was a Christian without guile, affable and polished in his manners, courteous in his conversations, dignified in his deportment, warm in his affections, steady in his friendships and unshaken in his principles. The great object of his life was usefulness and the spring of all his actions was of the religious. A great blank has been made in our circle and one of the most worthy of our elders has been gathered to his fathers.

Duff-Baby House was acquired by the Ontario Heritage Trust in 1979 and has since been restored.



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