

THE MAPLE LEAF

By Ann-Maureen Owens

It's been more than 150 years since Canada became a country. But it took us almost a century to come up with our own flag.



UNIQUELY CANADIAN

Canada's is the only national flag with a maple leaf on it, so is easily recognized around the world. Maple trees grow across the country. Groups in both Upper and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec) considered the maple leaf a symbol of Canada even before Confederation. It has appeared on gear worn by Canadian Olympic teams since 1904, and on Canadian soldiers' uniforms and gravestones.

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FROM OUR PAST

Before Canada was a country, the flags of many nations flew here. England's St George's Cross was raised on the shores of Newfoundland in 1497. In Quebec, France's fleur-de-lis (right) appeared in 1534. Spain's Royal Arms temporarily claimed British Columbia's Nootka Sound in 1789. Even America's stars and stripes flew over some 17th century trading forts in what is now Alberta.

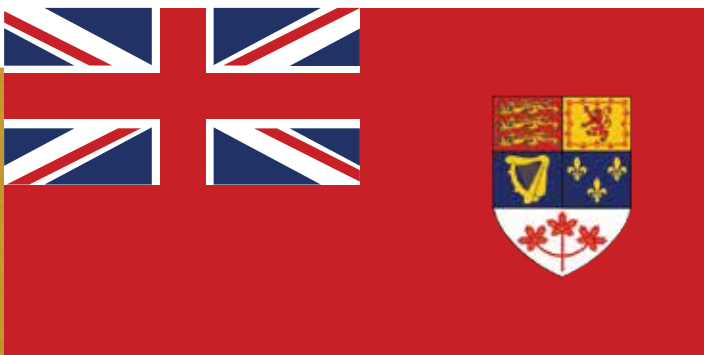


After 1763, the Royal Union flag, symbolizing the union of England and Scotland, flew over all British colonies in North America. It is sometimes called "the Loyalists' flag" because, after the American Revolution in 1776, it was the one carried north to Canada by colonists who wanted to remain loyal to Britain. A red diagonal representing Ireland was added in 1801.



At the time of Canada's confederation in 1867, the flag that flew across the country was what we now know as the Union Flag. (It's often called the Union Jack, although that term should really only be used when the flag is flying on a ship.)

In 1921, Canada's new coat of arms was added to the Red Ensign, a flag already used on Canadian ships and on many government buildings. The Canadian air force and army began to use it near the end of the Second World War. After the war ended in 1945, the federal government approved the flying of the Red Ensign on all government buildings until Canada had its own flag.



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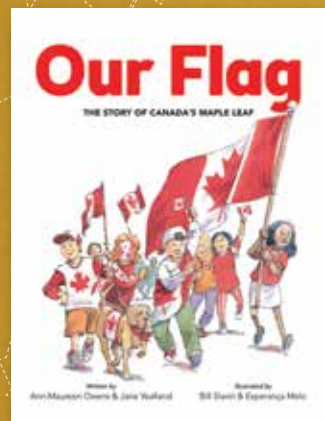


Joan O'Malley sewed the first ever Maple Leaf flag.

A SECRET AND A MYSTERY

Before the flag was officially chosen, 20-year-old Joan O'Malley, the daughter of a government employee, was asked to sew samples for the prime minister to see. There are no official records of that night and Joan remembers swearing not to talk about it — a promise she kept for many years. When the secret was revealed, Joan was invited to speak to schoolchildren about her adventure. She was also the Governor General's guest at a lunch with Queen Elizabeth II in 2002.

Those sample flags should be in a museum somewhere, but they have mysteriously disappeared. So has the first national flag of Canada, which was officially flown for the first time on Parliament Hill on Feb. 15, 1965.



There's lots more about our flag, plus crafts, flag codes, information on Canada's provincial and territorial flags and more in *Our Flag* by Ann-Maureen Owens and Jane Yealland.



George Stanley



John Matheson

FLAG PEOPLE

Three Canadians were responsible for our flag's great design. George Stanley, a professor at Royal Military College in Kingston, Ont., proposed the use of a single red leaf on a white background with red borders because it could be seen clearly from a distance. Once it was chosen, John Matheson, a member of the flag committee who had a passion for flags and symbols, worked with experts to perfect the design. Jacques St. Cyr developed the eleven-point leaf that looks like a simplified but real maple leaf.



THUMBS DOWN

Although there were some wacky suggestions, most of the proposed designs for a Canadian flag used a lot of the same colours and symbols. The bottom left flag is notable because it has white arrow shapes across the middle representing Indigenous people, whose contributions to Canada were mostly ignored by designers. The bottom right flag with the blue borders and red maple leaves was the Prime Minister's favourite, nicknamed the Pearson pennant.





THE GREAT FLAG DEBATE

There was a strong feeling among many Canadians that the country should have a flag of its own, especially as Canada's 100th birthday approached. Maybe because of his time representing our country at the United Nations, Prime Minister Lester Pearson was especially passionate about the idea. On June 15, 1964, he introduced a bill in Parliament to give Canada a flag. His choice — which quickly became known as the Pearson pennant — had three red maple leaves on a white background with blue side borders. Debate about the flag dragged on for three months, so Parliament set up a committee with members from all political parties to choose a design. As well as getting advice from flag experts, the committee asked Canadians for their suggestions. Thousands of people, from young children to famous artists like A.Y. Jackson, sent in their ideas, which included beavers, Mounties and even hockey sticks. The committee created three groups: versions of the Red Ensign, flags with a single maple leaf and ones with several maple leaves. They chose one from each group and held a secret vote. Every single person chose the red and white maple leaf design! It took another 15 days for members of Parliament to agree. Like most French-speaking MPs, Prime Minister Pearson wanted a distinctly Canadian flag, but John Diefenbaker, leader of the opposition, fought hard to keep the Red Ensign that showed Canada's historic link with Britain. Very early on December 15, 1964, Parliament voted 163 to 78 in favour of the maple leaf design. Canada had its flag! Approval by the Senate and Queen Elizabeth II made it official. The maple leaf flag flew from Canadian flagpoles for the first time on February 15, 1965.