

On Saturday, June 3, 2006, at 1 p.m., the Ontario Heritage Trust unveiled a provincial plaque commemorating The Battle of Ridgeway at Old Fort Erie, Fort Erie, Ontario.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

BATTLE OF RIDGEWAY

On June 1, 1866 Irish-American revolutionaries called Fenians invaded Canada as part of an attempt to strike at Britain and support the creation of an independent Irish republic. The next morning Canadian militiamen from the Queen's Own Rifles, the 13th Battalion and the York and Caledonia rifle companies, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Booker, arrived here by train before marching on to battle the Fenian invaders. Contradictory orders and confusion on the battlefield coincided with a Fenian counter-attack to cause the Canadians to withdraw. The Fenians retired to Fort Erie and returned to Buffalo that night. The Battle of Ridgeway shocked the country, spurring improvements to Canada's defences and helping to bolster the Confederation movement.

BATAILLE DE RIDGEWAY

Le 1^{er} juin 1866, des révolutionnaires irlandais-américains, appelés les Fenians, envahirent le Canada pour porter un coup à l'Angleterre et soutenir la création d'une république irlandaise indépendante. Le lendemain matin, les hommes de la Milice canadienne des Queen's Own Rifles, du 13^e bataillon et des York et Caledonia Rifle Companies, sous le commandement du lieutenant-colonel Alfred Booker, arrivèrent en train pour aller se battre contre les envahisseurs fenians. Alors que les Canadiens recevaient des ordres contradictoires et que la confusion régnait sur le champ de bataille, les Fenians contre-attaquèrent et les Canadiens durent se replier. Les Fenians se retirèrent à Fort Erie et retournèrent dans la nuit à Buffalo. La bataille de Ridgeway, qui eut l'effet d'une onde de choc dans le pays, entraîna une amélioration des systèmes de défense canadiens et donna une impulsion au mouvement en faveur de la Confédération.

Historical background

While an active revolutionary movement in Ireland protested English rule, the Fenian Brotherhood – the American wing of the secretive Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (IRB) – took up the struggle for Irish independence in the United States. In 1865, the same year that the Union defeated the Confederacy and ended the American Civil War, the revolutionary movement in Ireland suffered a severe blow when the British crushed the IRB and scattered its leaders. In the aftermath of the IRB's break up, a militant Fenian faction emerged in the United States that was bent on attacking the British whenever and wherever possible. Canada became a convenient target. Mistakenly believing they enjoyed the backing of the American government, the Fenians began making preparations to invade Canada.

In November 1865 the Canadian government called out the militia to guard important border points from Prescott to Sarnia, and in March 1866 14,000 men were called up in anticipation of a St. Patrick's Day attack. Neither attack materialized, but in April a Fenian splinter group launched a bungled raid on Campobello Island, New Brunswick. The relaxation of tensions after the St. Patrick's Day scare combined with the Maritime fiasco seemed to indicate that Fenianism was a spent force. British and Canadian authorities heaved a collective sigh of relief and relaxed – prematurely, as it turned out.

The Fenian Brotherhood was indeed in crisis but its leaders attempted to salvage the situation by planning to invade Canada. Their plan included landings at Goderich and Port Stanley to draw the British and Canadian forces deep into Canada West, and a feint across the Niagara River from Buffalo to further divide the defenders. At the same time, the main effort would strike north from Upper New York State and Vermont to capture Montreal and Quebec. The Fenians were determined, and when it proved impossible to mount the invasion across the lakes, the Niagara diversion was turned into the main effort in the west.

The sudden appearance of large numbers of young men in Buffalo in late May 1866 came as an unpleasant shock to complacent British and Canadian authorities. But if they had been caught napping, they moved decisively once warning of the pending invasion came. On the evening of May 31 the militia infantry and garrison artillery were called out. The cavalry and field artillery mobilized the following day.

