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Diefenbaker Grave Site



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Alternate Names

N/A

Architect(s)

N/A

Builders

N/A

Construction Dates

August 22, 1979

Recognition

University of Saskatchewan 'A' Listed

1. Statement of Significance

The grave of John George Diefenbaker is located at the University of Saskatchewan, on the bank of the South Saskatchewan River and the grounds of the Diefenbaker Building. Diefenbaker was Canada's 13th Prime Minister, serving from June 21, 1957, to April 22, 1963. He was born in Ontario, but raised in Saskatchewan, where his interest in politics began at a young age. He attended the University of Saskatchewan from 1912 until 1919, ultimately earning three degrees.

The gravesite has heritage value due to its cultural and chronological associations with John Diefenbaker and with the history of his time in office. Diefenbaker is remembered for his legacy of advancing civil rights and for his vision of 'One Canada,' as well as for the controversy surrounding the cancellation of the Avro Arrow project. Diefenbaker died in August 1979 and was buried with his wife, Olive whose remains were moved from Ottawa to Saskatoon at his request. The location of Diefenbaker's grave at the University of Saskatchewan serves to commemorate his place in Canadian history, and his long association with the University of Saskatchewan and the Province of Saskatchewan.



Figure 1. Granite grave stone.



Figure 2. Form and style of the grave stone.

2. Character - Defining Elements

2.1 Materials

The grave marker is a low stone tablet made of granite (Figure 1). The granite gravestone is in excellent commemorative condition. A bronze plaque commemorating both Diefenbaker and the 125th anniversary of Confederation was added in 1992. Both the gravestone and the bronze plaque are character-defining elements.

2.2 Form & Style

The grave marker takes the form of a modest rectangular plinth raised slightly from the ground. Surrounding it is a ring of rectangular granite flagstones set flush with the adjacent earth. A small patch of earth is left open as a flower bed. A simple inscription reads 'Diefenbaker', followed by the given names 'John George' and 'Olive Evangeline', and the years of their lives. The inscription on the marker faces up, and there is no ornamentation. The simple form of the grave marker is a character-defining element (Figure 2).

2.3 Location & Spatial Configuration

Diefenbaker's grave is located on a knoll in an open space between the South Saskatchewan River and the Diefenbaker Canada Centre (Figure 3). At Diefenbaker's funeral, Prime Minister Joe Clark began his eulogy, "John Diefenbaker is home." At the former Prime Minister's request, his body was transported by train after his death to be buried at Saskatoon. In January, 1979 he had written to the provincial government and to the university's Board of Governors, asking permission to be buried at the university. A small plot of land near the planned site of the Diefenbaker Canada Centre was set aside to accommodate this request.

The planning for the Diefenbaker Centre was already well underway at the time of his passing. In 1969, Diefenbaker announced he would donate his papers to the university. That gift led to the design and eventual construction of the Centre. The building was modeled on the presidential libraries of the United States, and was planned to house artifacts, personal and parliamentary papers, and a library. It was completed in 1980, about a year after Diefenbaker's death.

The gravesite sits overlooking the river and the city, and is publicly accessible. The openness and accessibility of the site are character-defining elements (Figures 4 & 5).



Figure 3. The location of Diefenbaker's grave site is indicated in green on this portion of a contemporary campus map.



Figure 4. Context of the grave site.



Figure 5. View from Diefenbaker's grave.



Figure 6. Grave stone.



Figure 7. Diefenbaker's name in the MacKinnon Building.



Figure 8. Diefenbaker's graduand photo, ca. 1919. Photo A-3358, retrieved from University of Saskatchewan Archives.



Figure 9. Diefenbaker in the House of Commons. Photo retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Diefenbaker

2.4 Cultural & Chronological Associations

Diefenbaker's gravesite is associated with John Diefenbaker, and with the history of his time in office. Diefenbaker was born in 1895 in southwestern Ontario, to William and Mary Diefenbaker. In 1903, his family moved to Fort Carlton, then part of the Northwest Territories, but now part of Saskatchewan. The family lived in various rural communities before finally settling in Saskatoon. Diefenbaker showed interest in politics from a young age. As a boy of 8 or 9, he told his parents that he would become Prime Minister. Diefenbaker was fond of relating that his first interaction with politics came at the age of 10 when he sold a newspaper to Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier, who was in Saskatoon to lay the cornerstone for the university's first building (now the [MacKinnon Building](#)). When giving his speech that afternoon, Sir Wilfrid commented on the newsboy who had ended their conversation by saying, "I can't waste any more time on you, Prime Minister. I must get about my work."

