

THE FENIAN RAIDS -- 1866

In the mid 1800's, the United States received large numbers of immigrants from Ireland, who were driven from their country by a combination of factors. In 1848, the British government suppressed an armed insurrection by the Young Ireland movement, and many of these rebels, either directly or indirectly, made their way to the United States. In addition, massive crop failures led to the potato famines of the late 1840's, and thousands of Irish farmers were evicted from their land. Those who could afford it fled the country in record numbers. By 1860, there were about 1,600,000 Irish-born Americans in the United States, of whom two-thirds had settled in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and the New England states.

Some of these Irishmen continued to work towards Irish independence from Britain, and in 1857, a correspondence was initiated between John O'Mahoney and Michael Doheny, who were living in the United States, and James Stephens in Ireland. All three were veterans of the 1848 revolt, and sought to organize, under Stephens' direction, an American-assisted Irish revolt. The Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood was founded in 1858, whose goal was the establishment of a republican government in Ireland. O'Mahoney became the leader of the organization in the United States, and initiated a flow of money, arms and provisions to Ireland. In 1859, O'Mahoney changed the name of the organization to the Fenian Brotherhood, which was derived from "*Fianna Eirionn*," a band of legendary warriors of ancient Ireland.

Many of the Fenians fought for the Union side in the American Civil War (1861-1865). Between 150,000 and 175,000 Irishmen served, and composed 40% of all foreign born enlistments, and 17% of the total forces. From this conflict, many Fenians gained valuable military experience, and were able to purchase surplus arms and equipment upon the conclusion of the war. Towards the end of the Civil War, the Fenian Brotherhood saw a marked increase in both membership and financial donations, and by January, 1865, they had over 10,000 members.

By the end of 1865, however, the Fenian Brotherhood had split into two distinct branches. One faction retained the original aim of the Brotherhood, but the other, believing that an Irish uprising was impossible, instead advocated the invasion of Canada as an alternate method of achieving independence. Their plan was to establish an Irish government-in-exile in Canada in order to pressure Britain into creating an independent Ireland. A complex military plan was created by General Thomas Sweeny, the Fenian Secretary of War, and revealed to the Senate wing of the Brotherhood in February, 1866.

The invasion of Canada was to be a three-pronged attack in which areas of Ontario would be attacked as a feint to draw British forces out of Quebec. A large Fenian force would then move into Quebec and sever the lines of communication, effectively capturing a sizeable part of Canada. In late May, 1866, the Fenian Army began to assemble at several points along the Canada-United States border, including Buffalo, where they were under the command of Colonel John O'Neill.

During the early hours of June 1, a regiment of Fenians under the command of Colonel Owen Starr, crossed the Niagara River from Buffalo to Fort Erie, where they landed at Freebury's Wharf at the foot of Bowen Road. Although some fishermen had observed their crossing and had alerted the town, the Fenians were able to establish a footing for Colonel O'Neill and the remaining troops. After tearing up railway tracks and cutting the telegraph lines, the Fenian army raised an Irish flag and read a proclamation to the residents of Fort Erie. At around 5 pm, the Fenians began to move north along the Niagara River, and set up a camp at Black Creek.

