



*This appears to be an early political cartoon that depicts Sir John A. MacDonald nervously arriving at Mother Barnes' cabin for that fabled visit. (Courtesy of the Athens Heritage Society.)*

She had always entertained guests by reading tea leaves, which was quite common at that time. The need to support her large family is perhaps why she started to accept \$.25 cents by using this talent. She was reported to have told farmers where to find missing cattle, helped authorities solve crimes, including the location of a murder victim and much more. Her granddaughter revealed that her predictions often came true and that they aided others. Barnes felt that her gift was a divine calling from God. Her success resulted in hundreds of visitors who reportedly came from near and far to receive advice and insight. Many carved their names on her doorposts and walls. At some point she was named "The Witch of Plum Hollow," perhaps by a reporter or by historian Thaddeus Leavitt who wrote a novel with that title. The book actually included only a few pages about her. As for Barnes, it seemed that perhaps she appreciated the mystery and fame which surrounded her.

Elaine Farley, local historian and Mother Barnes re-enactor, points out in her presentations that the 19th century definition of witches, included that they often lived in rural areas on their own "without male supervision," were of the lower class, cured illness, acted as mid-wives, and were independent. "Using this list, Barnes could easily be labelled as a witch," she surmises. However, most seem to agree that her motherly nature exemplified in the loving and generous care for her family and neighbours was the truest essence of who Mother Barnes was and it is the way her family wants her to be remembered.

One of the often told stories is reported to have taken place before the Confederation of Canada, when the choice of a final capital was uncertain. John A. MacDonald, then attorney general for Upper Canada, was said to be tired of waiting for Queen Victoria to decide on where it would be situated. Stories are told about him seeking Mother Barnes' advice in the matter. While not substantiated, it may have been that he just sent representatives to consult with her. The story is told that she said that the Queen would pick the city on the south side of a river. That city was Bytown, now known as Ottawa. It was also reported

# THE MOTHER BARNES & SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD CONNECTION

By Sally Smid

As Canada celebrates 150 years of Confederation, it's especially exciting to consider some of our local history connections. That could include the reported stories that link Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. MacDonald, to local legend, "Mother Barnes." Jane Elizabeth Marten was believed to have been of Irish origin, but was often inconsistent in reporting some of the details of her life. The small swarthy

woman was born to an aristocratic family in 1794. At age 20 she eloped with her "true love", army sergeant Robert Harrison, to avoid an arranged marriage. The two travelled to North America. She was left a widow at a young age and later married cobbler, David Barnes. He eventually moved to Smiths Falls and left her to care for 7 children in a small cabin near Lake Eloida, north of Athens.



***Mother Barnes Re-enactor Elaine Farley as she appeared several years ago at Mother Barnes' reconstructed cabin.***



***Mother Barnes, photo courtesy of the Athens Heritage Society***

that she predicted that Sir John A. would be successful in acquiring another term as Prime Minister. Due to a political scandal, he was very concerned about his campaign being successful and received a certain peace of mind when she indicated that he would win "by a gross" which did come to pass. Could it even have been that the stories of him consulting this famed mystic were used by his political opponents in attempts to discredit or poke fun at him? An Ottawa reporter once asked Mother Barnes about the rumoured visits and her only reply was, "I can't say." When that reporter pressured her further to admit if Sir John A. had visited her cabin, she looked him in the eyes, he reported, and gave him a wink in the mysterious and illusive manner which was so typical of her life.

It is interesting to note that Mother Barnes passed away 4 months before MacDonal's death on June 6 1891, both achieving fame in their own ways. Barnes had planned her own funeral which took place in the Athens Methodist (now United) Church and a monument is erected in her honour in



Sheldon cemetery. In addition to her own children, she also raised three orphaned children. When she died, she left 68 direct living descendants, 47 grandchildren, and 14 great-grandchildren. Her cabin on Mother Barnes Road has been restored and the property is currently for sale.

The Athens Museum is pleased to have her pine table in its collection which was reportedly where the tea cups were placed as she used her mystic powers. It is interesting to consider that perhaps

Canada's first Prime Minister sat at that table 150 years ago in her upstairs loft. The Medical History Interpretive Sign across from the Museum includes Mother Barnes as well. She served her sickly neighbours, provided herbal medicines and served as a midwife. The sign also proclaims her to be "Canada's most famous clairvoyant". Her supposed connection with Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonal, is an important part of the Museum's Canada 150 displays this year, as well as a fascinating part of Canadian history. [LH](#)