
The Troubles of 1837 and 1838
By Edgar C. Barnett (b.1865 – d.1942)

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The troubles of 1837 and 1838 found an echo in Potton, and possibly there was as much excitement in this vicinity as at any point along the border.

It must be remembered that Potton, while having been chartered and granted to Loyalists, was to a large extent settled by American subjects, who for various reasons, many of which were best buried in oblivion, had, at the close of the Revolutionary War flocked into the "Townships," as they were then called; and who were known to the government and to the grantees as "squatters."

The pioneer generation, at this time, now fast thinning out, were being replaced by their sons and daughters who had mostly been born in the land they had left and therefore partook largely of the sympathies and learnings of their parents, descendants of schemers who at the close of the Revolution had played Vermont against both Canada and the American Congress, eventually dropping on the side of the fence that fate had ordained. What wonder then that many on both sides of the line should jump at the chance to make Canada what Franklin, Allen and others had

failed to do – American territory. But the aims of fate are not to be thwarted.

As Hopkins in his “Story of the Dominion” has aptly termed them, “leaders of brilliant irresponsibility,” – MacKenzie in Upper Canada and Papineau in Quebec; as dissimilar in character as in type and in aims, to one thing alone they had jointly pinned their faith, the obsession that fate had ordained them to be knights errant, and the ruling forces was the castle to be demolished. Up and down the provinces, each in his own sphere, rushed these champions of the oppressed, the habitant in his innocence, the ne’er-do-well in his glory; the venerated American in ecstasy in anticipation of the consummation of the hopes of his fathers; one and all became “Sons of Liberty.” What wonder then that kindred spirits to the South waxed enthusiastic over the “just” cause of the “Patriots.” What wonder that a provisional government was formed at Franklin, Vermont, with Wolfred Nelson as President – though the delineation of his “Republic” is somewhat vague.

And all this while Potton, lying just across an imaginary line from this sore centre and refuge of voluntary exiles and sympathizers to the number of some two thousand, was spending sleepless nights, terrorized not so much at what appeared by day as to what the cover of darkness might carry. Her citizens in the big majority were loyal. Long before procrastinating authority had turned to them, either to assist or for assistance, around the township troop of the 2nd Battalion of the Townships – whose rallying point since its organization in the early days of the town’s history by Col. Henry Ruiter, had been at West Potton and where still resides the Battalion’s Ensign David Heath, with the troop under the command of Thomas Gilman with Stephen C. Boswell as lieutenant and non commissioned officers Francis Peabody, Levi A. Perkins, Henry Woods, David Barnett and some twenty

odd of the best riders in the valley – gathered every able bodied male citizen forming what was known as the “Potton Guard.” The barracks, as the storage place for the arms and supplies was termed, was simply a part of the old homestead of the late Dr. Gilman, then occupied by his sons and widow, who had recently married Capt. Moses Elkins.

Alarms had been of daily occurrence. Despatch bearers had been shot at. Courier David Barnett, while carrying despatches near the home of Bradbury Green, had had his hat perforated. The nerves of the most level headed had become ragged. “Crazy” Ralph Elkins brings in word that Nelson’s troops are coming in by the way of Coventry, Vt. Riders madly cover the by-paths of the town warning the “Guard”, who gather on foot and horseback at Coit’s Corners to barricade the made road leading into town from the South. Here, at the time, was located the store of Levi Coit. Here also the second schoolhouse built in town, and from its size and central location, used for a place of worship. Not far from the Corner also stood the building used as a distillery by the Heath boys, sons of Jonathan Heath, Jun., and in which was the still with its coils of lead, or Britannia. Madly the gathering “Guard” tear down the rail fences in the vicinity bringing them in to bar the road where the bridge crosses the river, then called the “Branch”. They have powder for their muskets, but they are short of bullets. And it turns out only a rumour, a flash in the pan. A few days later, as some of the people gather at the schoolhouse to worship, they find a small cask of powder buried in the ashes of the stove. Such were the methods of the “Patriots.”

But rumours are getting them nowhere, and threats are causing the “Sons of Liberty” to be a laughing stock. Something must be done to rouse the waning courage of the exiles whose home in Potton has become too warm for

them. The evening of February 27, 1838, must go down in history in red letters.

A party of, some say fourteen, others thirteen, (anyhow it was the fatal number who returned to their base that night), mostly American citizens, but five, as far as can be learned, of Canadian birth, though such men as Dr. Levi Moore had long been residents of Potton, gathered at North Troy, Vt. and decided to assume the delicate duty of disarming the "Potton Guard." Now there has been much assumed and written about the object and outcome of this raid that were well for once and all to set at rest. It has been stated that the party set out to raid the "barracks" and capture the arms. If so they did not know that there were no arms there to capture, as they had all been distributed or hidden, and disarming could be carried out only individually. Their actions that night seem to indicate that they were aware of this fact and that it was the larger undertaking they had assumed. None but muddled brains or descendants of those who had made of "The New Hampshire Grants" a state, would for one moment have considered such a project, and it was a combination of the two.

