



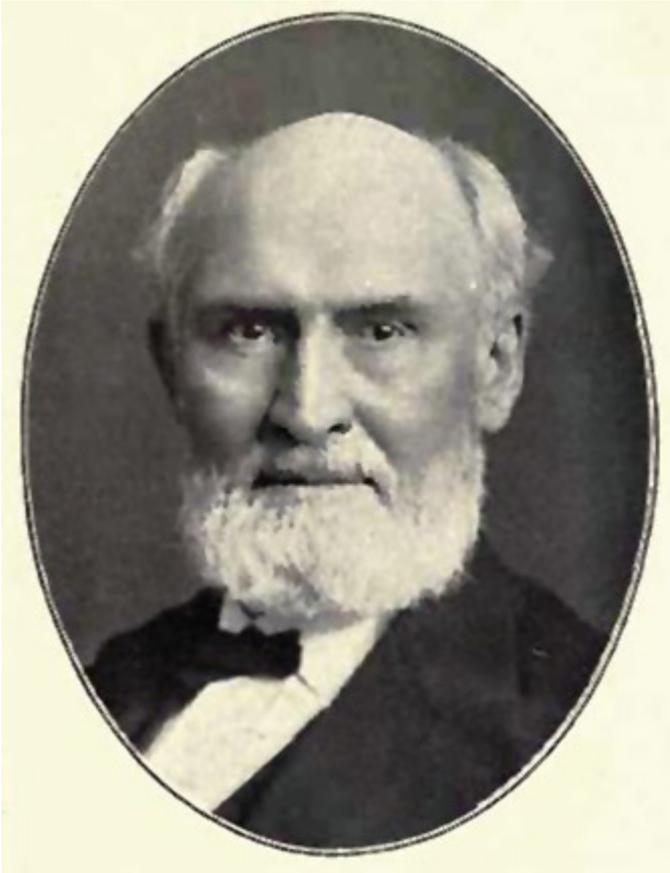
Westmount places:
Summit Woods

Description

How our urban forest evolved from the time it was created

By Michael Walsh

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Sir William Christopher Macdonald – Creative Commons

Quick question: who was the tobacco tycoon and philanthropist responsible for the city's urban forest? The answer is **Sir William Christopher Macdonald** (1831-1917), founder of the W. C. Macdonald Co. that manufactured smoking and chewing tobacco. The success of the company made him a millionaire, many times over, at a young age.

Macdonald's philanthropy bestowed upon [McGill University](#) allowed the creation of multiple faculties and buildings as well the formation of the **Macdonald Campus**.

Interestingly, he despised the tobacco habit and changed the spelling of his last name from MacDonald to Macdonald when knighted, in 1898, to distance his association with the company's products. The company remained in Montreal until 1974 when it was sold to R. J. Reynolds – who, in 1999, sold their non-U.S. operations to Japan Tobacco Inc. who currently manufacture their tobacco products.

The area would not be what it is today without the vision and generosity of Sir William Christopher Macdonald.

The relationship between Sir William Macdonald and the City of Westmount started in 1895 when he “*donated a splendid region on the summit of Westmount for an observatory*” to McGill University.

This splendid region is comprised of Utica Shale, a black sedimentary rock that typically breaks into thin flat pieces, and Trenton limestone containing fossil fragments. In deeper areas, the limestone forms a white marble. In oil wells, the former type of rock produces natural gas and crude oil.



Summit Circle Look Out above Sunnyside Park, looking east

The existence of the Macdonald Observatory was short-lived – “... we cannot hope for “good seeing” within the confines of a city yearly growing blacker with factory and engine smoke, largely preventable and unnecessary.”

A fascinating 1973 article on the summit, by **Andy Dodge**, describes how between 1906 and 1928 the McGill Survey School used concrete blocks (still visible to this day) to mount meridian telescopes to survey the stars and planets.

‘McGill University used the area as a botanical laboratory, sharing it with the 24th Victoria Rifles of Canada as they conducted field manoeuvres.’

In 1903, the **Marconi Company**, today named Telnet and owned by the Swedish firm Ericsson, built a receiving station on the property. Their transmitting station was located at the harbour’s Park Pier and was used for shipping.



Logo Canadian Marconi Company

Two years later, McGill University opposed the Marconi Company in its plans to use the Montreal mountain summit for a wireless telegraphy station. Their objection was that radio signals might interfere with the instrumentation used in Sir **Ernest Rutherford**’s physics laboratory. Amongst his other achievements, Sir Rutherford is credited with splitting the atom in 1913.

Following that period, McGill University used the area as a botanical laboratory, sharing it with the 24th Victoria Rifles of Canada as they conducted field manoeuvres.

‘In 1940, F. Cyril James, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of McGill University recommended “the sale

of Westmount Mountain Summit to the City of Westmount'

In 1940, [F. Cyril James](#), Principal and Vice-Chancellor of McGill University recommended “the sale of Westmount Mountain Summit to the City of Westmount”. City Council minutes provide details of the sale.

