
The Capture of Wolfred Nelson In the Rebellion of 1837

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Dr. Wolfred Nelson was born July 10, 1792 in Montreal. His ancestors had come from England and settled early in Sorel with the Loyalists. His father was the son of an officer of the Royal Navy and a warden of the Anglican Church in Sorel. His mother was the daughter of Mr. G. Dies, a Loyalist family from New York State who lost all their property in the American Revolution.

At an early age, Wolfred Nelson was apprenticed to Dr. Carter of the Army medical staff. There were very few medical men in Canada at that time and he was soon practising medicine at the military hospital in Sorel. He was licensed as a physician in January 1811, and established a flourishing practice at St. Denis, on the Richelieu River between Sorel and Chambly. As a family doctor he must have been well acquainted with the people of that district and their problems. In the War of 1812 he served as a surgeon in a militia battalion of his district.

He had experience with politics and politicians when he was elected in 1827 to represent the district of Sorel (then called the Borough of William Henry) in the House of Assembly at Quebec. He was also a justice of the peace and commissioner of the court for small cases.

The Constitutional Act of 1791 created the two provinces of Upper Canada and Lower Canada (now Ontario and Quebec). This Act established in each province a Legislative Assembly where the elected representatives were able to discuss the concerns of the people in a democratic manner. This was the

first experience of French Canadians with the idea of representative institutions and many were suspicious of the British principle of self-government. However, the full advantage was delayed because the Act also provided an appointed Legislative Council which could work with the governor, or influence him, to obstruct many important reforms. The members of the Executive Council, who advised the governor, were appointed from the senior officials. This made it possible for those in power to have undue control in government policy, in many cases for the benefit of the elite.

It was inevitable that the discontent and justifiable desire for change would result in a struggle outside of the Assembly when the process of reform in the Assembly was blocked. In Upper Canada the best known of the reformers was William Lyon Mackenzie who led an armed rebellion in December 1837 against the Governor and the ruling officials. The majority of the population did not support the use of force to right their grievances and the rebellion was put down very quickly.

In Lower Canada the struggle for democratic Responsible Government by political reform was supported by people in both the French-speaking community and the English-speaking community. In the Eastern Townships the American pioneer settlers were especially sensitive to their lack of any local municipal institutions.

Louis-Joseph Papineau became the most prominent of those who publicized the justifiable grievances of the French inhabitants of Lower Canada. During the War of 1812 he fought for Canada as a captain in the militia. Famous as an orator, he was chosen Speaker of the Legislative Assembly in 1815. He made a public speech in 1820 in which he praised the situation of the French in Canada under British rule compared with the misery of their condition during the French regime. He

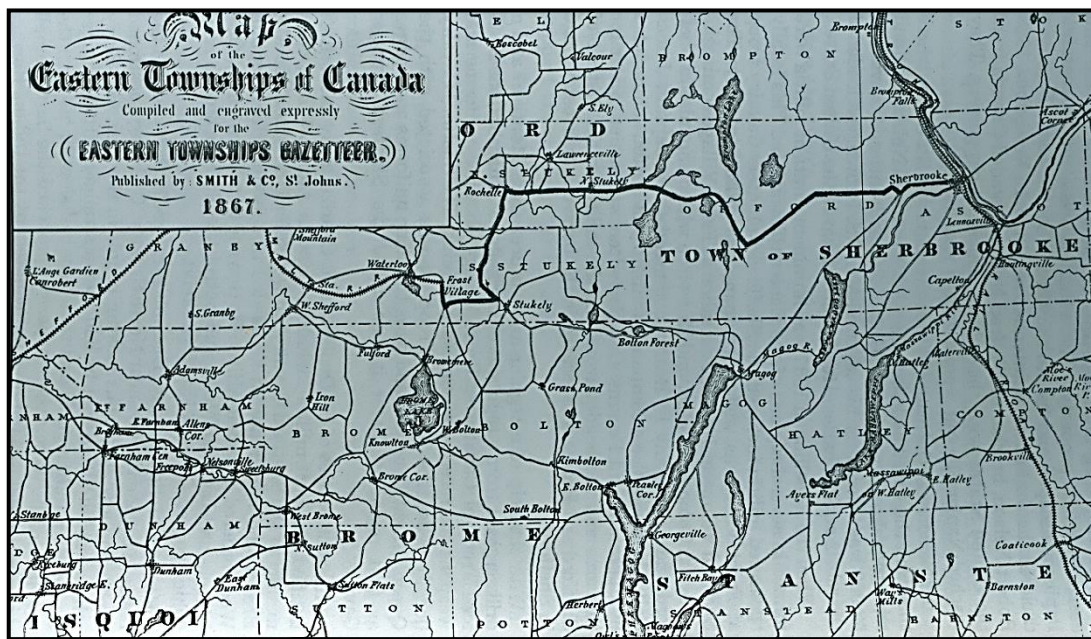
emphasized the advantages of much better legal security such as trial by jury, of personal freedom and equality, of religious toleration and the right to express public opinion through their representatives in the Assembly.

The Quebec Act of 1774 had guaranteed that French Canadians would keep their religion, their language and culture and the old French civil law, with the addition of English criminal law. From the beginning, the French inhabitants had a strong majority in the Assembly at Quebec and both English and French were official languages in the Assembly. Most districts of the Eastern Townships did not have adequate representation in the Assembly before the 1830's.

and intruders upon the French descendants who claim exclusive right to this country". Some French speakers talked of becoming independent from the British and of replacing the government by people of the "French-Canadian nation". The fight became so bitter that moderate reformers such as Mr. John Neilson, editor of the Quebec Gazette, would no longer support the cause of the French.