The party left North Troy in a double pung, or sleigh, heading northeast along the main highway into Potton. Ferrand Livingstone, known as Deacon Livingstone, lived less than a fourth of a mile from the international boundary. He did not belong to the guard. If he had arms, they were his own. His wife was a daughter of Moses Elkins and her uncle Salmon Elkins lived next place to the west on the plain. With Elkins lived his sons Ralph and Harvey and Harvey's son Hector, nearing manhood. The party halted at Livingstone's. If they got any arms that night, they would have got them there, but they would have been his own. Their delay at this place shows their fuddled conditions, for it gave Livingstone time to send one of the boys ahead to warn the

house on the hill. But close in his wake came the raiders.

Salmon Elkins lived in a house of rather small dimension, but two storeys in height. A doorway entered the building, in the southwest corner and, as you entered the door, a stairway ascended to the upper floor at the left hand and flush against the west wall, ending in a landing in the corner of the upper floor. This stairway was very narrow, not more than two and one-half feet, the landing at its head being of the same width and not much more in depth, and at most unable to hold more than two persons. From the foot of the stairs it was an absolute impossibility to see further than the landing as you were facing the north wall. This description to disprove the contention of some that they pointed guns at the inmates to make them give up their arms. Stories of bullies and bluffs, for they saw no one that night. The Elkins had short time for preparation. Salmon was an invalid, as to some extent was his wife, but all as quickly and quietly as possible retired to the upper rooms. The three able men were each armed. Their guns were the old regulation flintlock musket, carrying an ounce ball and discharged from a spark from the flint dropped in a little protected pan filled with powder and connected by a minute hole in the breach to the charge inside the barrel.

Two of the men took their stand on the landing at the head of the stairs; which two they never saw fit to disclose, and the lights were extinguished. In came the raiders. Finding the lower rooms empty and in darkness they did not quite like to bolt that narrow stairway without knowing what they were up against. So calling up the stairs the order to produce their guns, they were shocked to receive the reply, "Come and get them."

James Manson, one of the exiles, also one of their leaders, to prove his right to be

considered as such, or in a spirit of bravado, says "Come on," and stepped upon the stairs. There was a click and a momentary light pierced the darkness. James Manson stepped back for he had seen death face to face and been spared. The flash in the pan had failed to connect. Right well he what he had seen and it had been enough for him. His remark, "They have blown out the light," was his resignation as leader.

Among the party were at least two of the Hadlocks from Jay, Vt., Hazen and Ithamore, dare-devils and tough. Hazen saw Manson, as he thought, funk and with a curse cries, "Come on, I'm not afraid," and sprang for that narrow landing. Again an instantaneous flash hit the landing, ending in a volume of flame and smoke that shook the building and Hadlock reeled back in the arms of his companions with a muttered "They've killed me." That ounce of lead had passed clean through his body and buried itself deeply in the adjoining wall. That flash had not failed. The temper of the defendants had been proved.

The crowd was sobered. A cry went up for revenge. A council was held. That dark stain still remained where none now cared to lead. A proposal was made to burn the building. But thanks to family connections, where civilization had slipped its bounds, and to Dr. Levi Moore whose wife was a niece and cousin of the family, the fiendish project was given up. Inclement weather and coming day precluding a siege, they decided to retire and returned to their base at North Troy.

As an illustration of the character of these men – their scant respect for the dead. For their companion even. On their return to the saloon from whence they had started, they entered in a body and began to refresh themselves. The proprietor noticing that Hadlock was not among them inquired where he was. "Oh, he's holding the horses," they replied. He proposed

that they take him out something but they said, "Oh, he don't want anything." With a curse he replied, "Well I guess he will have something," and pouring a stiff drink carried it to him to be horrified at finding him propped upright in the sleigh the lines about his neck and frozen stiff.

So much for that February night, the "Sons of Liberty," the "Patriots" and their sympathizers across the border. But their proximity to the border made the position of this Elkins family untenable and they soon removed to the County of Shefford, where their descendants have ever been loyal and worthy citizens.

For a number of years after the failure of these irresponsible agitators there were heart burnings between these exiles, who were exiles still, and their neighbours who had been loyal, but so far as Potton was concerned the last depredation took place on the night of June 3, 1840, when some of these misguided men succeeded in burning the whole establishment at the old Gilman place, eventually getting the "barracks" though there was nothing to get, but at the same time nearly succeeding in burning the whole family.