In 1912 Diefenbaker entered the University of Saskatchewan to study arts and law and received his Bachelor of Arts in 1915. He returned for his Masters of Arts in political science and economics the following autumn. Diefenbaker convocated in May 1916. In August 1916 he enlisted in officers training so that he might serve in the First World War. Commissioned as a lieutenant in the infantry, Diefenbaker sailed to England where he served as a member of the 196th Battalion (Western Universities) before returning to Canada in February 1917. A terra cotta frieze in the [MacKinnon Building](#) commemorates all those who served in the First World War, including Diefenbaker (Figure 7). In May 1919, Diefenbaker received a degree in Law, making him the first student at the university to receive three degrees (Figure 8).

Diefenbaker began his political career while working as a lawyer at a firm that he founded in Wakaw. He ran as a Conservative Party candidate several times during the 1920's and 1930's, becoming a member of parliament in 1940. Diefenbaker ran as the leader of the opposition in the 1957 election, winning a minority. He took office as Prime Minister of Canada on June 17, 1957. In 1958 he called a snap election, securing a majority government, and won another minority in 1962. 'Dief the Chief' as he came to be known, was a champion of civil liberties and his legislative program reflected this. He secured passage of the Canadian Bill of Rights, the first step towards the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. He was the first Prime Minister to appoint a woman to cabinet and appointed the first aboriginal person to the Senate. He secured for aboriginal people the right to vote. He also successfully amended the Criminal Code to include two categories of murder and to limit the death penalty to a narrow range of deliberate acts. His vision of "One Canada" is summarized in his statement, "All through my life, one of the things I've tried to do is to bring about in this nation citizenship not dependent on race or colour, blood counts or origin."

Diefenbaker's term ended on April 8, 1963. He served as leader of the opposition until 1967 and was an MP until his death. John Diefenbaker died in Ottawa on August 16, 1979 and was buried six days later on the banks of the South Saskatchewan River at the University of Saskatchewan (Figure 10).

3. Associated Objects

Many objects held by the university are associated with Diefenbaker and his gravesite. The oldest associated object is the terra cotta scroll commemorating university students and faculty who served in the First World War. (See Section 2.8 Cultural and Chronological Associations).

Diefenbaker's graduand photo from law school is located in the University of Saskatchewan Archives. Diefenbaker's personal papers and other memorabilia are held in the Diefenbaker Canada Centre. The Centre and its collections are associated with the nearby gravesite.

A bronze plaque commemorating Diefenbaker and the 125th anniversary of Confederation was added to the grave stone in 1992 (Figure 11).

A memorial plaque was unveiled in 2000 (Figure 12). The plaque reads: "Right Honorable John George Diefenbaker (1895-1979). John Diefenbaker, a prairie populist and spellbinding speaker, advocated that all Canadians should be "unhyphenated Canadians." He served as prime minister from 1957 to 1963. In 1958, he won the greatest electoral victory in the history of Canada's House of Commons."



Figure 10. State funeral for John G. Diefenbaker. Photo A-10072, retrieved from University of Saskatchewan Archives.



Figure 11. Grave site plaque.

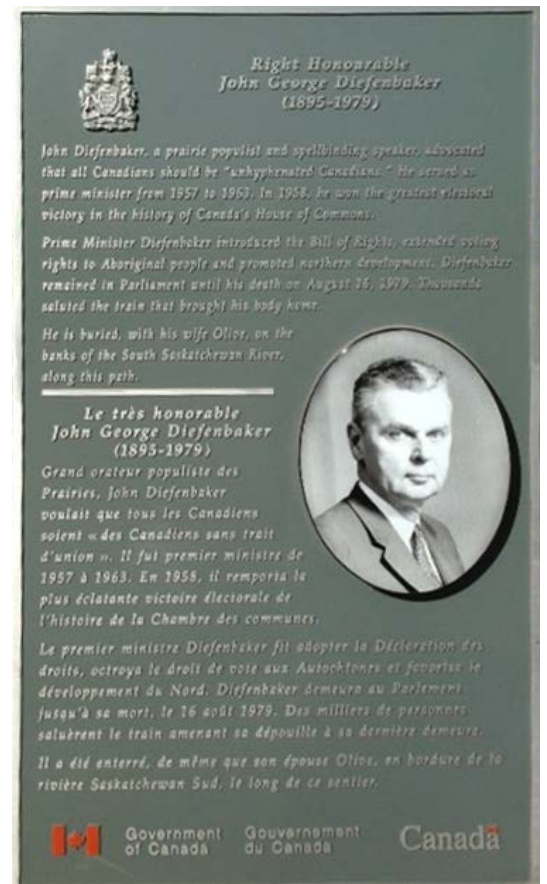


Figure 12. Memorial plaque.

4. Supporting Documents

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5. Summary of Character - Defining Elements

Materials

- granite grave stone
- bronze plaque

Form & Style

- rectangular raised marker
- simplicity of form and lack of ornamentation

Location & Spatial Configuration

- site at the University of Saskatchewan
- site overlooking South Saskatchewan River
- open and publicly accessible site

Cultural & Chronological Associations

- Canadian Prime Minister
- Progressive Conservative Party of Canada
- University of Saskatchewan alumnus
- First World War

