

HERITAGE CORNER

SOMBRA RAID OF 1838 COMMEMORATED WITH NEW PLAQUE



Canada's early days were a time of turbulence and dissent as Canadian patriots fought to free the land from British rule. The St. Clair River bore witness to several of the raids the dissenters, living in the U.S. to avoid arrest by the British, made into Canada. The Sombra Raid has been commemorated with the installation of a brass plaque that describes the raid and its outcome.

Dr. John C. Carter, PhD., an authority on this era and author of *Piratical Doings On The St. Clair River*, was on hand at the plaque's dedication on June 25. He spoke briefly about the circumstances and results of the raid, giving the event historical context.

The following article about the Sombra Raid was written by Dr. John C. Carter. Dr. Carter is a Research Associate at the University of Tasmania, and can be contacted at drjohncarter@bell.net.

Remembering the Sombra Raid

By John C. Carter

Between December 1837 and December 1838, at least 14 armed incursions from United States into Canada were recorded. These unsanctioned raids constituted the Patriot War/1838 Upper Canadian Rebellion. After the evacuation of Navy Island in the Niagara River on January 14, 1838, many members of the Patriot Army moved to Cleveland, Ohio, and then subsequently to Detroit, Michigan. There plans were made to launch more

incursions into Canada from the Detroit frontier.

The first occurred at Bois Blanc Island and included the schooner *Anne* incident on January 8/9. Next was the Battle of Fighting Island on February 23-25. Pelee Island was invaded on February 25 and the Battle of Pelee Island took place on March 3. The first episode of the St. Clair Raids happened on June 26, when Patriot forces sailed from Palmer, Michigan and plundered Goderich. This set the stage for the Sombra Raid.

Henry Grant, editor of the [Sandwich] *Western Herald*, vividly described the June 28th attack in an article entitled "Piratical Doings on the River St. Clair." He pointed out that for some time "Pirates-Rebels" were "...hatching mischief in Michigan," and added that "...scoundrels were skulking about the villages of Newport [now Marine City], Palmer and Port Huron." Their goal was to effect a landing on the Canadian side of the St. Clair River. In the June 30 edition of the *Cleveland Herald*, reiterated this threat; "Rumors of refugee movements, in the vicinity of St. Clair, have been current for some days, and strengthens the probability of this fresh outbreak."

The actual incursion began on the morning of June 28, 1838. A sloop belonging to Charles (Bourman) Bowerman landed an armed party at Sombra near the general store kept by local Justice of the Peace, Claude (Govin) Gouin. Stock was plundered and the raiders proceeded to the commissariat under the charge of Captain McDonald. There they stole eight barrels of flour and fifteen bushels of oats. Captain McDonald and Port Lambton tanner Angus McDonald were taken prisoner. With the booty and captives stowed aboard the sloop, the Patriots sailed back to

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the American side. Because of calm winds and sailing against the current, the invaders couldn't return to their point of departure. They were forced to ground and then abandon the vessel south of Palmer, Michigan at Reemer's Point.

United States Deputy Marshal Cornwall had crossed the river from Palmer to Sutherland's Landing [now between the present day Courtright and Mooretown]. Cornwall's mission was to assure commander of the Moore Militia, Lieutenant-Colonel William Wright, that he would do all he could to preserve the peace and to maintain neutrality. Cornwall revealed to Canadian authorities that the American steamer *Gratiot* would soon arrive from Detroit. It would be pressed into service to capture the rogue schooner and take the invaders into custody. In the meantime, 17 Moore Militia volunteers and 7 Chippewa warriors, likely from the Thames and Bear Creek Reserves, procured 4 log canoes and pursued the rebels. Shots were fired and the rebels ran their vessel aground. An international crisis was diffused by action taken by American Captain John Clarke, and the potential of war between United States and England was narrowly averted.