At the importunities of a more than generous government the exiles mostly returned and were pampered at the expense of those who had been loyal. And the perusal of the petitions for annexation to the United States in circulation at about this time will disclose the resentment that existed among those who had been the salvation of the country in its hour of peril.

My authorities were Mrs. Heath, wife of Ensign Heath; *Mrs. Dr. Moore*; my grandfather, David Barnett; Chase Gilman; Annexation Petitions in the museum at Knowlton and the old Elkins house which burned in 1884, and which I have seen many times, also the hole where the ball that pierced Hadlock had been dug out with a

knife. I was also there when it burned and it was occupied by one Jim Beach, a lumberman and contractor, at the time.

(Signed)
Edgar C. Barnett.

Highwater, P.Q., 1926

Editor's note:

When researching the Edgar Barnett papers at the Brome County Historical Society in Knowlton, I came across his handwritten notes on Potton, Books I and II, which intrigued me. I thought these might be of interest in the present context.

In Book II, Barnett had recorded the names of the Rebel party who attacked Salmon Elkins home in February 1838 as follows:

Capt. Ira A Bailey	Troy
Hayden Hadlock	Jay
Ithamor Hadlock	Jay
James Manson	Potton
Jonathan Elkins	Troy
Daniel Miltimore	Jay
Wm. Perkins	Potton
Jonathan Bailey	
Dr. Levi C. Moore	Potton

Peter Gardyne, scout, brought Elkins the news of approach from Dea. Livingstone's whose premises were first searched.

(The list totals 9 – raiding party was supposed to have included 13 – 14)

Mr. Barnett quotes one of his sources as being "Mrs. Dr. Moore" (opposite)

His notebook contains interesting, although somewhat historically inconsequential reminiscences of this lady, Louisa Elkins, born in

1817, daughter of M.L. Elkins, one of Potton's first settlers.

Of particular interest, given the present context, are notes of his interview of Mrs. Dr. Moore pertaining to her recollection of the "Troubles of 1838-1839" which Mr. Barnett recorded.

His interview seemed wide-ranging for it included biographical notes of Louisa Elkins Moore as well as childhood memories of being lost and spending the night in the woods (1825), and an adventure in 1826, with a horse-drawn carriage. His notes end with the incidental information after the fateful event on February 27, 1838 in which her husband, Dr. Levi Moore, was involved.

"Louisa Elkins daughter of M.L. Elkins was born in 1817. Her father lived on what is called "Elkins Hill", the farm now owned by A. A. Jenkins.

As a tot of six years, she attended school at the Branch, later Coit's Corners and still later Meigs' Corners. The old schoolhouse stood near S.L. Elkins' barn, the one nearest to the bridge and on the same side of the road which led from Col. Ruiter's at West Potton over Elkins' Hill down past the Branch thence through to North Troy.

One night the summer she was eight years old, while she was searching for the cows which had strayed from the pasture which was merely a tract of woodland enclosed by trees which had been fallen to form a sort of break or "slash" fence, as it was called, she became bewildered as night came on and losing her bearings, wandered 'til exhausted and lying down beside her dog, went to sleep.

Before going to sleep she notices three lights winking in the valley to the west. In the morning as soon as it was light enough to see

she set out to try and reach the point where she had seen the nearest and to her surprise found she had gone to sleep on the very brink of a ledge which has an almost perpendicular drop of upwards of thirty feet. After making a detour to get round the precipice, she finally made her way down into the valley and came to the home of Gardner Gordon, near where Mr. A.E. Aiken lives.

The old man gazed at her for a moment and then, in his Scotch drawl says "Why, "Louisa" child, where did ye come from?" "The whole neighbourhood are all out looking for ye!"

Only once during her wandering did she feel frightened and that was when she thought she thought she saw a bear and cub which her inquisitive spirit soon proved to be nothing but the roots of an upturned tree.

Another of her experiences took place, the next summer 1826 as she was returning on horseback from the mill at North Troy about a mile east of the village. A horse hitched to something having wheels and in which rode a man came up behind her – all more than equine nature could understand! Away went her steed leaving her grist and herself by the wayside. The man in the wonderful conveyance soon came up and it proved to be Elder Ide, an errant Baptist preacher, who gathered up herself and the grist, not much worse for their first experience with a buggy.

