



3 American attempts to conquer Canada (1775, 1812-14, 1866-71)

Paul Desbiens

Motivation

- During America's first century, the U.S. and Canada were uneasy neighbors. Armed conflicts erupted periodically along the boundary line, which was a no-man's land frequented by counterfeiters and smugglers
- American anger toward Canada surged during the Civil War when it became a haven for draft dodgers, escaped prisoners of war and Confederate agents who plotted hostile covert operations—including raids on border towns and the firebombing of New York City
- The three separate wars between the two countries forced four Canadian provinces to join forces in 1867 (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Ontario) under the leadership of Canada's first **Prime Minister John A Macdonald** and push back on their American aggressors
- Important infrastructure projects were undertaken in light of possible invasion attempts

Motivation

- Despite the great British victories against France during the 1755-1760 period, the American colonies were not very pleased with the high price paid for the conquest and subsequent taxation
- Acclaimed as the first step towards independence, the **Boston Tea Party** was an American political and mercantile protest by the Sons of Liberty in Boston, Massachusetts, on **December 16, 1773**. American Patriots strongly opposed the taxes and demonstrators destroyed an entire shipment of tea sent by the East India Company
- Having to deal with increasing unrest in American colonies, the British proposed and signed the **Act of Québec in 1774** which gave French Canadians the rights to maintain their language, religion and set of rules, including the seigneurial regime
- The Church sided with the British to resist calls for joining American colonies in their quest for independence and most French Canadians remained neutral although some farmers did help Benedict Arnold troops with food when they approached Québec

Two war parties attack Canada 1775

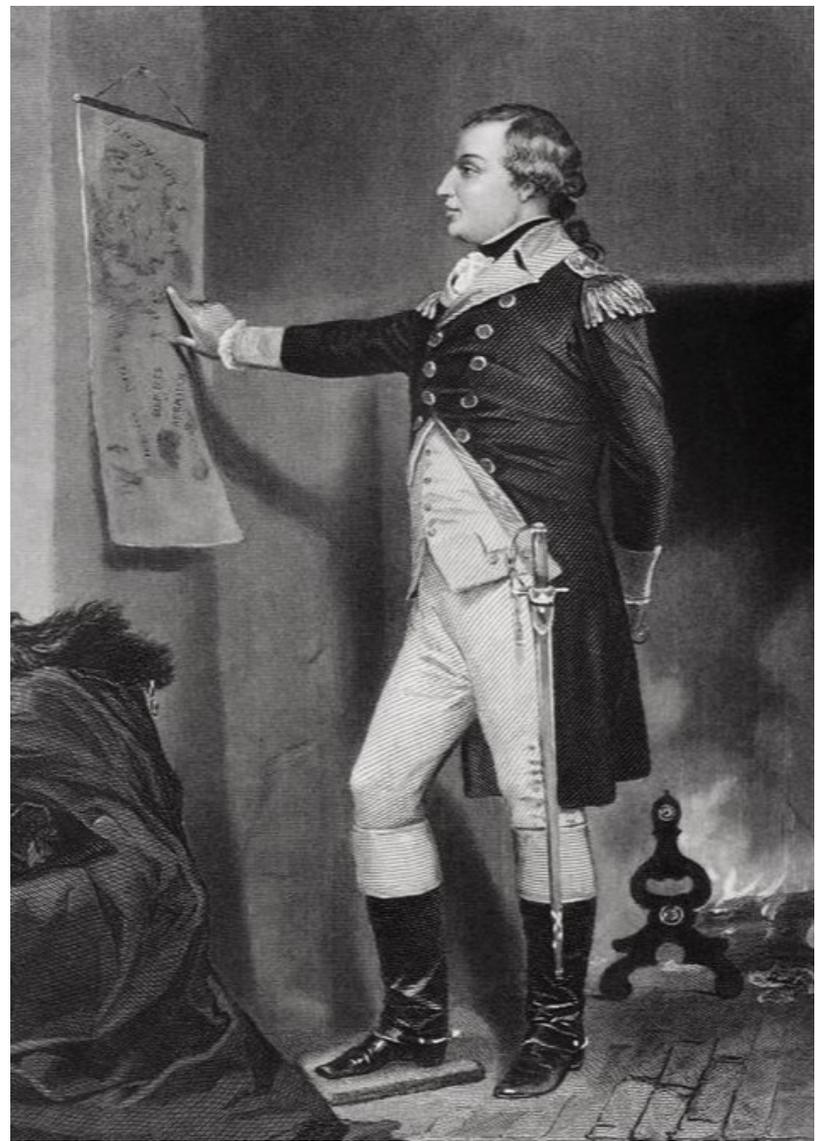
- One expedition with 1,200 men, left Fort Ticonderoga (Formerly Fort Carillon-Lake Champlain) in late August under Major General **Richard Montgomery** and in mid-September began besieging Fort St. Johns, the main defensive point south of Montreal
- After the fort was captured in November, British General Guy Carleton abandoned Montreal, fleeing to Quebec City, and Montgomery took control of Montreal and headed for Quebec with an army much reduced in size by expiring enlistments
- The other expedition of 1,100 men left Cambridge, Massachusetts in September under the leadership of **Benedict Arnold**, and traveled with great difficulty through the wilderness of Maine to Quebec City. Many died or returned home en route and only 600 troops reached Québec. The two forces joined there on December 3