“Your Committee recommends that Council authorize the purchase for use as a Park or Playground in perpetuity, the property of the Royal Institution for the Advancement of Learning, on Westmount Mountain... with the buildings thereon erected, the said property comprising all the area of approximately 1,427,288 square feet, more or less, surrounded by the street known as Summit Circle and including also the one-foot strip on the west side of the southwest part of Summit Circle... the price to be paid for the said property being \$300,000, payment to be made in three instalments of \$100,000.00 each without interest, the first instalment payable upon execution of the deed of sale, the second instalment on or before January 1, 1942, and the third instalment on or before January 1, 1943, the vendors to give the City of Westmount a clear and valid title by a warranty of deed of sale in the usual form...”

– City of Westmount, Council Minutes, March 18, 1940



‘The Verdun and District Sportsmen’s Association introduced pheasants to the Summit.’

City Council also approved naming the area Summit Park:

“Your Committee recommends that the property recently purchased by the City, bounded by Sherbrooke Street, Wood Avenue, Barat Road and Vignal Street, be named Queen Elizabeth Gardens and that the property purchased from the Royal Institution for the Advancement of Learning, surrounded by Summit Circle, be named Summit Park. On the motion of Alderman Panet-Raymond seconded by Alderman Rexford, this recommendation was unanimously adopted”.

– City of Westmount, Council Minutes, April 22, 1940



During that same period, the Verdun and District Sportsmen's Association introduced pheasants to the Summit. "*This type of bird can stand severe winter conditions and it is expected that they will become permanently established*".

– City of Westmount Annual Report, 1940

These were cared for by the **Westmount Park authorities**. The pheasant population flourished and spread to a radius of 15 miles. Other changes included clearing areas for paths and ski runs. In addition, the Westmount reservoir quarry (Corporation Quarry) was also located on the summit.

In 1948, the National Research Council had an experimental radio tower and service building in Summit Park:

"Your Committee recommend that the Mayor and Secretary-Treasurer be authorized to sign an agreement with the Honorary Advisory Council in Scientific and Industrial Research, prepared by the City Solicitor, whereby The Honorary Advisory Council will be permitted to erect and maintain in the western part of Summit Park, a Steel Radio tower for propagating tests and a service building or house for a generator, batteries and equipment for operating said tower, at the places marked in the plan prepared by the City Engineer, for a period of two years, at a rental of one dollar (\$1.00) per year, the whole on the conditions that the tower and building will not be used for any commercial purpose and will be removed at the end of two years, and that the site will then be restored to its present condition, and that the City will be indemnified and held harmless from all claims and damages in the premises".

– City of Westmount Council Minutes, March 8, 1948

'In 1948, the National Research Council had an experimental radio tower and service building in Summit Park.'

In 1962, the [Royal Canadian Mounted Police](#), used the summit's elevation for their radio service building:

"It was moved, seconded and unanimously resolved that the agreement be extended between the City and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for the use of Summit Park for a radio service building and mast for a period of two years from March 20, 1962 and that the Mayor and Secretary-Treasurer be authorized to sign the said extension on behalf of the City".

– City of Westmount Council Minutes, March 5, 1962

Today, [Summit Woods](#) (the name was changed in 2010 to reflect the area's urban forest ecology) is used by bird watchers, recreational enthusiasts, nature photographers and dog walkers. This mixed-use of the area does, on occasion, cause contention between different user groups. In fact, the challenges in managing this property have been discussed in academic circles, specifically, Taryn Graham's 2013 Master's thesis at the University of Waterloo.





Westmount – Summit Woods, seen from the west – image: Wikipedia Creative Commons

In fact, the story of Summit Woods is still unfolding. In 2016, Council approved the permanent closure of one-third of Summit Circle and the creation of a serpentine gravel footpath. This is not a new idea: it was originally proposed in 1990 and defeated due to the logistics of providing access for emergency vehicles.

'In 1962, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, used the summit's elevation for their radio service building.'

Next time you walk along the summit's paths either alone, with your dog or carrying birding lenses, remember to stay on the paths and not pick any wildflowers. Reflect instead on the storied history of the area, a beautiful property comprised of parcels of land that once belonged to McGill University, The Royal Bank, Estate Yuile and Estate Archibauld.

Finally, remember that the area would not be what it is today without the vision and generosity of Sir William Christopher Macdonald.

Images: Andrew Burlone unless otherwise indicated

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Michael Walsh is a long-time Westmount resident. He is happily retired from nearly four decades in the field of higher education technology. A “professional student” by nature, his academic training, and publishing, include statistical methodology, mycology and animal psychology. During this period, he was also an officer in the Canadian Armed Forces. Prior to moving to Montreal, he was contracted by the Ontario Ministry of Education evaluating bilingual primary and secondary school programs. Today, he enjoys spending time with his (huge) Saint Bernard while discovering the city's past and sharing stories of the majestic trees that grace the parks and streets. He can be contacted at michaell2003@hotmail.com or through his blog [Westmount Overlooked](#)

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