When she was 17, (1835) she was married by Jas. Reid of Frelighsburg, then Slab City, to Levi Moore of Parsons ville, Me., thirty miles from Saco, a young physician who had come to Potton about a year and a half previous, from Georgeville where he had practised a couple of years, and who had taken up his abode at Manson's Mills. Soon after their marriage Moore purchased the farm now owned by B.A. Young where they lived for two or three years, when he sold out to David

Perkins and moved down to the property now owned by Chase Gilman and which then belonged to his grandmother, widow of Dr. Wm C. Gilman (1777-1832) and also the widow of Moses Elkins, grandmother to Mrs. Moore. (Susan Heath (1738-1863).

Political feeling was running rife about the time (1837-38), and Dr. Moore, who had probably not lived in Canada long enough to become a very loyal subject, took a prominent part in the Rebel cause.

On the evening of February 27, 1838 he left home quietly, leaving his wife and infant son and it was near noon the next day e'er he returned. His wife could see something had happened out of common though the Doctor offered no explanation, but in passing his wife, she noted the fingers of his buckskin gloves which protruded from his jacket was covered with blood, and says to him "Why Levi, where have you been and what have you been doing?" and drew his attention to the glove. He then told her of the affair at the house of Harvey Elkins the night before when about a dozen reckless spirits with himself (some of them rebels and the rest sympathizers from Troy and Jay) had undertaken to capture the guns and ammunition left at different fronts along each road leading across the line. In a double sled the party left Troy and at once proceeded to the home of Harvey Elkins situated on the plain midway between Troy and Mansonville and attempted to capture the arms and ammunition and left here for the use of the local militia; and had one of their number, Hazen Hadlock, shot dead on the spot.

(After his return home) The Doctor remained in hiding all evening as he suspected he was being watched and then made his way to the line to Troy where his wife and child later joined him, and where he remained for the rest of his life, though after quiet was restored

and bitter feelings had subsided, much of his practice was again on the Canadian side of the line."

Note:

This article refers place names no longer used however we do know that Moore lived: in the house once occupied by Dr. William C. Gilman, which was located in the vicinity of 2733 route de la Vallée Missisquoi, not far from Highwater.

(Dr. William Coffin Gilman, b. 1777 – d. 1832, was a doctor in Potton from 1802; his wife, Susan Heath, b. 1783 - d. 1863. Descendants of this family live in Potton).

It is believed that the Gardyne and Livingstone families lived in the area of the Pont de la Frontiere covered bridge, then called Province Hill. Barnett mentions "the Branch" river – now called the Missisquoi, (Highwater); and Coit's Corner – near the intersection of Rte 243 south and Montée René-Rémillard.

He refers to "*the road which led from Col. Ruiter's at West Potton over Elkins' Hill down past the Branch thence through to North Troy*", now but a track leading over private property to Miltimore Road and the Chapel cemetery.

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Nous remercions la Société Historique de Brome de nous avoir accordé la permission de reproduire ces articles.

If you would like to read more about the time period between 1812 and 1840, "Loyalites in Conflict"² gives interesting perspective. At the time of writing his book, J.I. Little was a Professor in the Department of History at Simon Fraser University. "Loyalites in Conflict is a rigorous study of the conflicting forces that shaped a Canadian region in a pivotal period in North American history"

The following is quoted from Afterword, (page 107), of this book.

"On 27 June 1797, Moses Elkins of Peachum in central Vermont set out for the Missisquoi Valley with his family, two hired men, and a cart drawn by two oxen. He had heard favourable accounts of this northern frontier from his brother Josiah, who had been trading with those Abenakis who were still living at Lake Memphremagog. Ten days later, having been joined by two other prospective settlers, who helped cut the way through dense woods from the last Vermont settlements, Elkins became a squatter in what would become known the following October as Potton Township. Elkin's name does not appear among the seventy-seven associates granted patents in 1803 but he was a militia captain during the War of 1812, when, as we have seen, he was accused of harbouring deserters. Isolated by some of the highest mountains in the Eastern Townships, Potton continued to have closer links with Troy, Vermont, than with the rest of Lower Canada. In contrast to the region as a whole, most settlers in this thinly settled area were either Baptists or members of the radical Protestant Methodist sect. Yet, during the Rebellion of 1838, as we have seen again, a member of the raiding party from Troy was shot and killed in the house of Elkins neighbouring brother, Salmon. Moses would pay the price in 1840, two months after the British military commander had been removed from the border. Unseen arsonists burned his house, four barns, and two sheds, as well as livestock and other contents to a reported value of £765. As of 1846, the government had still not given Elkins's widow any compensation, based on the argument that the attack had taken place too long after the Rebellion had ended."

² Loyalties in Conflict: A Canadian Borderland in War and Rebellion, 1812-1840 Author: J.I. Little Published by Little University of Toronto Press Inc 2008.