

Historica Canada Education Portal

Donald Morrison

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Donald Morrison biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Morrison was a Scottish immigrant who lived in Megantic, Québec in the 1880s. He became a part of one of the largest manhunts in Canadian history after killing a man over a property dispute and fleeing the scene.

Aims

Students will study the key turning points in Morrison's life to decide whether he should be regarded as a victim of circumstance, a cold-blooded killer, or something in-between.

Background

Donald Morrison, son of Scottish immigrant Mudro Morrison, hired a lawyer in 1888 to challenge the terms of a mortgage his illiterate father took out against the family farm. The lawyer was in cahoots with the moneylender, named McAulay, and the Morrisons were bilked out of their farm. During the supposedly legal takeover, the Morrison farmhouse and barn burned down, and McAulay hired gunslinger Lucius "Jack" Warren

as a "special constable" for the sole purpose of arresting Donald Morrison for arson. Warren challenged young Morrison and when they met face to face on the street that afternoon, Donald Morrison shot and killed Warren.

Morrison was hunted by detectives, police, jail guards, and soldiers, who held on to the hope that justice might somehow, someday prevail.

Sympathetic friends harbored Morrison for nearly a year, but he was captured in an ambush and made to stand trial.

He was sentenced to eighteen years hard labour. His friends and supporters were shocked. With no fight left in him, Morrison chose to succumb to starvation and died in hospital 19 June 1894 – four days after a recommendation for his release claimed that he was no longer a threat to authority. The hunt for Donald Morrison remains one of the longest and most extensive manhunts in Canadian history.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

The story of Donald Morrison might easily be mistaken for a fictional tale were it not for the profound impact his struggle continues to have on the community in which he lived. An unassuming and composed man, Donald Morrison managed to keep the authorities guessing for over a year as he used the surrounding wilderness and the support of his community to evade capture. Though the accounts of Morrison's adventures are varied, some seeming more like myth than reality, one thing remains true: Donald Morrison stood in defiance of (what he

believed were) the forces of corruption in his community. Why did he fight back? Who were his friends? How was he finally captured? All these questions reveal an exciting and often tragic tale of a man who would do anything to protect his home and freedom.

1. Create a timeline to illustrate the key events in Donald Morrison's life. Include ten key events or development. Direct your students to select three key events that they think are turning points in Morrison's life. Have each student describe why they think these three events are major turning points. Compare these events and encourage a group or class discussion on why they have selected different events. Emphasize that there is more than one answer and that all answers need to be supported with historical facts and well-constructed arguments.

2. Formal debate topic: *"Donald Morrison was an innocent man trapped by the forces of corruption in his small community. He was justified in his actions, which is why his death was such a tragedy."*

In the video most of the people interviewed felt that Donald Morrison was a victim of circumstance. How would society react today to such an incident? Was Donald truly a victim (thus justifying his use of deadly force) or was he the cold-blooded murderer depicted by the authorities?

3. In making the video of Donald Morrison for *The Canadians* series, the production team used various types of information to tell the story. How many different types of information can you identify? Rank the various types of information according to that which you found most interesting, most reliable, and most effective. Explain why you ranked them in the order you did with specific examples and references.

5. Re-create the courtroom trial of Donald Morrison. You should have

both a team for the prosecution and a team for the defense. Have both sides present their interpretation of the facts to a jury of twelve students. This exercise may also provide an excellent opportunity to incorporate Canadian law into the history classroom.

6. At various times in his life Donald Morrison attempted to state his position concerning what he perceived to be the forces of corruption in Megantic, Québec. Imagine you are Donald Morrison. What are your thoughts and dreams? What are your recollections of the various stages of your life? Create a journal in the character of Donald Morrison, describing the various adventures, hardships, joys, and sorrows that have occurred throughout your life. What is it like to be hunted? How does it feel to have the support of the community? What do you do when your friends begin to be arrested? How do you view your trial? Do you receive justice or not? What are your thoughts in prison? You are exploring the life of Donald Morrison, be sure to make your journal original and interesting.

7. Write an obituary for Morrison. (For examples of obituaries, refer to your local newspaper or go to [The Globe and Mail](#))

Resources

[Donald Morrison Worksheet](#)

[Donald Morrison - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Epps, Bernard. *Outlaw of Megantic*. Toronto, McClelland. 1973.

Wallace, Clarke. *Wanted - Donald Morrison: the true story of the*

Megantic. Outlaw. Toronto, Doubleday. 1977.