

The St. Albans Raid

The Confederate Raid On St. Albans, Vermont October 19, 1864

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During the latter course of the Civil War, Confederate forces undertook a number of operations along the northern U.S. border with Canada that were intended to disrupt the Union's focus on the military situation in the south. In particular, by inciting uprisings along the northern border with Canada, it was hoped to achieve several goals that would further the Confederate cause. Those aims included organizing the escape of prisoners of war and arousing dissident northern factions such as the Sons of Liberty. Both groups were to join in creating armed insurrections in northern border cities such as Chicago, bring the horrors of war to the people of the north, appropriate money that could be used by the Confederacy to finance the war, draw away Union manpower and material from active southern battlefields, and adversely effect Republican hopes in the Presidential election of 1865. President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, activated this plan in March 1864.

The subject of Confederate naval operations on the Great Lakes was previously the subject of a paper presented to A.S.A.C. by Steve Selenfriend and Ted Myers at the Pittsburgh meeting in October 1998. However, in commemoration of our meeting here in Burlington, this article will discuss the land operation that came to be referred to as the "St. Albans Raid"—the northernmost engagement of the Civil War.

James A. Seddon (1815–1880), Secretary of War for the Confederacy, had issued orders that authorized “. . . any fair and appropriate enterprises of war against our enemies, . . . and employ such soldiers as may be collected in any hostile operation offering, that may be consistent with the strict observance of neutral obligations incumbent in the British provinces.”

The Hon. Jacob Thompson (1810–1885) of Mississippi, the Hon. Clement Claiborne Clay, Jr. (1816–1882) of Alabama, and James P. Holcombe of Virginia were appointed Special Commissioners of the Confederate States Government in Canada. Thompson had served as Secretary of the Interior under President Buchanan, and Clay had won election to the U.S. Senate in 1854 and 1859. Their task was to aid and abet any of the enterprises that might create havoc in the north. By the end of May 1864, Thompson, as head of the delegation, had established his headquarters in Montreal. However, it was in Toronto where the hotbed of Confederate civilian refugees and military escapees had congregated. The leader of the raid, 21-year-old Bennett H. Young, had been imprisoned at Camp Douglas, but escaped to Canada and enrolled as a divinity stu-



dent in Toronto. Upon contacting the Confederate commissioners in Montreal with a plan to raid northern border towns, he made his way to Richmond via Halifax, Bermuda, and Wilmington to obtain final approval. At Richmond, he was commissioned a provisional First Lieutenant in the Confederate Army and assigned to return to Canada, organize a special company of escapees, and create havoc along the border. By the very act of escaping from Union prison camps, escapees had already proven their daring and abundance of resource. Young returned to Canada and went alone into Vermont where he selected St. Albans for his initial attack.

The prosperous town of St. Albans, some 16 miles from the Canadian border, was a center for the building and repair of railroad locomotive engines and passenger and freight cars, and a hub for the Central Vermont Rail Road. It also had four financial banks—the State Bank, the St. Albans Bank, the First National Bank, and the Franklin County Bank. The raiders targeted only the latter three inasmuch as the State Bank's cash-on-hand operation was considered inconsequential. Additionally, Young did not want to spread his men out too thinly because the force under his command comprised only 21 escaped Confederate soldiers, few of whom were over 24 years of age.

The raiders were as follows:

Bruce, Alamanda Pope	Lackey, Samuel Eugene
Butterworth, Daniel	Moore, Dudley
Collins, Homer Bworn	Price, Lewis
Collins, Thomas Bronsdon	Scott, George
Doty, James Alexander	Spurr, Marcus A.
Gregg, Samuel Simpson	Swager, Charles Moore

Higbie, Charles	Teavis, Squire Turner
Hutchinson, William Huntley	Teavis, William T.
McGorty, Joseph	Wallace, Caleb McDowall
McInnis, John	Young, Bennett Henderson
Moss, John E.	

Young arrived in St. Albans on the 10th of October and checked into one of the hotels as a divinity student. Young spent his days in St. Albans locating and spying out the banks and livery stables. He also made excursions out of town to check out the several possible escape routes back to Canada. Young even had the audacity to pay a call on the Governor's mansion where Governor Smith's wife showed the "nice-mannered" divinity student about the mansion, stables, and grounds. It was Young's intention to burn the Governor's mansion to the ground.

Young's men, dressed in civilian clothing, filtered into St. Albans days before the 18th of October by various routes and checked in at different hotels. The 18th had originally been selected as the day of the raid, but as it turned out, that was the town's market day and Young concluded that there would be too many people present for his men to control, so they decided to wait until the following day.