In the meantime, the first wave of some 600 Fenians crossed the upper Niagara River and landed a few kilometres north of Fort Erie in the early hours of June 1. The Fenians had enjoyed at least one day's advantage during which they were free from significant opposition. But instead of advancing on the strategically important Welland Canal, the Fenian Commander – Lieutenant Colonel John O'Neill – waited for reinforcements. These failed to materialize because the arrival of an American gunboat, the USS Michigan, in the late afternoon prevented

any further crossings. The Michigan had been patrolling the Niagara River to enforce the *Neutrality Act* and to prevent the Fenians from reaching Canada.

Major General George Napier, the British commander in Canada West, ordered his British regulars and Canadian militia to move into the peninsula to defend the Welland Canal from destruction and to prevent the Fenians from expanding their foothold in the area. By midnight on June 1 Port Colborne was defended by the Queen's Own Rifles from Toronto, Hamilton's 13th Battalion, independent rifle companies from York and Caledonia and the Welland Canal Field Battery, while British and Canadian troops were in Chippawa.

Both sides had an approximate idea of their opponent's location and strength. The British commander at Chippawa, Lieutenant Colonel George Peacocke, had correctly thought the Fenians were at Frenchman's Creek but had overestimated their numbers. Peacocke also erred in concluding that the Fenians would either remain stationary or retire back across the river. He incorrectly decided to concentrate two forces at Stevensville and then march on Frenchman's Creek. On the other hand, O'Neill knew that his enemy had divided his forces and that the weaker part was at Port Colborne. He believed that the two forces would concentrate at Stevensville on June 2 and then move to attack him. O'Neill had two options. He could withdraw back across the river or he could fight. He had already achieved his aim of diverting attention from the main effort against Quebec, but to withdraw without firing a shot could damage the Fenian cause and the presence of the Michigan meant that retreat was risky. O'Neill decided to attack the Port Colborne column before it could link up with Peacocke's men, declare victory and retire to Fort Erie to await reinforcements, or if all else failed, to fight to the bitter end.

The Fenians broke camp at 10 p.m. on June 1 and marched north along River Road and then turned west towards the limestone ridge that dominated the country to the south and west. The next morning at 6 a.m. the head of the Fenian column moved onto the ridge and cautiously advanced south along the aptly named Ridge Road. An hour later, approximately five kilometres from Ridgeway, the Fenians came in contact with horsemen who galloped away to the south. Shortly after, the Fenians heard train whistles and bugle calls from the direction of the village. O'Neill's plan had worked; he would fight the Port Colborne column on ground of his own choosing, free from Peacocke's interference.

The Canadian commander at Port Colborne, Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Booker, believed from information he received from local residents that the Fenians were still in camp at Frenchman's Creek, drinking heavily and demoralized. He must not have felt much trepidation at 5:30 a.m. when he loaded the 13th Battalion and the Queen's Own Rifles on a train that chugged slowly along the railway line towards Ridgeway, the closest station to Stevensville. Booker also believed that Peacocke would leave Chippawa at approximately 6 that morning and would arrive at Stevensville between 9 and 9:30 a.m., about the same time his column would reach the

rendezvous. The train arrived in Ridgeway around 7 a.m. and the soldiers calmly disembarked – with train whistles, bugle calls and shouted orders. It was clear that Booker had no reason to think that he would encounter the Fenians on the march to Stevensville. The Port Colborne column under Booker marched north out of Ridgeway along the Ridge Road with the Queen's Own Rifles leading, followed by Booker mounted on a borrowed horse, the York Rifle Company, the 13th Battalion and finally the Caledonia Rifle Company. About four kilometres along the road, the leading troops signalled back, "Enemy in sight." The Queen's Own were deployed as skirmishers and advanced toward the junction of the Ridge and Garrison roads. Soon the rattle of musketry could be heard; the Battle of Ridgeway had begun.

The Fenian commander Colonel O'Neill drew on his American Civil War experience to fight Booker's column, deploying about one quarter of his force as skirmishers with orders to draw the Canadian attackers forward onto his main body. Once they had come within range, O'Neill planned to use heavy, concentrated fire and counterattack with a bayonet charge. If the Canadians proved too strong, O'Neill had maintained a reserve to provide a screen to cover his retreat along Ridge Road.

