

RIDGEWAY 1866: A MOUNTAIN MEMORY By Robert J. Williamson

Hamilton, so close to the American border, inevitably became a significant part of Canada's legacy of invasions across the Niagara frontier. The first week of June is celebrated annually for the Battle of Stoney Creek victory on June 6, 1813, but sadly the significant Battle of Ridgeway fought on June 2, 1866 is all but forgotten. However, as part of the heritage of a Ryckman neighborhood family and the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, we are justified in putting Ridgeway, metaphorically, on our Mountain Memory map.

Captain William Wells (1827-1915) is the great grandfather of Robert Morris, Lieutenant RCNR Ret'd who is the current owner of what remains of the Wells' farm on Upper James Street just south of Barton Stone Church. Wells, a 39 year old corporal in the 13th Hamilton Battalion Militia in 1866, boarded a train on June 1st bound for Fort Erie along with the Caledonia and York Haldiman Rifle Companies. They were joined there by the Queen's Own Rifles from Toronto. All told their strength was 850 volunteers. As senior officer in the field, Hamilton's 13th Battalion Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Booker took command. They were all in good company that day. Joining them in the field was Alexander Muir from Toronto who a year later would compose the lyrics to "The Maple Leaf Forever".

The Fenians, a ragtag irregular army of Irish American veterans, fresh from the recent American Civil War, began gathering in Buffalo in late May 1866. Their intent was to intimidate Britain into recognizing an independent Irish Republic by invading Canada. At 1:30 a.m. June 1st they began illegally crossing the Niagara River north of Fort Erie, avoiding border authorities in the dark. They used any form of water transport they could commandeer. Thirteen hours and many trips later, 1,000 Fenians had successfully landed in Canada before the illicit invasion was shut down by the arrival of the American gun ship USS Michigan.

The Fenians spread out, occupying the village of Fort Erie and its strategic approaches, in particular a limestone ridge 2 km north of Crystal Beach near the railway depot of Ridgeway (today's Highway # 3). They formed a defensive position there and met the arriving Canadian militia from Hamilton and Toronto. Although slightly outnumbered, the civil war veteran leaders quickly recognized that confusion abounded in the inexperienced Canadian ranks and ordered a surprise bayonet charge. The Canadian militia, many of whom had seldom fired a musket, were confounded and put to flight. However, after that initial success, the Fenians encountered stubborn pockets of resistance as Canadian ranks swelled with reinforcements. Recognizing that they had bitten off more than they could chew the Fenians made a hasty retreat to Buffalo where American authorities disarmed them.

It wasn't glorious but for the last time, Canada, once again had successfully defended its borders. Despite the Canadian militia's obscure success in this pre-confederation defense of Canada, the novice Canadian Confederation government was reluctant to recognize the battle's importance in Canada's military history and refused to acknowledge any militia service prior to 1867. However, in 1899 in response to a petition by veterans, an 1866 Defense of Canada designation was added to a British General Service Medal awarded only upon request. Land Grant applications for voluntary military service were finally sanctioned in 1900 and Ridgeway was belatedly declared a National Historic Site in 1921.

Thanks to Mountain resident, Robert Morris, the great grandson of Captain William Wells, this collection of rare voluntary service artifacts illustrate this almost forgotten piece of Canadian and Mountain history.



Photos courtesy Robert Morris Collection

Left Wm Wells promoted to Captain, 6th Company 77th Wentworth Battalion in 1880 (originally the 13th Battalion in 1866, reformed as RHLI 1927). Note : Wells wears no 1866 medal because none was issued until 1900.

Right A "Fenian Raid" veteran's Land Grant Certificate issued to Wm. Wells for 160 acres of Cochrane township on the Canadian Shield in 1907, sold for \$200.00 in 1912 only three years before he died in 1915 age 88.

Mountain Memories by award winning writer Robert Williamson appears monthly for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society. See <Hamiltonheritage.ca> for more information.