Becoming Canadian
a flag story

Nelson is a haven: a mountain fastness more attuned to wildflowers and kayaks than smog and traffic. This setting inspires the inward-looking soul often evident in the depictions of wildlife, lakes and mountains seen in local shops and galleries. Now, this little community has extended its introspection to the nation.

In a coming-of-age tale, Touchstones Nelson: Museum of Art and History, has launched *Becoming Canadian, a flag story*. Marking the forty-fifth anniversary of the National Flag in 2010, the exhibition looks at Canada's journey from colony to country by presenting a series of flags Canadians have hoisted to proclaim their evolving identity. The exhibition opens with Canada's long forgotten flags of 1870, travels though the many versions of the Canadian Red Ensign, and pauses to tell the strange tale of how an overseas editorial caused the Union Jack to fly over Parliament and schools for forty years.

The growing Canadian sense of self was mirrored in the role played by the maple leaf on flags. In 1870 it played a bit part. From the 1890s through the 1960s, its importance grew as a series of contenders vied for the national honour. Finally, in 1965, the maple leaf dominated and Canadians said of their National Flag: "That's me!"

The exhibition marks a second anniversary: in 2010 the flag of British Columbia turns fifty. Touchstones Nelson has produced an exhibition that could play from Victoria to St. John's. The show lasts from November 28, 2009 to January 17, 2010.

Below is a pictorial overview of the exhibition. Sections of the exhibition are illustrated with a sample flag and a view using a 3D model for layout.

This page only serves to give insight into an exhibition prepared by Touchstones Nelson for display from November 28, 2009 to January 17, 2010. Inquiries should be directed to Leah Best director@touchstonesnelson.ca

Beginnings

Governor General of Canada, 1870   This is the gem of this exhibition—indeed, it is the gem of any museum exhibition on Canadian flags. It was the opening piece in a one-year exhibition at the CMC in 1990. This is the only known surviving original of the premier flag of the first flag authorized for Canada (1870). This one was made in 1901 for a trip of Governor General Minto on the Canadian Cruiser *Acadia*. It was used on a second voyage in 1902. This flag has been conserved by the Canadian Conservation Corps and is presented in the frame made for the CMC exhibition of 1990. In the present exhibition it is featured both for its role as the first official Canadian flag, and as part of the story of the slow ascendancy of the maple leaf.


Beginnings (3D mockup)   The Governor General's flag appears in the first section of the exhibition, entitled Beginnings. Also included here is a governmental maritime flag: The (four-province) Canadian Blue Ensign also approved in 1870. Two of their modern descendants are shown also. The first Canadian Blue Ensign is interesting for two other reasons. First, it was the first Canadian flag to fly in British Columbia when it was brought from Ottawa to welcome the new province in 1871. Second, from 1870, it served as the model for the (informal) Red Ensign which had such a long national run.

