
“Hunters' Lodges”
in Potton and Bolton, and the
Rebellion of 1837-1838
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During the Lower Canada rebellions of 1837 and 1838, sympathy for the “rebels” or “Patriotes” (however one wishes to call them) was quite strong in the border areas of the Eastern Townships. This was particularly true of the townships around Lake Memphremagog, where “seditious” activities were widespread. These included the publication of a radical newspaper, *The Canadian Patriot*, which was dedicated, according to Benjamin Hubbard, “to stirring up the people to revolt.”¹ Other activities included local assistance to French Canadian and other Patriotes crossing the border into the United States² and of course, the abortive “uprising” in Stanstead and the raid on Potton in February, 1838, both infamous in local lore.³ There is, however, one aspect of the local rebellions which is not so well known, and that is, that in the summer of 1838 the movement in some townships went quietly underground. In Potton and Bolton (as well as Sutton and Shefford), this took the form of mysterious secret societies known as “Hunters' Lodges”.

Following the suppression of the first round of rebellions in early 1838, and the general amnesty extended to rebels by Lord Durham, Hunters' Lodges or “Frères Chasseurs”, as they were more commonly called in Lower Canada, were established in many parts of the province - the Townships included. According to S.D. Clark, the ones in the Townships were the direct result of visits by Lodge organizers from across the border.⁴ In fact, exiled Patriote leader Robert Nelson was involved in the establishment of at least one - the one in Shefford.⁵ According to Elinor Senior, the goal of these organizers was to create “a system of secret lodges along military lines that could supply shock troops within the province in combination with an invading force from the United States to overthrow British power” in Lower Canada.⁸

It was in the three months leading up to the second round of rebellions of November, 1838 that Hunters' Lodges were active in Potton and Bolton. Back in February, local militia lieutenant Henry R. Woods had noted that Potton - possibly the most agitated township in

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the region - was "pretty equally divided," though the "rebels are unarmed."⁷ The creation of Lodges in Pot-ton and Bolton was a sign that Patriotes in the area were still committed. Over forty people - mostly from Potton but a few from Bolton and North Troy, Vermont - would later be named as participants in the clandestine Lodge activities, and at least two would be formally charged with sedition.

Lodge members communicated by secret signs and passwords. Initiation ceremonies were solemn affairs. According to Senior, *"Each candidate had to kneel, blindfolded, before at least three other members and solemnly swear in the presence of Almighty God to observe the secret signs and mysteries of the society of Chasseurs; never to write, describe, or make known in any way, the things which shall be revealed to me by the society, or lodge of Chasseurs, - to aid with my advice, care and property every brother Chasseur in need, and to notify him in time of any misfortune that may befall him. All this I promise without reservation, and consenting to see my property destroyed and to have my throat cut to the bone."*⁹

Secret oaths were being administered in Potton as early as August, 1838. The Potton Lodge was formalized in October at the mills of James Manson, with farmer Charles Woods (Henry R. Woods' brother) elected Master, in charge of administering oaths. Dr. Amos Lay was in charge in Bolton.¹⁰

Like Lodges elsewhere in the province, those in the Townships began preparing for a "general uprising" and invasion that was planned for early November. On the fourth of that month, Robert Nelson entered the province and proclaimed himself "President" (for the second time). However, as they had in the earlier uprisings, the Patriotes lacked guns. After only a week, and a few minor incidents in the Richelieu valley, and a failed attempt by

Patriote leaders to obtain weapons in the United States, the uprisings were once again quelled. As for the Townships, various people later testified that secret military preparations had been under way in Potton and Bolton at the same time as events on the Richelieu. Local Hunters' Lodge members had apparently tried to procure some \$600 worth of guns. A nocturnal gathering of about twenty-five men took place at the home of Potton tavern-keeper Buswell Gilman. It seems that the plan had been to "take the dragoons at Bolton and the Guns at Brome." One resident claimed that he had been asked to participate by Robert Manson, who said that seventy-five to eighty men were needed for the job, and who offered "as an inducement" that "the Horses and Guns" would be taken across the Line and sold and the money divided Equally.¹¹ The raid, however, failed to materialize. This, according to one witness, Daniel Miltimore jr., was because he and another man, William Perkins (both Lodge members), had considered it "imprudent in consequence of the ill success of the Rebels along the Frontier."¹² Indeed, it does seem likely that Patriotes in this rather isolated area would realize the futility of acting on their own, without encouraging news from their compatriots in other locales.