Period first-hand accounts of the raid were brief but to the point. Writing from the St. Clair Mission, interpreter and assistant missionary George Henry (Maungwudas), noted that a few Indians "...drove the unfortunate fellows [Patriots] over [the border] again, and chased them to the other side [of the St. Clair River]." Captain Richard Emeric Vidal simply said of the day in his written diary account for June 28; "The whole day occupied fortifying the village [Port Sarnia]. The magistrates called out the militia...Mr. Gouin's Store plundered by the patriots." In his July 1 diary entry, Vidal recorded that; "The *Gratoit* (sic) called and too down 8 prisoners [to Detroit]." The *Detroit Daily Advertiser* of July 3, noted the fate of Patriots captured by American authorities; "We learn that of the prisoners brought down Sunday night from St. Clair, and examined yesterday by Judge [Ross] Wilkins, that two were bound over to appear at the next Session of the District Court, and the other four were released." The official position of the American federal government was spelled out in an article published in the July 3 edition of the [Sandwich] *Western Herald*; "President [Martin] Van Buren, evinces a firm determination to preserve our neutral relations with Great Britain. He has issued instructions to all subordinate officers, demanding of them vigilance and energy in the preservation of peace, and the suppression of violence on the frontier."

The July 3 issue of the *Detroit Daily Advertiser* provided a local response and gave a positive prediction for the future; "But so confident are we that our authorities will be faithful in the discharge of their duties, so decidedly is public opinion arrayed against them [the Patriots], that we do not apprehend any serious difficulties in this quarter." A re-printed article in the July 7 edition of the [Philadelphia] *Inquirer & Daily Courier* published additional information, and proffered another prediction about the future; "We are advised that most, if not all, the crew [of the schooner] were Canadians. The promptness on the part of officers and citizens of St. Clair, will, it is confidently hoped, crush another of those incipient piratical expeditions which have from time to time annoyed our frontier."

The Sombra Raid would be followed by an incident at Nugent's Landing on June 27, and action at Bear Creek at Chenal Ecarte on June 28. All these incursions were unsuccessful. The St. Clair

area returned to relative calm and normal conditions prevailed after the excitement of June 1838. Interaction and harmony between international neighbours resumed. American General Hugh Brady's July 17 letter to his superior General Roger Jones, described the prevailing mood; "As this section of the country is again restored to quietness, I have discharged the Steamboat which for some days has been running on the St. Clair river under the command of Capt. Jamison...The conviction that military aid was at hand tended to encourage the deputy marshals in the performance of their duties and, gave palpable evidence to the desperate men on this border, whose wish it was to embroil our Government in a war with Great Britain, that the Government of the United States was determined at all hazards to maintain the supremacy of the laws." British authorities agreed. Later in the year, Governor-General Sir John Colborne wrote to Lieutenant-Governor Sir George Arthur expressing an optimistic tone for what was expected in the future; "With respect to the further schemes of the Brigands and their associates and supporters in United States, it is probable that their failures and inability to make aggressions with any prospect of success will leave the Province quiet."

Peace had come not only to the St. Clair Region but to the rest of Upper Canada!

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Perfect ending to volunteer dinner



The Moore Museum volunteer dinner on July 12 treated the dedicated, hard-working museum volunteers to a sumptuous meal followed by about 15 different kinds of dessert. Keeping the dessert table stocked proved quite a challenge, but the kitchen volunteers managed to keep up with demand. Volunteer kitchen staffer Melissa Westbrook is shown here restocking servings of carrot cake that seem to have disappeared. *Photo by Bonnie Stevenson*

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Letter to the Editor - April 29, 1857

-With files from Heritage St. Clair

Anyone who lives or travels within the borders of St. Clair Township will find the following Letter to the Editor fascinating. It was written by a traveler from Swanton, Vermont and published in the April 29, 1857 issue of the Christian Guardian. (The archaic turn of phrase and composition of the letter has not been altered from the original.)

Mr. Editor - Just another word about Western Canada. I was struck in passing down the river St. Clair from Port Sarnia, with the improvement that had been made on the British side in the course of a few months; but I could see in my imagination the doings of future years, on a scale far exceeding anything hitherto accomplished in these parts.

