

# Historical Memory and the Statue of Gabriel Dumont in Saskatoon's Friendship Park



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Statues and memorials at the forefront of current public debate remind me of the statue of Métis leader Gabriel Dumont sitting astride his horse on the South Saskatchewan riverbank in Saskatoon's Friendship Park. I regularly use images of this statue in my teaching to discuss monuments as sites of memory and historical consciousness where people publicly engage in acts of commemoration. I think it is essential to discuss what monuments represent and the stories people hold about these memorials.

When presented with the statue, most students immediately recognize Dumont for his leadership in the 1885 Resistance. Some even acknowledge his prowess as a buffalo hunter or the leader of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Métis community at St. Laurent, Saskatchewan. Few, if any, know the history behind the statue or what it represents to Saskatoon's Métis community. There is no plaque to describe how Gabriel Dumont's statue challenges the idea that Indigenous peoples were not present in urban centres during the settlement period or how it speaks to the broader Métis history of use and occupation of the South Saskatchewan River region. Nor is there any marker to explain how the statue reflects a legacy of Indigenous political activism or its importance as gathering space for contemporary Saskatoon Métis.

The initial impetus for the statue began in 1984 with Dennis Fisher, a friend, and ally of the Métis. He chaired the Commemorate '85 Corporation, a group working to honour the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1885 Resistance. With Métis leadership and community members' support, Fisher commissioned Saskatoon sculptor Bill Epp to create a piece commemorating the Métis Resistance.

Epp's first response was to sculpt Louis Riel, but Fisher convinced him that Dumont, leader of the South Saskatchewan River Métis, should be recognized.

When Epp finished the sculpture, Fisher, accompanied by local Métis leaders Clarence Trotchie, Tony and Ron Camponi, Nora Cummings, and others, prepared to welcome the statue and present it to the City as part of a public ceremony full of pomp and circumstance. On 6 May 1985, a crowd gathered under a large red and white circus tent eager to see Dumont's memory honoured. The ceremony began with honoured guests arriving by boat at the water's edge and then transported by horse-drawn cart to the ceremony. City dignitaries including mayor Cliff Wright, with councillors Donna Birkmaier and Howard Nixon, attended alongside members of the extended Dumont family and the Saskatoon Métis community. Beyond unveiling the statue, the day included the release of a Canada Post stamp picturing Dumont; the dedication of Gabriel Dumont Park, the latest riverbank park created by the City of Saskatoon and Meewasin Valley Authority, a conservation organization mandated to conserve the South Saskatchewan River's cultural and natural resources; and the opening of the Marr Residence historic site, which was one of three Saskatoon residences that served as a field hospital during the 1885 Resistance. A reception and Métis cultural entertainment, including fiddle music, jigging, and square-dance performances, completed the festivities.

Following the celebration, organizers did not move the statue to its intended location at Gabriel Dumont Park because the park was in its early stages of development. Instead, they transported it to a Dumont



Gabriel Dumont in Saskatoon's Friendship Park, c1985. Dennis Fisher donated a collection of photographs from the making of the statue to the Gabriel Dumont Institute ([www.metismuseum.ca](http://www.metismuseum.ca)) along with a significant collection of artifacts from the Batoche and Fort Pitt battlefields, Cumberland House, and St. Peter's Mission, Montana. Denis and Jean Fisher Collection, Album #12, Gabriel Dumont Institute

family reunion in Duck Lake, Saskatchewan, and then back to Saskatoon for formal presentation to City Council. After receiving the statue, the City decided its immediate location would be Friendship Park, on the South Saskatchewan River's west bank, close to downtown Saskatoon, where it remains today.

This story is only one of many that the statue represents. The sculpture and its placement in Friendship Park have become meaningful to the Saskatoon Métis. It is a symbol of the Métis' historical presence in the City and the region's broader Métis history. Métis have used and occupied the territory that became the City of Saskatoon for generations. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they hunted buffalo in the area, moving along the Red River cart trails that transected the region. They travelled the

river corridor for social and economic reasons, often frequenting a natural resting or camping spot called "Bois de Flesche" or "arrow woods" along the river's east side. When the buffalo economy collapsed, Métis continued to move throughout the area, freighting goods for incoming settlers and collecting buffalo bones that they hauled to a rail depot and sold to Saskatoon merchants.

The statue's very creation speaks to Métis community members' insistence on formally recognizing their history and experience. While Fisher, a non-Indigenous man, led the statue's creation, he was successful owing to the relationships he created with the Métis community and the support they provided. Individuals such as Trotchie, Cummings, and the Camponis were descendants of Métis families from the Round Prairie settlement south of the City, and the first generation born and raised in Saskatoon. By the late 1960s, they were also formidable political activists responsible for creating several Métis social and political organizations in Saskatoon that continue to operate today. They strongly supported Fisher by advocating for the creation of the statue and the commemoration of 1885. And, when the City of Saskatoon and Meewasin Valley Authority twice tried to move the statue from Friendship Park, these individuals responded with successful grassroots action of letter-writing campaigns and community petitions.

The statue's home in Friendship Park has become meaningful for the Métis and signifies a continued Métis presence in the City. It is where the community gathers to honour and celebrate. Indeed, it has become a place of ceremony. It is where dedicated community members gather for Saskatchewan's Louis Riel Day each November 16<sup>th</sup> to offer prayers and honour his life and legacy. Until recently, it was also where the Indigenous community gathered each June 21<sup>st</sup> to celebrate National Aboriginal Day. The event has now moved to a larger park to accommodate the growing celebration. The statue, on the City of Saskatoon's official register of Historic Sites, serves as a permanent reminder of the Métis presence. It represents collaboration between the City and the Métis community, and the legacy of political activism by community leaders such as Trotchie, Cummings, and others. The statue speaks to relationships, responsibilities, and reconciliation, long before anyone talked about reconciliation. Gabriel Dumont's statue has important stories to tell, if only there were markers to share this history. ■