Not surprisingly, following the failure of the second round of rebellions, secret oaths and membership in the Hunters' Lodges were declared unlawful and treasonous. The rebellions of November, 1838, in fact, were more brutally crushed than the earlier uprisings. Hundreds of Patriotes were arrested in different parts of the province, and hundreds more went into exile. Some of those tried were executed. Habeas Corpus was suspended, martial law was in effect, and the province was under the rule not of an elected legislature but of an appointed Special Council.

In the Townships, the conservative or loyal reaction was equally severe. Whereas during the uprisings of November, 1837 to February,

1838, local militia units had been mobilized, office-holders of questionable loyalty deprived of their posts, and people asked to swear the oath of allegiance, following the November, 1838 uprisings suspected Patriotes were actually arrested and jailed without trial. Among the unlucky ones was Hatley militia captain Taylor Wadleigh, who pleaded (successfully) to authorities that despite his radical politics he was “a friend to the British Government under which he lives from choice and nothing would give him greater satisfaction than the total failure of the Rebels in this province.”¹³ Wadleigh was released after a couple of weeks, but some prisoners from the area were in jail for as long as five months. Some people avoided arrest by taking up residence across the border in Vermont. Marcus Child, the local Member of the (abolished) Legislative Assembly, was one of them, and no doubt there were people in Potton and Bolton who did the same.

It was thus a concerted and intense period of repression that ended the rebellions and the influence of the Hunters' Lodges in Lower Canada and in the Townships. However, though there were no more “general uprisings” tension and resentment lingered for several years. Indeed, sporadic acts of violence continued to occur. The arsoning of the home of the Gilmans, a Potton family that sided with the government during the rebellions.¹⁴ was evidence of the deep divisions within that local community.

Note: The writer, Matthew Farfan, is a student at McGill University studying for his Master of Arts in History. A member of the Stanstead Historical Society, his home is in Beebe, Que., where the family have resided since 1959. He has a special interest in local history.

References :

1. Though labelled "Stanstead" on the title page, this paper was actually printed in Derby Line, Vt. See M.F. Farfan, "Stanstead's Other Journals," in *Stanstead Historical Society Journal*, 13, 1989, 30-31.
2. Stanstead Plain seems to have been the favoured crossing point.
3. See B.F. Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings*, Montreal, 1874, 12-16; and E.C. Barnett, "The Troubles of 1837 and 1838," in *Transactions of the Brome County Historical Society*, 3, 1910-26, 80-84.
4. S.D. Clark, *Movements of Political Protest in Canada 1640-1841*, Toronto, 1959, 316.
5. Les Archives Nationales du Québec (ANQ), Documents relatifs aux événements de 1837-38, Doc. No. 1180.
6. Elinor Senior, *Redcoats and Patriots - The Rebellions in Lower Canada 1837-38*, Stittsville, Ont., 1985, 155.
7. Cited in N.H. Muller, "Trouble on the Border, 1838: A Neglected Incident from Vermont's Neglected History," in *Vermont History*, 44, (2), Spring, 1976, 101.
8. ANQ, Documents relatifs ... Doc. No. 1176.
9. Senior, 155.
10. ANQ. Documents relatifs ... Doc. Nos. 1173, 1174, and 1180.
11. Ibid., No. 1178.
12. Ibid., Doc. No. 1180.
13. Ibid., Doc. No. 1181.
14. See Barnett, 84.