
The Trouble in Potton

By Audrey Martin McCaw

Yesterdays of Brome County – Volume Four, The Brome County Historical Society, Knowlton, Quebec 1980, pages 28-36

It is 150 years since sparks from the Papineau Rebellion flared into scattered eruptions and short-lived battles in south-western Quebec. When students of Canadian history think of “the troubles of 1837-38”, they are apt to recall the confrontations between the rebels, or “patriotes” and government forces at St. Charles and St. Denis on the Richelieu River east of Montreal, the rout at St. Eustache and the Battle of Moore's Corners in Missisquoi County. However, here in Brome County feelings reached a fever pitch too and there was the odd skirmish that might very well have resulted in a full-fledged battle.

E. C. Barnett of Highwater, a descendant of pioneer Colonel Henry Ruiter, wrote in an article in 1926: *“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.”*

Life along the border has always had its unique concerns, particularly during the days of early settlement when newcomers had to be sized up as post-revolutionary loyalists from the U.S., immigrants from French Canada or the British Isles, Yankee land speculators with doubtful loyalties or just plain squatters. The general malaise in Lower Canada that led to the Papineau Rebellion had numerous causes, but in southern Quebec some of those causes were unique to our pioneer forefathers who lived close to the frontier that divided Brome County from the State of Vermont.

The troubles stirred up by Papineau and his Patriots against the British Government in

Canada found eager sympathizers among the “Sons of Liberty” on both sides of the border, and Potton Township was dismayed to find itself uncomfortably close to the centre of the storm. Daily alarms kept the populace in a state of panic: dispatch riders were shot at, worshippers gathering at the Potton school house for their Sunday service were shocked to find a cache of gunpowder hidden in the ashes of the stove. Challenges for the hastily formed Potton Guard came to a head on the evening of February 27th, 1838, a date which E. C. Barnett said: *“must go down in history in red letter.”*

But first, some background. In 1837, many of the inhabitants of Potton were sons and daughters of original settlers from the U.S. who had been loyal to the Crown during the American Revolution, and they inherited the political sympathies of their parents. They were weary of revolution, had been loyal to Canada in the War of 1812, and wanted only to be left alone to pursue a peaceful and productive life. Thomas H. Raddall in *The Path of Destiny* describes a typical Loyalist as “a born American of strong opinions, little wealth, a suspicion of local demagogues, a conservative instinct for law and order and a hatred of being (in the modern phrase) *“pushed around”.*”

However, there were others whose parents had gladly acquired land in Canada but who still nourished the hope, fifty years after the Revolution, that this politically unsettled country would yet become part of the United States. This sentiment had been bolstered by the curious position of Vermont in the late 18th century. The American rebels Ethan and Ira Allen, resentful of New York's claims on Vermont territory during the Revolution, had made overtures to Canada's Governor Haldimand, offering to join the British with 4,000 armed men in return for recognition of Vermont as a Canadian province. Attractive as

this might sound, Haldimand rightly distrusted these "sour Mountain Boys" who, in fact, had no intention of turning British, but were trying to play Canada and the U.S. Congress off against each other. Vermont became a state in 1791. Governor Haldimand's policy of forbidding Loyalist settlement close to the border immediately following the Revolution had left a vacuum in our area, and we can hardly blame the Vermonters, encouraged by greedy land speculators in Quebec and Montreal, for moving in and availing themselves of this promising wilderness. Rev. Ernest M. Taylor points out that "during the War of 1812-14 some of these settlers returned to the United States, but later many of them came back again to Canada. Some even came to Canada at that time to escape being drafted into the American Army. But many of the residents of Potton Township entered the British Service and fought nobly in defence of their new homes."

The main cause of the Rebellion was, of course, the grievances of the British Canadians against repressive British rule and a widespread desire for responsible government. Papineau and his followers had, as George H. Montgomery put it in his *"History of Missisquoi Bay,"* "been stumping the environs of Montreal and the Valley of the Richelieu with fiery and somewhat seditious speeches culminating in an advocacy of annexation to the U.S." Consequently Papineau, who was both intelligent and passionate, attracted - in addition to his vast crowd of French -Canadian Patriotes - a number of English-speaking sympathizers. His senior lieutenants included men such as Thomas Storrow Brown, a leading English politician, Wolfred Nelson, a medical doctor from England who practised in the Richelieu area and was a member of the Reform Party in Lower Canada, and Wolfred's hot-headed brother Robert who proved later to have a good deal to do with the troubles in Potton.