Fort Carillon (Fort Ticonderoga) built by the French in 1755, lost in 1759 and occupied by the American Continental Army in 1775





***Benedict Arnold, Major General,
American Continental Army***



***Irish born Richard Montgomery was Major
General in the American Continental Army***

Battle of Quebec

- The two forces assaulted the city on December 31, 1775 in a snowstorm. The battle was a disastrous defeat for the Continental Army; Montgomery was killed and Arnold wounded, while the city's defenders suffered few casualties. 426 American soldiers were made prisoner
- However, this did not discourage Arnold who camped outside of the fortifications, maintained the siege of the City. 2,000 American soldiers arrived in Quebec in March 1776 but it was too little, too late. On May 6th, 1776, 8,000 British soldiers from Europe landed in Québec under the leadership of General John Bourgoyne.
- Shortly afterwards, General Carleton launched a counter-offensive, ultimately driving the smallpox-weakened and disorganized Continental forces back to Fort Ticonderoga, Lake Champlain
- The Continental Army, under Arnold's command, were able to hinder the British advance sufficiently that an attack could not be mounted on Fort Ticonderoga in 1776. The end of the campaign set the stage for Burgoyne's campaign of 1777 to gain control of the Hudson River valley



Battle of Québec December 31, 1775

Arnold the traitor

- In 1780, **George Washington** approved of the nomination of Arnold as the chief commanding officer of the **West Point** base on the Hudson River. Arnold was disappointed for not being promoted earlier to higher ranks in the American army. He also had a strong spending tendency and negotiated through a spy network, the surrender of West Point to the British forces. This plan failed and Arnold barely escaped by joining British forces
- Arnold eventually moved to London England where he died in 1801. To this date, Arnold is considered as one of **America's biggest traitors**
- Canada lived in peace with its neighbour until 1812 when a new war between the two countries erupted

The War of 1812-14

- By the time the War of 1812 rolled around almost four decades after the 1775 failed conquest, the so-called “war hawk” members of Congress were clamoring for a second go-around. There were even a few calls for part or all of Canada, then a British colony, to be annexed
- At that time, around 7.5 million people lived in the United States, compared to only about 500,000 in Canada, many of whom were of French or American descent rather than British
- In June 1812, the United States declared war on Great Britain, citing among its grievances the practice of removing sailors from American merchant ships and forcing them to serve in the British navy. The United States also took issue with a system of blockades and licenses designed to halt trade with Napoleonic France, and with Britain’s supposed foment of Native American unrest



War of 1812

- President **James Madison** approved a three-pronged assault against Canada. Many Americans believed the invasion would be a cakewalk, particularly since Britain was so distracted by the Napoleonic Wars in Europe
- Former President Thomas Jefferson called the acquisition of Quebec a “mere matter of marching,” while Speaker of the House Henry Clay, a prominent war hawk, declared that the militiamen of Kentucky were capable of capturing Upper Canada (essentially modern Ontario) and Montreal without any assistance
- Yet despite its population advantage, the United States had only about 12,000 men in uniform, including too many incompetent officers and too many raw, untrained recruits