Pretenders

Four-province Canadian Red Ensign   Initially designed in imitation of the Canadian Blue Ensign, the Canadian Red Ensign was used extensively from 1870 on, but wasn't actually approved for use on Canadian soil until 1944 when it was approved for use by the Army. The flag had six major forms and many minor forms. This was the first one. It showed a badge of the founding four provinces. This one is rarely found now because, although it started the progression, it was soon replaced by the ones showing five, seven, and then nine provinces. After 1922 one bearing the shield of the newly granted Arms of Canada was used. A variation on the latter was the one that John Diefenbaker championed in 1964. All of these Canadian Red Ensigns are shown and discussed in the Pretenders section of the exhibition. Although many people assumed it to be Canada's National Flag prior to 1965, it never was, and for forty years it even played second fiddle to the Union Jack.
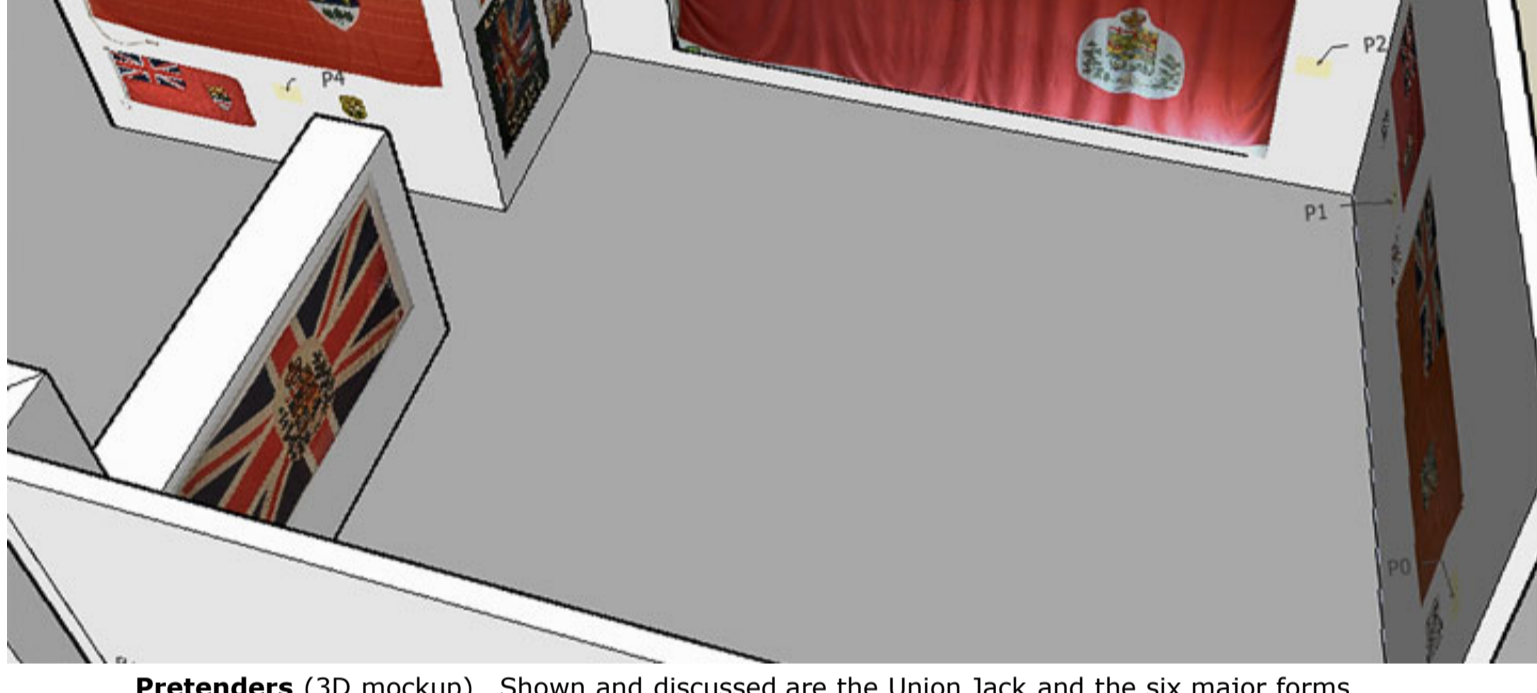
Pretenders (3D mockup)   Shown and discussed are the Union Jack and the six major forms taken by the Canadian Red Ensign. These are the flags that Canadian used widely, enthusiastically, but erroneously as if they were the national flag.

Contenders & National Flag

Battle Flag of Canada   From the 1890s through the 1960s there were many serious proposals made for a National Flag of Canada. Those contenders were discussed in pamphlets, rallies, contests and parliamentary committees. This flag was a proposal in the mid 1920s and it showed a little something for everyone. Curiously, in 1939, it became the Battle Flag of Canada under which the troops sailed to Europe. Very few of these survive. This one is a (framed) six-foot silk print made about 1943.

Condenders & National Flag (3D mockup)   The principle contenders during seventy years of wrangling over a possible flag for Canada are shown. Of particular interest is the progression taken by the maple leaf. As Canadians moved from thinking of themselves as colonials to nationals, the maple leaf grew in importance on these flags until it finally took centre stage in 1965 on the National Flag.

British Columbia

Prototype for the flag of British Columbia   This small hand-waver flag was already a half-century old when Premier W.A.C Bennett used it in 1960 as the prototype for the flag of BC. The superb condition of this flag and the curious story of political subterfuge which accompanies this object makes it the second most important artifact in the show (after the Governor General's flag of 1870), or at least it does so for British Columbians.

British Columbia (3D mockup)   The BC ensign was only used outside the province; this rare find was used by the BC Government on a trade mission to San Francisco in the 1920s. Other flags—such as the centennial flag of 1958—are used here for the story of political subterfuge that lead to the adoption of the provincial flag on June 30, 1960 (2010 marks the 50th anniversary of adoption).