Papineau made the mistake of protesting too hard. When civil war seemed imminent in Montreal in late 1837 and Papineau began to lose the support of many French Canadians, including the clergy, he and some of his side fled across the border to the U.S. More followed after the defeats at St. Denis and St. Charles. Not all made it. Wolfred Nelson was captured near Waterloo after swimming across the Yamaska River and wandering in the woods for a week. Several were captured near West Farnham. Brown, with a price of \$10,000.00 on his head and with impaired eyesight and a bad leg as a result of the recent battles, struggled from one hiding place to another in the Cowansville-Dunham area and finally managed to cross the border to Berkshire, Vermont. Others fled successfully by way of Stanstead.

Even though the Rebellion appeared to be a failure, many Americans mistakenly believed that Canada was in the mood to be liberated. Throughout 1838 there were acts of lawlessness, rumours of invasion and a number of alarming incidents along the frontier. Robert Nelson, now on the American side of the border, became the leader of the radical *"Sons of Liberty"* who took their name from a band of French rebels in Lower Canada who were known as *"Les fils de la Liberté."* Robert, drunk with power, set up his "Republic", with himself as President, and formed a provisional government at Franklin, Vermont, with armed forces at Highgate, Swanton and St. Albans.

In the words of Taylor: *"All this while Potton, (now Mansonville) lying just across an imaginary line from this storm 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.*

"

Throughout the Townships, efforts were being made to enlarge the existing militia and to administer the Oath of Allegiance to individuals considered "to be disaffected". Potton and Bolton formed part of Stanstead County at that time. A Stanstead newspaper called *The Canadian Patriot* ran a controversial article, signed merely 'Patriot,' which aroused and encouraged many readers to refuse to take the Oath. In January of 1838, a letter from an official in Stanstead to the Governor's secretary, urging the sending of more commissioners for the purpose of administering Oaths to the troops, said in part : *"I meet with a good deal of opposition and many refusals ... there never was a time when it was more desirable to have measures decided than at present, in relation to Stanstead County, I do consider it to be the most disaffected and restless in the province ..."*

For protection, the loyal citizens of Potton relied on the Potton Guard. This consisted of the Second Townships Battalion, originally mustered under Col. Henry Ruiter of West Potton (now the village of Dunkin). In 1837 the troop was commanded by Thomas Gilman, with Stephen C. Boswell as lieutenant, Ensign David Heath and non-commissioned officers Francis Peabody, Levi A. Perkins, Henry Woods, David Barnett and "some twenty odd of the best riders in the Valley" who served as scouts and despatch riders. Around this group gathered every loyal able-bodied male citizen of Potton Township.

The headquarters of the Potton Guard, serving as a supply depot and sort of barracks, was a part of the old homestead of the late Dr. Gilman near Dunkin. It was that time occupied by his sons Leander and John T. Gilman, and his widow Susannah. She was now married to Capt. Moses Elkins who had been Captain of Militia during the War of 1812. The Elkins

family were early settlers in Potton Township, although branches of the family had remained on the Vermont side. Interesting histories of this and other families connected with this story are recounted by Rev. E.M.Taylor in his *HISTORY OF BROME COUNTY*, Volumes 1 and II.

The facts of what actually happened the night of February 27th, 1838 are gleaned from several sources, so we have to piece together the scenario of events. And they began a short time previous to this with a dramatic false alarm.

Ralph Elkins brought in word that troops of Robert Nelson were heading for Potton from the direction of Coventry, Vermont. Despatch riders alerted the community and members of the Potton Guard hastily gathered on foot and on horse-back at Coit's Corners. This small community, later known as Meig's Corners, was situated between Mansonville and Highwater and consisted of Levi Coit's store (the first store in Potton Township), a schoolhouse and a distillery operated by the Heath brothers, which contained a still made with coils of lead or 'britannia.' In the report of E. C. Barnett we read: *"Madly the gathering Guard tore 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 had powder for their muskets but they were short of bullets. Few of them but who revered the still, but potato whisky must wait in times of stress, and out came the still be to cast into bullets ..."*

After all this frenzied effort, the warning of approaching troops from Vermont proved to be nothing more than a false alarm. However, frequent rumours such as this were putting the Sons of Liberty in a bad light, and the continual 'no show' on the part of Robert Nelson was beginning to make him and his troops a sort of laughing stock in the area.