At 3 o'clock in the afternoon of the 19th, the raiders all assembled in the center of town and told people on the streets they were Confederate soldiers, although none of Young's men were in uniform. One raider, Joseph McGorty, wore a "butternut suit," but this would not have been recognized as a Confederate uniform by most of the citizens living in a town on the Canadian border. Young carried a Confederate uniform in his satchel that he had had made in Montreal, but he did not wear it during the raid. All of the raiders carried satchels and later maintained that they all had worn some component that might have identified themselves as Confederate soldiers, even an item as small as a single military button. However, each was armed with a "belted pair of Navy sixes." Later, authorities at the Canadian town of Stanbridge identified several of the captured revolvers as being of Colt manufactory, but the captives did not tell the Justice of the Peace there where they had gotten their arms.

The raiders were also prepared with 50 four-ounce bottles of Greek fire (naptha, sulfur, and elemental phosphorus), which would burst into flames when the flasks were broken and the chemicals made contact with the air. They ordered all citizens on the streets to gather in the public square where they could be held at bay and more easily controlled. Of greatest concern was a possibility that an alarm might reach the railroad shops and foundry four blocks away, where over 200 workmen might prove to be a force not within their power to control.

The raider's initial orders to proceed to the public square were met with jeers from the populace, thereby inciting the Confederates to begin shooting at men who hesitated

to go. Bennett Young was seen to have shot one citizen in the back, jeweler Collins H. Huntington, who thought Young was merely intoxicated and paid no attention to his orders. Another man, a visiting New Hampshire building contractor named Elinus Morrison, attempted to take refuge in a store, but was shot in the abdomen and died two days later. Ironically, it had been rumored that Morrison was thought to be a southern sympathizer.

Three raiders were assigned to each of the three banks, from which they collected a claimed \$256,000; \$83,000 from the St. Albans Bank, \$75,000 from the Franklin County Bank, and \$98,000 from the First National Bank. Most of the cash was in the form of privately issued bank notes. In their haste, the raiders missed several sacks of gold coin and sheaves of signed but uncut bank notes.

The remaining raiders were occupied in crowd control, using their incendiary grenades in firing hotels and other buildings around the square to create confusion, and in securing horses and equipment for their escape. They would have succeeded in firing the entire town but for the failure of the chemical compounds with which they were armed. They had hoped to leave the town a burning inferno in retaliation for Union destruction in the Shenandoah Valley. Later this was offered in court as a prime motive for the raid, not for the robbery.

St. Albans had a population of about 4,000, which were more cantankerous Yankees than the raiders could contain. Suddenly, citizens began firing at the raiders from their windows, although most of the weapons fired were old, and the firing proved ineffective. However, one of the raiders, Charles Higbie, was wounded as they fled. A generalized skirmish ensued in which other citizens were wounded.

As the raiders departed and began their race for the border, Captain George P. Conger (1st Vermont Cavalry) quickly formed a posse of about 50 citizens and a few soldiers to give chase in buggies and on horseback. They were shortly followed by a second hastily organized posse of about 40 men, many of who were members of the Ransom Guard, a St. Albans militia company.

Thanks to the telegraph, Vermont's Governor (and a St. Albans resident), John Gregory Smith, was immediately notified of the raid at the state capitol in Montpelier and began taking steps to mobilize his State's forces. He quickly requested and received authorization from Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton for access to federal ordnance supplies stored at Vergennes. Smith initially requested enough bridles, saddles, sabers, pistols, carbines, etc., to equip 500 men.

At 7 p.m. that evening in New York City, Major-General John A. Dix, Commander, Department of the East, received Governor Smith's telegraphed plea for help and authorized the Provost-Marshal at Burlington to mount a force to "find the marauders and in case they are found on our side of the

line, pursue them into Canada if necessary and destroy them." Dix reiterated the necessity that "pursuit must be instant and continuous if carried across the line" [border].

At the Governor's direction, the acting Assistant Provost-Marshal-General at Brattleboro, Major William Austine, hastily collected about 100 convalescents and 30 of the Veteran Reserve Corps and, with two officers from Brattleboro General Hospital, departed by express train for St. Albans some 200 miles away, where they arrived at 8 a.m. the following morning. With news that the Confederates had been captured, the detachment of convalescents was sent back, replaced by 60 of the Veteran Reserve Corps under a Capt. Nickerson. By October 22nd, Governor Smith had returned to St. Albans to encourage the organization of cavalry forces at several points on the frontier. These troops were to be kept in readiness against the threat of further incursions, particularly against St. Johns, Vermont.