I put into Newport, and thence by ferry, crossed over to Sombra. Here I found the nucleus of a town, a cluster of houses, several stores of various kinds, a post office, a respectable hotel, a blacksmith's shop, etc., and last, but not least, a school house and a "House of Prayer". The prospect from this place is quite picturesque, with a thriving town of Newport exactly opposite, and all sorts of craft enlivening the limpid waters of the soft-flowing river.

I went down one of the concessions right into the midst of a dense forest, O, the solemn stillness of a woody solitude in its primitive and unbroken massive-

ness. Never yet was I in a more sequestered position for suggestive meditation, than when walking down this concession, walled in on either hand by the serried ranks of gigantic trees, planted by Gods own hands in the wild profusion of his infinite prolificness. For miles I could hear the scream of the steamboats plying upon the river St. Clair, which was nearly the only sound to be heard, except the whistle of the birds - little songsters that seem to have it all their own way.

After a walk of six or eight miles, I came to a place of the name of Wilkesport, where I found quite a settlement, another log school house, a post office, a store, and even vessels on the creek. The creek, I believe, is called Bear Creek, a somewhat ominous name, but suitable to the sombre character of the name of the township itself.

*But *maugre name, or no name, this part of the country is destined to become a flourishing farming district. The superstratum of the soil is formed of an alluvial deposit, doubtless from the lakes at some far-gone period; the substrata, of a gray glutinous marl, and clay of the first quality for mixing with the upper mould, or for building purposes, when formed into brick. If the projected canal from St. Clair to Lake Erie, should ever become a reality, villages and flourishing towns, and it may be, a city like Detroit itself, will grace the neighbourhood of this now wild but strong-textured country of heavy lands...*

*Yours, very truly,
Swanton, Vermont, April 22nd, 1857 W.H.B.*

*Footnote: Maugre - archaic word meaning "to defy" or "to exhibit ill will" - *The Complete Oxford Dictionary*

Canada Post rural delivery changed the face of rural Canada

The recent threat of a postal strike prompted Heritage St. Clair to look back on the important role rural delivery played in the growth of St. Clair Township. This article was contributed by Heritage St. Clair.

It's been over 100 years since Canada Post introduced rural mail delivery across the nation. The effects of this new policy ultimately changed the face of rural Canada, as evidenced in the townships of Moore and Sombra. Dotted across both townships were small hamlets which were found at the intersection of concessions and side roads. These hamlets were the site of a post office, a school, a church, and a general store.

The beginning of the end of these hamlets was announced in 1911 by Prime Minister Robert Borden, who pledged to provide rural mail delivery. This was achieved in 1914. It eventually led to the closing of small post offices across the nation.

Letter-writing was an important communication skill at that time. People wrote to have contact with the world beyond their small communities and access to a nearby postal outlet was important to their daily lives. Mail order, the old-time version of

Amazon, allowed them to bring in goods from fabric for dresses to machinery and tools to work the land without having to make lengthy journeys to larger centres of commerce. The convenience of rural delivery opened many new doors for the farming community.

The hamlets were still viable through the Great Depression and WWII because of the other important services they offered to local residents. But as cheap, dependable vehicles, central schools, and shopping malls became commonplace after WWII, the hamlets of Moore and Sombra, as well as small villages across the country, were no longer viable as a rural focal point.

Today, most of these hamlets exist only as names and memories, slowly fading into the history and lore of days gone by. Communities such as Avonry, Bickford, Henry's Corners and Charlemont in the former Sombra Township, and Ladysmith, Kimball, Cromar, and Sykeston in the former Moore Township, are long gone, while Beecher (Becher) and Lucasville (also known as Beehive or Cole's Corners) are now just crossroads.

EmergenciesLambton website helps you prepare for the worst

Lambton County has launched a new website to provide information on how to be prepared for a wide variety of emergency situations. EmergenciesLambton.ca covers topics like emergency preparedness and hazards in the Lambton County community.

The website outlines the Emergency Response plans of

Lambton County and various local municipalities. It also features notable historic local emergencies such as the 1902 Wainstead train wreck, the 1913 Great Lakes White Hurricane, the 1953 Sarnia and 1983 Reece's Corners tornadoes, and the 2010 snowsquall emergency, locally known as "Snowmageddon".

Emergencies happen - be prepared!