

## St. Clair River Raids plaque unveiling recalls border clash

-With files from Dr. John C. Carter, a member of the Ontario Historical Society, author, and research associate in the School of History and Classics, University of Tasmania

The peaceful border St. Clair Township now shares with Michigan hasn't always peaceful, and nothing illustrates this more clearly than what has come to be known as the St. Clair River Raids.

The raids were the result of a rebellion mounted by Canadians who objected to living under British rule. The original rebellion in 1837 was put down by British forces but some of the rebels were able to escape over the border into the U.S.

In 1838, the rebels were joined by American sympathizers and began calling themselves the Patriot Army. The group started making a nuisance of itself, mounting occasional raids into Canada at various border locations including at least three along the St. Clair River. The rebels notched up a total of 13 incursions that year while continuing their fight to achieve victory for their cause.

On the Canadian side of the border, the Moore Militia stood ready to meet invaders but didn't have a chance to that until June 28, 1838. The rebels crossed the river at Sombra aboard a sloop owned by Charles Bowerman with the goal of stealing guns, landed at Sombra, and made their way to the commissariat (the British depot where stocks of food and supplies were kept). They didn't find guns, but they ended up with eight barrels of flour, 15 bushels of oats, and a hostage, the commissariat's keeper, Captain McDonald. With another hostage, the local tanner Angus McDonald, in tow, the rebels hurried back to the sloop and were taken north to Palmer, now known as St. Clair, Michigan.

In response to the rebel raid, a deputy marshal from Michigan crossed the river from Palmer to Sutherland's Landing, located between Courtright and Mooretown. He met with the commander of the Moore Militia and assured him that he would do what he could to preserve the peace. He added that an American steam ship, the *General Gratiot*, was on its way from Detroit and would be sent in pursuit of the raiders.

The commander of the Moore Militia was not willing to wait

GIGANTIC AUCTION SALE of the Oakland Furniture Hotel Clair. St. Michigan Sale Lasts 3 Days Beginning Wednesday, Sept. 22nd The Following Articles Must Be Sold During The THREE Days Many More Articles too Numerous to Mentior ALL HIGH GRADE GOODS f the Largest Sales Ever Undertaken there is a Fine Opportunity for Ye GRADE FURNITURE at Y The Assortment is So Complete that Articles for People in All Walks of L REMEMBER the Sale Opens WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 22nd and Lasts 3 Days The Kantzler Newman Co., O. Wardell & Son, of Detroit. Proprietors

Auction sale notice taken from the *Sombra Outlook* newspaper of Sept. 16, 1915.

and he dispatched 17 Moore Militia volunteers as well as seven Chippewa warriors, who pursued the raiders in log canoes.

Meanwhile, the raiders landed in Michigan and fled. The sloop was abandoned in American waters where it, along with its cargo of arms and munitions, became the property of the U.S. government. The goods were returned to their Canadian owners and the hostages were released and returned to the Sombra side unharmed. The *General Gratiot* towed the sloop back to Detroit and the potential for war between England and the U.S. was averted.

The captain of the rebel ship wasn't so lucky. Charles Bowerman was eventually captured, tried for burglary, and sentenced to hang, but his sentence was commuted.

According to letters written to officials, another group of rebels landed at Nugent's Inn about two miles above Baby Point, now known as Port Lambton. It was said that they hoisted a liberty pole and a tri-coloured flag, then awaited further orders. Local observers reported that 300 pirates had landed and that 400 more were expected to cross the river in small boats and canoes. Lt. Governor Sir George Arthur later issued a report amending that number to less than 100.

Ordered to Nugent's Inn, the Moore Militia arrested six men, including Horace Cooley, who had previously been sent to prison for carrying messages between the patriots in Michigan and discontented residents in Upper Canada. He was tried and sentenced to hang, but his sentence was commuted and he became one of 93 English-speaking rebels who were sent to the penal colony of Van Dieman's Land, now known as Tasmania. The men were classified as political prisoners for their involvement in the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1838.

## Plaque dedication planned

The St. Clair River Raids will be commemorated with the unveiling of a plaque at Sombra Park in Sombra village on the St. Clair Parkway on Saturday, June 25 at 11 a.m., rain or shine. Dr. Carter will be on hand to give a brief informal talk and unveil the plaque. The public is welcome to attend this event.

## Oakland Hotel a luxurious landmark

The Oakland Hotel, a luxurious landmark along the St. Clair River across from Courtright from 1881 to 1911, offered every imaginable amenity to guests from both sides of the border. The hotel, acknowledged as one of America's largest wooden structures at the time, was built at a cost of \$150,000 and offered 115 guest rooms. A number of guest cottages were also built on the property and could be rented for the summer season for just \$225. The hotel burned down in 1915. *Courtesy Heritage St. Clair* 



The Oakland Hotel as it looked in its glory days.