Mr. Papineau became more and more extreme in his opposition. The Rebellion of 1837 in Lower Canada began when small groups of residents organized and marched in the streets in Montreal and several towns in the surrounding region.

In November 1837, groups of insurgents, "the patriotes", gathered in St. Denis and St.



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The French inhabitants became more sensitive to the slowness of reform than the other settlers and over a period of time they came to regard the situation as a struggle between the French and the English. The French leaders described the English population as "strangers

Charles on the Richelieu River. By this time Dr. Wolfred Nelson, because of his professional and political connections, possessed great influence and authority in the territory bordering the Richelieu River. The local people appealed to him on important political questions. At a local meeting of the rebels he was

chosen as chairman. He supported the cause of the rebels and blamed the government officials for "actions which drive people to desperation".

Dr. Nelson went even further, he incited the people to open rebellion. Apparently it was his advice which finally persuaded Papineau that

the time had come “to melt our spoons into bullets”. As a result, army troops and volunteer militia were sent to arrest Dr. Nelson, Mr. Thomas S. Brown, Dr. O’Callaghan of the newspaper “the Vindicator”, Mr. Papineau and other leaders for treason. The rebels defended their leaders, trying to prevent their arrest. The armed battles at St. Denis, St. Charles and two weeks later St. Eustache and St. Benoit, north of Montreal, did not last very long but there was considerable loss of life and destruction of property. The rebellion was not successful. Papineau escaped and fled to the United States. Later Papineau declared that he had never intended rebellion. In November, 1838 Robert Nelson, brother of Wolfred Nelson, invaded Canada from the United States with the help of American supporters. They reached Napierville but were defeated near Lacolle.

Dr. Nelson was the leader of the rebel forces at St. Denis, where they won the first battle but then left the town. Nelson fled and tried to make his way to the United States frontier. A reward of \$2,000 was offered for his capture. Mr. T.S. Brown was leader of the rebels at St. Charles. He also fled towards the United States.

When the Rebellion of 1837 was imminent, units of militia were formed in several regions of the Eastern Townships. This locally sponsored militia included the Shefford Volunteer Cavalry troop at Frost Village as well as companies of militia infantry: The Shefford Volunteer Infantry battalion at Frost Village commanded by Lt. Colonel Paul Holland Knowlton with companies in Shefford and a company in Brome commanded by Captain James Ball. There was also a company of infantry in Pottton commanded by Captain David Perkins. Col. Knowlton was senior officer for this area and the headquarters for the militia in the district of Shefford and Brome was located in the barracks at Frost Village in Shefford.

With the help of a regular army officer from Montreal and a drill sergeant from a regiment of Dragoons at Chambly, the Shefford Troop of Cavalry at Frost Village obtained uniforms and weapons and received appropriate training. The Shefford Cavalry (locally called the Shefford Troopers) was associated with the Queen's Light Dragoons and wore the same uniforms and badges as that regiment. Later it was called the Shefford Frontier Cavalry.

After the battles of St. Denis and St. Charles, army authorities notified the local militia including Captain Alonzo Wood, commander of the Shefford Cavalry, to watch for Dr. Nelson and Mr. Brown who were reported as headed in this direction. Captain Wood ordered Sergeant Milton R. Bowker to take two men, Otis Lincoln and Lorenzo Wells, and patrol the old Sherbrooke road (which passed through North Stukely).

Early the following day, December 12, 1837, they came to the house of Stephen Berry, near North Stukely. On being questioned concerning any suspicious looking people in the area, Mr. Berry reluctantly admitted that he had seen a stranger with a younger man and an Indian guide and that they had slept in his barn the previous night. When the troopers approached the barn a small dog ran out and was followed immediately by the Indian. Bowker and Wells entered the barn while Lincoln looked after the horses. From the description which had been given to them, they recognized the man in the barn as Dr. Nelson. When the troopers rushed in, he was holding a small bottle which they immediately took away from him. Later it was determined that the bottle contained poison but he did not have time to drink it.

Dr. Nelson surrendered without resistance. Apparently he did not have any weapons. With the help of Sergeant Mark Whitcomb and his detachment who were also searching, the prisoners were taken to Osgood's Hotel at Frost Village in Shefford and detained there

awaiting further orders. His captors said that he acted like a gentleman and gave the troopers no trouble whatever. Dr. Nelson later acknowledged publicly that he was treated with respect and kindness. This is not surprising considering that many people in the Eastern Townships were sympathetic to the aims of the rebellion. Dr. Nelson had passed through Farnham and the Granby area with the help of the native guide. They had been in the woods for nine days. After being detained for three days, he was escorted by the Shefford Volunteer Infantry to Frelighsburg. A detachment of the Missisquoi Volunteer Infantry took him to Montreal where he was placed in prison.

A special committee of the Executive Council at Quebec examined the various applications claiming the reward for the apprehension of Wolfred Nelson. The committee recommended that the amount of the reward be divided equally among eighteen people, each of whom had some part in the capture and custody of Dr. Nelson in the Eastern Townships.

After the Rebellion, Dr. Nelson was kept in prison for seven months and then exiled to Bermuda. He left there in November, 1838 for the United States where he practised as a physician until August, 1842, when he returned to Montreal. In 1844 he was elected to Parliament for Richelieu County. He became inspector of prisons in 1851 and chairman of the Board of Prison Inspectors in 1859. He served as president of the medical board and college of surgeons. He was also chairman of the board of health during the cholera epidemic of that period. He was twice elected mayor of Montreal. He died in 1863.

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