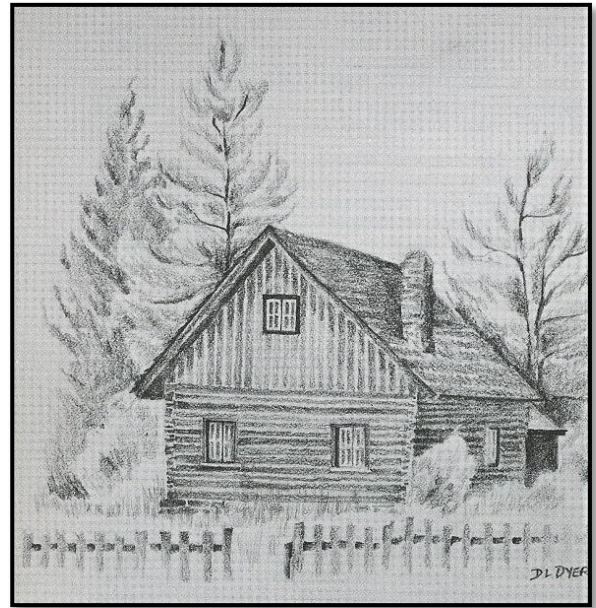
Records indicate that they were definitely short of arms. The exiles from Potton among his forces were itching for action and finally, on February 27th, they decided to make a move and disarm the Potton Guard.

A party of about fourteen men gathered at North Troy, just across the border from Highwater. They were mainly American citizens but several were Canadians, closely related to their 'enemies' north of the border. The rebel party consisted of Captain Ira A. Bailey, Jonathan Bailey, James Manson, Hazen Hadlock, Ithamar Hadlock, Jonathan Elkins, John Miltimore, Daniel Miltimore Junior, Dr. L. C. Moore, William Perkins, Ashley Walker and a few others. We do not know whether they intended merely to raid the barracks for arms, or if they had knowledge that the Guard had hidden their equipment and ammunition in various places. In any case, they left North Troy in a sleigh, called a 'double pung,' crossed the border and halted at the home of Farrand Livingstone who lived about a quarter mile from the boundary. He did not belong to the Guard and certainly did not have any arms but his own.

Peter Gardine, who lived at Livingstone's, slipped out and ran ahead to warn the Elkins family in the next house on the hill. These families were related for Mrs. Livingstone was a niece of Salmon Elkins (also a cousin of Jonathan in the rebel party). Salmon Elkins lived with his sons Ralph and Harvey and the latter's son Hector. The raiders followed fairly closely behind Gardine, but their delay at Livingstone's seems to indicate a certain disorganization or indecision in their strategy. Possibly they had expected to find a cache of arms at this point.

Salmon Elkins was old and infirm at this time, but luckily his two sons and grandson were at home. They had only three guns among them. The Elkins lived in a small two-storey house,

and as you entered the door, a narrow stairway ascended to the upper floor ending in a landing with a turn at the top, so it was impossible to see beyond the landing from the foot of the staircase. Barnett explains: *"This description is given to disprove the contention of some that the attackers pointed guns at the inmates to make them give up their arms ... for they saw no one that night."*



**Diana Dyer | Artist's Concept
of the Log House owned by Mr. Elkins
at time of the raid by the "Sons of Liberty"**

The Elkins family took cover upstairs as quickly as possible, Ralph, Harvey and Hector arming themselves with their old regulation flintlock muskets. These *"carried 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 breech to the charge inside the barrel."*

Barnett relates what happened: *"Two of the men took their stand on the landing at the head of the stairs ... 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, said: "Come on!" and stepped up 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 ... right well he knew 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 two, at least, of the Hadlocks from Jay, Vermont, Hazen and Ithamore, dare-devils and tough. Hazen saw Manson ... funk, and with a curse, cried: "Come on, I'm not afraid!" and sprung for that narrow 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 ... 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 results of this one shot quickly sobered the raiders. How could they avenge the death of their companion? Foiled in their plan, they now proposed to burn down the house, but fortunately for the Elkins family and "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."

Taylor says: "After Harvey had shot Hadlock it is thought that they gave up their guns to the rebels provided they would go away peaceably and not burn the house. The rebels took the

body and went to a hotel in Troy, Vermont and caroused."

At the hotel, according to Barnett, the landlord noticed that Hadlock was not among the raiders and inquired about him. The men told him that he had remained outside to hold the horses, so the landlord proposed taking him some refreshment. Against the protestations of the men, he poured a stiff drink and carried it outside to Hadlock. He was "horrified at finding him propped in the sleigh, frozen stiff, the lines about his neck ..."

