

# Robert H. Labatt

---

Robert Hodgetts Labatt, a member of the famous Canadian brewing family, was born on February 24, 1864, in London, Ontario (then Canada West), and was the only son of Ephraim and Elizabeth Labatt. Educated first at Port Hope, Labatt began attending the Galt Collegiate Institute in 1880, when Dr. Tassie was headmaster of the school. In 1883, he embarked on a successful career in the militia, first with the Queen's Own Regiment, and then with the 7th Regiment in London, seeing action in the Northwest Rebellion, and rising through the ranks over the next couple of decades. In 1893, he married Helen Isabel Falkiner Ridley in Hamilton, and together had two sons.



When war broke in August 1914, Labatt was appointed commander of the 4th Battalion at Valcartier. He accompanied the unit to England, and then to France, but fell ill and was forced to relinquish his command prior to the Second Battle of Ypres. His replacement was killed in the battle, at which point Labatt resumed command of the battalion for another couple of months before his recurring heart and stomach pains required he leave for England. He returned to Canada in July 1915.

While in Canada and recovering, Labatt became a staff officer for Military District 2, assisted with recruitment in Ontario, and was commander of Camp Niagara. He helped organize the 86th Machine Gun Battalion in Hamilton and the 97th American Legion in Toronto, and solicited donations to the total of \$210,000. He then agreed to an appointment with the Board of Pension Commissioners in June 1916.

By May 1918, newspaper editors and Members of Parliament began to criticize Labatt's appointment to the Board of Pension Commissioners. Their main criticism, which sparked quite a bit of controversy, was Labatt drawing from a civil service salary *and* a disability pension. One MP went so far as to accuse the government of nepotism and for allowing Labatt to draw from both sources of income because of his connections in Ottawa when he showed no clear signs of disability. In fact, Labatt had been suffering from chronic endocarditis since he took up the position, which ultimately contributed to his death. In the meantime, Labatt decided to resign from the Board in June 1918 to avoid a public scandal. He died of heart disease on February 6, 1919, in Barton, Ontario, and was buried in Woodland Cemetery in Hamilton.

---

Sources:

Matthew K. Barrett, "The Pensioner: Lieutenant Colonel R. H. Labatt," Patriots, Crooks and Safety-Firsters: Colonels of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, accessed October 4, 2019, <https://matthewkbarrett.com/2015/01/05/the-pensioner/> (photograph retrieved from same); Galt Collegiate Institute Honour Roll, GCI Archives; "Lieutenant Colonel Robert Hodgetts Labatt," Canadian Virtual War Memorial, accessed October 4, 2019, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/memorials/canadian-virtual-war-memorial/detail/425602>; Registration of Deaths, 1869-1947, MS 935, reel 260, Archives of Ontario, Toronto; Select Marriages, Archives of Ontario; War Graves Registry: Circumstances of Death Records, RG 150, 1992-1993/314, Box 225, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa; World War I Newspaper Clippings, GCI Archives.