Booker's plan was to fight his first battle by the book. His skirmishers would drive the enemy back, his main body would follow, demoralize the enemy with a volley and drive them from the field with a bayonet charge. Initially all went well, although the enemy skirmishers did not fall back as quickly as expected and by the time the Queen's Own Rifles reached the main Fenian position they were running short of ammunition. Booker ordered part of the 13th Battalion forward to replace the Queen's Own Rifles and the two units began to change positions, a difficult manoeuvre to execute under fire. It was at this time, just when the two battalions were intermingled, that disaster struck. Horsemen were spotted approaching the Fenian lines, and someone shouted, "Cavalry!" Booker reacted as if he was on a field exercise and ordered, "Prepare for cavalry." Almost immediately he realized his error and tried to countermand his previous order. Mass confusion prevailed and the sight of the skirmishers doubling back unnerved the troops moving forward.

O'Neill may have been concerned as he watched the Canadians appear to advance despite the Fenian's stiffening resistance. Suddenly his enemy began to mill about and waiver. John O'Neill was too experienced a soldier not to take full advantage of this opportunity. His troops began to fire on the Canadians and then launched a bayonet charge down the slope of the ridge onto the Canadian centre. Short of ammunition and disorganized, panic spread along the Canadian line and the forward companies fell back in disorder upon the rear. The left wing of the 13th, the only uncommitted troops, reacted to the sight of their comrades running toward them by turning and bolting to the rear. Pursued by a small force of Fenians, the Canadians withdrew to Ridgeway, where they boarded the train and returned to Port Colborne, dispirited, discouraged and defeated more by panic than by force of arms.

The Chippawa column had been late in leaving its camp and slow to advance. Moreover, although Peacocke knew that the Port Colborne column was fighting on the limestone ridge, he halted at Stevensville to rest and wait for information. Meanwhile, O'Neill signalled to Captain Hynes, a representative of the Fenian High Command in Buffalo, that his command would be surrounded by British and Canadian forces by morning and that although he would not be able to hold out for long, he was prepared to stay and fight if Fenian offensives were taking place elsewhere. Upon receiving word that no other invasion of Canada had been made, O'Neill returned to Fort Erie where he brushed aside opposition from a small force landed at his rear to cut his retreat. The Fenians then crossed the river into American waters where they were intercepted by the USS Michigan and taken into custody.

The Canadian press and public demanded a scapegoat and military authorities were content to let Alfred Booker take the fall. In an effort to clear his name Booker requested an inquiry into his conduct. It was found that for the most part he had acted appropriately (although he had ordered his troops into a defensive square to fight a cavalry that never materialized) but this did little to silence his critics. Booker left the militia and moved from Hamilton to Montreal, where he died embittered in 1871. John O'Neill, on the other hand, reaped the rewards of his success and advanced within the Fenian Brotherhood. With the eventual decline of the Fenian movement his life took a turn for the worse and he died destitute in Nebraska in 1878.

The Battle of Ridgeway had positive consequences for both sides. The Fenians' victory on the battlefield at Ridgeway (and in a second engagement in Fort Erie on the same day) provided a tremendous boost to the Fenian movement. It was the only battle won by the Irish independence movement between 1798 and 1919 and benefited the Fenian movement and O'Neill's career for a few years at least. But the victory was limited as the larger Fenian plan to invade Canada as a whole was unsuccessful. A subsequent attempt to invade Quebec later in 1866 failed, as did forays into Manitoba and Quebec in 1870. Despite these failures, the Fenians were a persistent threat during the first decade of Confederation. It could be said that the Fenians provided a common cause and sense of unity throughout late 19th-century Canada. The Fenian invasion at Ridgeway spurred improvements to the young country's defence network by exposing its vulnerability and helped to galvanize the Confederation movement.

The Ontario Heritage Trust gratefully acknowledges the research of Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Brian A. Reid in preparing this paper.



© [Ontario Heritage Trust](#), 2006