RETREAT, PURSUIT, AND CAPTURE

Young and his men headed northeast toward Sheldon, Vermont (eight miles from the border) intent on robbing the Missisquoi Bank there. They then set fire to a bridge over Black Creek to delay pursuit, but found the bank was closed that day. At this point the raiders split up, taking three different routes north. Young and his men pushed on and reached the Canadian border, where they changed into "civilian" clothing and dispersed. Some were captured at Stanbridge East, Waterloo, Dunham, and Frelighsburg. About \$88,000 was found on the 14 men who were captured.

The next day Young learned that seven of his men had been arrested and were being held at Philipsburg. He therefore felt compelled to surrender to the Canadian authorities and make a case for the Confederate operation, which they contended broke no Canadian law and was in retaliation for outrages committed in the Shenandoah Valley and elsewhere in the Confederate states. However, before Young could reach the authorities, the pursuing group from St. Albans captured him at a farmhouse where he was resting. They roughed him up and proceeded to haul him back to St. Albans in an open wagon. At the gate of the farmhouse, he seized an opportunity to eject his captors from the wagon and drove north toward Philipsburg. He was soon overtaken and faced another beating when a British Major happened upon the scene and interceded. In his attempt to reason with the Americans, the officer informed them that five others of the raiding party had just been arrested in Philipsburg, and two more at St. Jean-sur-Richelieu, and that all seven were to be sent to St. Albans the next day. Mollified by this, Young's captors agreed that the officer should be allowed to take Young under their escort to Philipsburg. Other raiders were also being held at Frelighsburg.

As it happened, however, Lord Monck, Governor General of Canada, had ordered local troops to assist in arresting the raiders, but there was no arrangement to return any prisoners to St. Albans. On the contrary, Canadian militia had been alerted to prevent recurrence of another posse entering Canada or of angry American vigilantes from coming to seize the captured raiders. Of the 21 raiders, 14 were captured, while 7 escaped through the Maritime Provinces. Only one of the raiders ever managed to return to Richmond and turn over any cash from the banks.

Canadian authorities swiftly moved Young and the other captives further away from the border to St. Jean-sur-Richelieu, where they were all held under most hospitable and friendly circumstances while awaiting their fate in the courts of Canada. Meanwhile, Governor Smith learned that a hasty trial was to be held before the local magistrate on October 22nd. At Smith's request, the Governor General of Canada ordered the legal proceedings removed to Montreal, to be heard by Judge Charles Joseph Coursol. Therefore, after a few days, Young and his comrades were sent to Montreal, where they were again confined under cordial conditions and extended a great deal of sympathy by the citizens of that city.

EXTRADITION DEMANDED

Extradition of the raiders was demanded by the United States Government. It was then realized that a historic trial and legal battle was in the making. The American incursion across the border to apprehend Young and his party aroused great indignation among the Montreal population. The Confederate Commissioners in Canada had no trouble in securing the services of Montreal's leading lawyers. Therefore, a Queen's Counsel was forced to act as attorney for the United States in the Canadian courts.

The U.S. contended that Young and his men were not Confederate soldiers. Their extradition was demanded for the criminal offenses of murder and robbery under the laws of Vermont. They were arraigned on November 7th for an enquiry into the facts of the raid.

When the case was called in Police Court on December 7th, magistrate Coursol conceded that his court did not have proper jurisdiction and the prisoners were discharged. The funds taken in the raid were returned to them. However, at the immediate behest of the U.S. representative, their extradition was demanded for having committed criminal offenses outlined under terms of the Webster—Ashburton Treaty of 1842. The U.S. position was that the prisoners were guilty of robbery, arson, assault, and murder, which were extraditable, and their status as soldiers under orders from the Confederate government to raid upon U.S. territory was disputed. Justice James Smith of the Superior Court issued a warrant to rearrest

the raiders. However, with collusion from the Montreal police chief, the warrants were not immediately served, giving the raiders time to escape. They were subsequently rearrested near Quebec, probably heading to the Maritimes and the next vessel southward bound.

The trial became a celebrated event, forcing an issue between England and the United States. A 30-day delay was granted in order to enable messengers from Richmond to return with certified copies of Young's commission and orders from the Confederate Government and other records to show that the prisoners were Confederate soldiers acting under orders of their government. An appeal was made to President Lincoln to allow a Canadian lawyer passage to Richmond to bring back the necessary documents demanded by the Canadian court. Lincoln refused his consent. Every possible effort was made to prevent any messenger from Richmond from bringing back the papers. However, just before the trial ended, the necessary documents arrived bearing the great seal of the Confederacy. A young Kentucky widow, whose identity was never revealed, smuggled the papers through to Canada. Young and the other defendants were discharged on April 5, 1865, by the court upon the grounds that they were Confederate soldiers entitled to the status of belligerents and duly authorized by their Government to engage in expeditions against the United States.