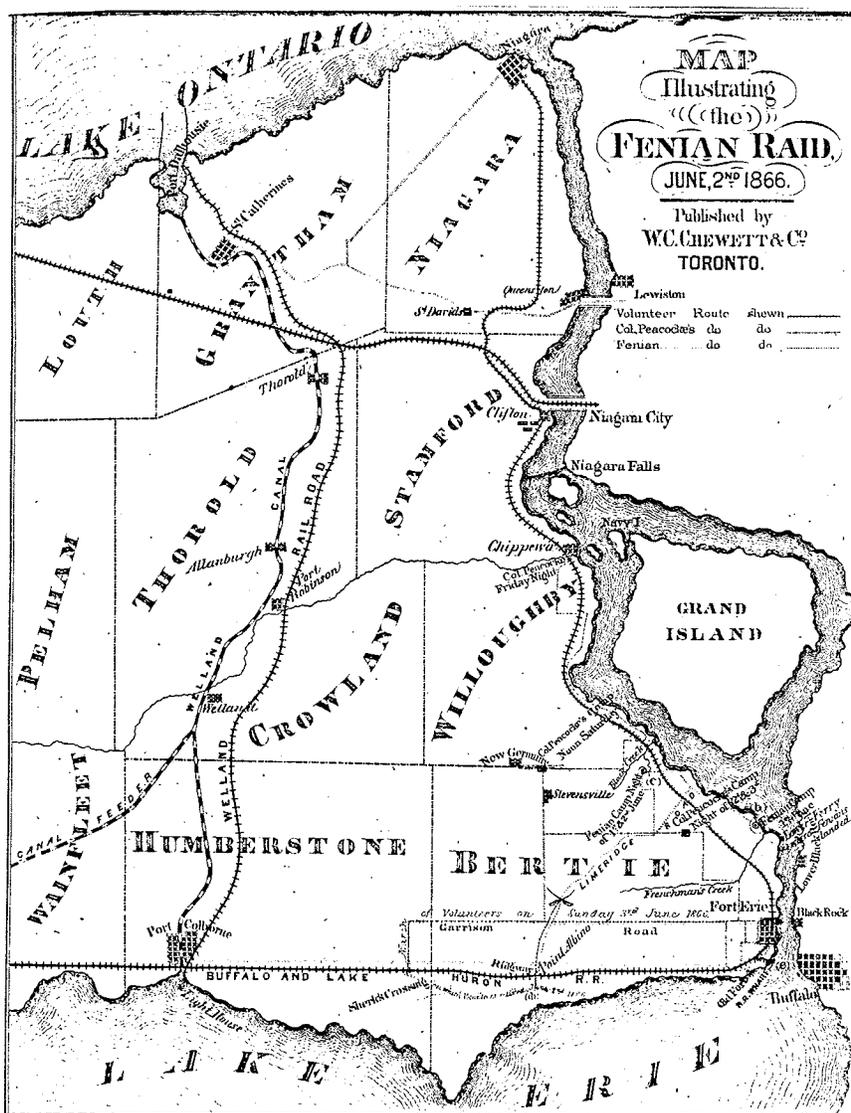
At 6 am on June 2, 1866, a Canadian and British force of about 840 officers and men under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Alfred Booker arrived in Ridgeway. Colonel O'Neill

had received information about the movement of the British troops and had set out at about 3 am from Black Creek to intercept them at Ridgeway. O'Neill occupied some high ground about 100 yards from the present day intersection of Ridge Road and Bertie Street, and deployed his troops. Hostilities commenced at about 8 am.

Colonel Booker was an inexperienced commander, and soon ordered his forces to retreat, after his troops were plunged into confusion by his unsure orders. Fortunately, the arrival of Canadian reinforcements forced the Fenians to retreat back across the Niagara River. Elsewhere, the Fenians met with even less success than they had at Niagara. The Fenians had assumed that the Canadians would offer little resistance and that Irish Canadians would join their cause. Instead, they were unpleasantly surprised by the intensity with which the Canadians repulsed their attack. On June 6, 1866, President Andrew Johnson issued a belated "Neutrality Proclamation," ending Fenian hopes for official support from the United States, and while there were a few more incidents in the following years, the Fenian Brotherhood quickly faded away.

Although the Fenian "invasion" was short-lived, it had a profound impact on the emerging country of Canada. It led to greater cohesion within Canada, and a realization that Canada would have to develop its own military defence system. Indeed, many believe that the

Fenian Raids of 1866 catalyzed the union of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Upper and Lower Canada, into the Dominion of Canada in 1867, many years before Confederation may have been achieved otherwise.



Left: Map Illustrating the Fenian Raids of 1866 a) Fenians Landed June 1, 1866; b) Fenian Camp which they broke up going downriver to 'c'; c) Fenians camped until 4 a.m., June 2 and then moved towards Ridgeway; d) Fenians followed retiring volunteers to this point; e) International R.R. Ferry Wharf where O'Neill and his men retreated across the border to Buffalo on June 2, 1866.