It would be a simplification to say that one bullet on that night of February 28th, 1838, put an end to the troubles in Potton completely, for resentment continued for a number of years and there were many "heart burnings between these exiles, who were exiles still, and their neighbours who had been loyal." Harvey Elkins, who fired the fatal shot, was "so persecuted that he left Potton". Barnett says that "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."

In the Archives in Ottawa is a letter from Harvey Elkins addressed to Col. Rowan, Secretary to His Excellency, Sir John Colborne, written in South Potton, Aug. 9, 1838,

"Dear Sir,

On or about the 20th March last, I had the honour of addressing you and stating my case in reference to the losses sustained by me and my being obliged to leave Potton in consequence of an attack made on my father's house by rebels on the night of 26th (sic) February on which occasion in self-defence and my nephew were obliged to fire on the parties attacking us, and one of the rebels from across the line was killed. I have been obliged to part

with my property at a great loss and am now without a residence, having altogether sustained a loss I cannot repair, without some assistance from the Government. You was kind enough to say I should receive an answer to my letter of March. I will be much obliged, by being informed if anything is determined on and what further steps I am to take. I have the honor to be your most obedient servant,

Harvey F. Elkins."

The rebels finally got their revenge two years later on the night of June 3, 1840, when a group of bitter exiles, still determined to 'get the Potton barracks,' succeeded in burning the Gilman house and out-buildings to the ground, the family barely escaping with their lives, In Quebec as a whole, Papineau's Rebellion had not been a complete failure, for it did finally lead to responsible government. The eruptions in Upper and Lower Canada, occurring just as the Young Queen Victoria was ascending the throne, were a great shock to England and in order to find out just what was going on in these troublesome Colonies, they sent out Lord Durham as the new Governor General. He got rid of Sir John Colborne's ultra-Tory Council and made a good start by consulting with Canadian leaders, both French and English. However, his next act was both dramatic and illegal, and while it finished his career in Canada, it did put an end to the ambitions of Robert Nelson. According to Thomas H. Randall, Lord Durham: "... *obtained a confession of guilt from Wolfred Nelson and several other notable rebels and with their own consent exiled them to Bermuda out of harm's way. They were forbidden to return to Canada without proper authority, under pain of death, The same decree of banishment under these terms applied to Papineau, .. Robert Nelson and thirteen other leaders who were already safe in the United States.*"

Full amnesty was granted to most other prisoners and refugees and the majority of the Potton exiles returned and "were pampered at the expense of those who had been loyal." In the files of the Brome County Historical Society are petitions for annexation to the U.S. which indicate a good deal of resentment among those "who had been the salvation of the county in its hour of peril."

One of the rebel raiders who did not return to Canada was Daniel Miltimore Junior. He settled in Plainfield, Wisconsin, where he made a life for himself and his family as a farmer. It is clear from a letter to his brother in 1856 that his heart was often heavy with thoughts of home and the knowledge that he would never return.

He says, in part:

"Respected Brother,

Yours of the 3rd of May was duly received and was much gratified in perusing the same - containing news of yours and family's health and prosperity and the assurance of your thoughtfulness toward us, though you might have on occasion sometimes thought we had wholly forgotten you, since we have neglected writing you so long. But I assure you I have not forgotten you and your family. Yes, there is not probably a day and I might say an hour, that my mind does to wander back to Canada and to various scenes, both of pleasure and pain, of those I shall probably visit no more ...

You intimated the possibility of visiting the West. I wish you could come at this season of the year when nature is in all its glory ... I had wished to have made ample improvement for the entertainment of friends but I hope you will not wait for that but come as soon as convenient, Dear Brother. You have a privilege which I have denied myself, that of visiting all your friends but one in a day, and that as

often as you wish, but this I never expect to enjoy. Catherine and Family send their respects. You all now be sure and write as soon as you get this and tell us all the news in your vicinity and likewise that of our old home. So adieu for the moment.

Dan'l Miltimore."

Bibliography

- Rev. E.M. Taylor. *History of Brome County*, Vol. 1 and II
 - Thomas H. Raddall. *The Path of Destiny*
 - George W. Brown. *Building the Canadian Nation*
 - J.C. Sutherland. *The Romance of Quebec*
 - J.C. Sutherland. *Missisquoi Bay*
 - Brome County Historical Society. *Yesterdays of Brome County*, Vols. 1, 2, & 3 Reports of Missisquoi Historical Society. Vols. 5,9 and 12
 - Stephen Leacock. *Canada, the Foundation of its Future*
 - E. C. Barnett. Article on Political Strife in Potton, during 1837 and 1838, found on pp 80-84 of Vol. III of Transactions of the Brome Co. Historical Society
-