As regards to such acts of lawlessness or violence, the Queen's Counsel in England opined, "As a matter of fact, raids of this description have been consistently permitted and justified by and on behalf of the United States. On what principle then can they be denied to the so-called Confederate States? It is for the belligerents themselves to deal with these questions; and where authority, either expressed or implied, is given by one belligerent to do the act, it is an act of war for which alone the belligerent is responsible."

The legal battle was not quite over. The Attorney General of Canada held Young and his five men on a warrant from Toronto, which charged a violation of the neutrality laws of Canada in that the raiders fomented the plan on Canadian soil. Young and his men were immediately transferred to Toronto and again incarcerated. After four days of delay, they obtained an examining trial in which the only testimony against Young was provided by Col. Thompson's former secretary and confidant Godfrey J. Hyams. Hyams' unsupported testimony was discredited and Young was released on a \$10,000 bond, which was promptly furnished by Canadian sympathizers. The war ended April 12, 1865. Finding no case could be further made against Young, he was finally released months later.

CLOSING THE BARN DOOR AFTER THE HORSE IS GONE

As a result of the raid, measures were immediately undertaken to strengthen troop dispositions along the north-

eastern border. Frontier cavalry units composed of seven companies from New York State, three from Massachusetts, and two from Vermont (the 1st and 2nd Vermont Cavalry) were assigned to guard their respective areas. For this duty, 1,500 Vermonters were trained in Burlington and occupied new barracks in St. Albans under the command of Bvt. Major General George Jerrison Stannard. However, these forces were subsequently disbanded in the summer of 1865.

Among the arms transferred by the Ordnance Department to Vermont on December 13th, 1864, were 1,200 Cavalry Sabers (at \$6.70 each) and 1,200 Remington Carbines (at \$23.00 each) under voucher No. 23,374. On the same date, 1,200 sets of Horse Equipment (at \$37.85 each) were transferred under voucher No. 23,376, while under voucher No. 23,378, 1,200 Remington Army Pistols (at \$12.00 each) and 120,000 Ballard Carbine Cartridges (at \$24.00 per thousand) were also sent.

In as much as the Ballard carbine cartridge was a special .44 long rimfire (.44-33-250), and the cartridge for the Remington carbine took a .46-caliber short rimfire cartridge, it is believed that the carbines transferred to Vermont were incorrectly recorded by the storekeeper and actually were Ballards. Additionally, the first delivery on the Remington carbine contract did not occur until February 1865. Thus, no Remington Carbines were available to the Ordnance Department on the date the transfer was recorded. The author is grateful to ASAC member Howard M. Madaus for information supplied regarding this transaction.

POSTSCRIPT

The day after Magistrate Coursol's decision, General Dix issued General Order No. 97, which directed that in the event of further depredations by Confederate marauders, U.S. troops were "*if it be necessary, with a view to their capture, to cross the boundary between the United States and Canada . . .*" and "*to pursue them wherever they may take refuge, and if captured, they are **under no circumstances to be surrendered**, but are to be sent to these headquarters (New York City) for trial and punishment by martial law.*" This policy was fraught with the possibility that if Confederates residing in Canada were to create further incursions across the border, and were dragged back across the border, such action might cause the start of another armed conflict between Canadians and Americans. General Dix was forced, by direction of the President, to rescind his "hot pursuit" policy just three days after issuing it.

Clay found that he might be arrested for having authorized Young's raid upon St. Albans and for receiving the "captured" money as an agent of the Confederate States. Rather

than jeopardize the Confederacy's already tenuous status in Canada, it was deemed best that this proceeding should not occur. By then, the Canadian Government was in a panic and willing to extradite Confederates upon reasonable pretext through fear of exposing Canadians to the bitter enmity of the United States. Clay left Canada and turned himself in to U.S. authorities in Georgia, where he was arrested and incarcerated at Fortress Monroe before being eventually released from solitary confinement, one year after the war ended.

During the Civil War, the status of peace along the Canadian-U.S. border was precarious and already roiled by the Trent Affair of 1861, the toll on Union shipping taken by English-built Confederate sea raiders such as the *Alabama* and the *Florida*, and for providing haven for those who launched terrorist actions on the Great Lakes. All these factors fueled talk of annexing Canada. At the end of the war, the Fenian Raids into Canada maintained this dangerous atmosphere and the abrogation in 1866 of the U.S.-Canadian Reciprocity Treaty embittered it. Fear of American annexation and development of a spirit of greater unity among British North Americans lent impetus to the movement toward Canadian federation, which bore fruit in the organization of the Dominion of Canada on July 1, 1867.

Of the \$208,000 proven taken in the raid, only \$75,000 was recovered as a result of the hot pursuit. The Canadian Government ultimately voted \$50,000 to the St. Albans banks as a relief to their losses, although all three banks were eventually forced to close their doors.

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