British forces control the Great Lakes

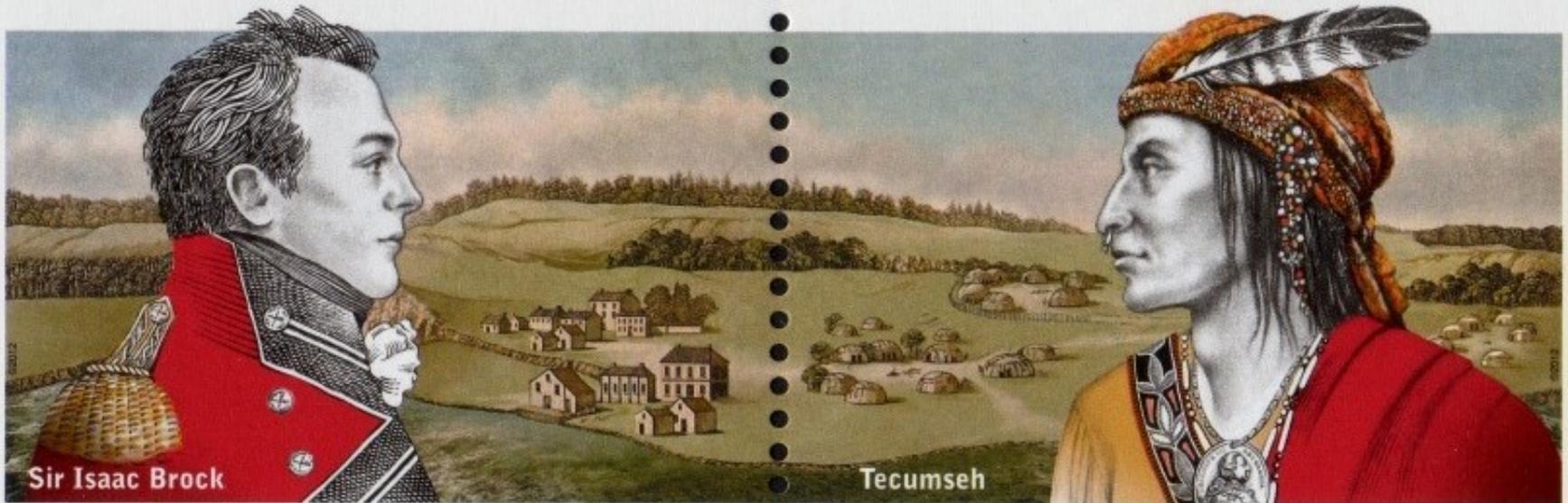
- The British controlled the Great Lakes and were therefore better able to move troops and supplies. Moreover, they received support from Canadians, who many Americans falsely believed would welcome them as liberators, and from Native American tribes worried about U.S. expansionism
- The U.S. General William Hull assembled a force of about 2,000 men and on July 12, 1812 he crossed the Detroit River where he immediately issued a written proclamation telling inhabitants that they would be emancipated from tyranny and oppression
- These words proved immediately laughable. Hull briefly laid siege to Fort Malden but soon withdrew after warriors under the leadership of Shawnee chief Tecumseh intercepted his supply lines
- British commander **Isaac Brock** then chased the Americans back across the river and began launching cannon fire at Fort Detroit from the Windsor side

Historical Post Stamps

THE WAR OF 1812

An alliance of leaders

They protected territories
from American expansionism



Sir Isaac Brock

Tecumseh

The War of 1812
La guerre de 1812

CANADA 

The War of 1812
La guerre de 1812

CANADA 

Brock intimidates Hull and win his bet

- Brock intimidated Hull by pretending that once combat started, he would be unable to control his native allies. Hull ended up surrendering his entire army and the city of Detroit that August after a cannonball smashed into his officers' mess, killing four. Hull was later court-martialed and convicted of cowardice and neglect of duty
- At around that same time, the British captured Fort Dearborn in present-day Chicago, along with an American outpost on Mackinac Island between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan.
- Further east, U.S. General Stephen Van Rensselaer prepared an October 11 assault on Queenston Heights, located on the Canadian side of the Niagara River. Roughly 300 Americans were killed or wounded in the battle, while the British suffered some 100 casualties. NY militiamen refused to support Van Rensselaer

A two prong attack to capture Montreal

- **The Châteauguay Battle** (October 25-26, 1813): Aware of Major General Wade Hampton's advance into Lower Canada, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles-Michel de Salaberry, charged with defending the Upper Richelieu, built a series of fortified positions along the Châteauguay River. Hampton advanced with about 3,000 soldiers while Salaberry had under his command roughly 400 militia and First Nations fighters as well as 1,300 men led by Lieutenant-Colonel George Macdonell. Dividing his force for frontal and flank attacks, Hampton's brigades retreated in confusion after skirmishing with Salaberry's troops
- **The Crysler's Farm Battle** (November 11, 1813): In October Major General James Wilkinson began a coordinated campaign to capture Montreal with between 7,000 and 8,000 soldiers based at Sackets Harbor, NY. He was to link up with Major General Wade Hampton's army which was to advance on Montreal along the Richelieu River. British Lieutenant-Colonel Joseph Morrison's force of about 1,100 men pursued Wilkinson's flotilla down the St. Lawrence River. When the Americans turned to engage with about 3,000 of their force, the British landed and took up a strong defensive position on John Crysler's farm. After a bloody battle Wilkinson's troops hastily returned to French Mills, New York, where they took up winter quarters abandoning efforts to capture Montreal after hearing news of Hampton's defeat at Chateauguay



Laura Secord was a Canadian heroine of the War of 1812. She is known for having walked 20 miles (32 km) out of American-occupied territory in 1813 to warn British forces of an impending American attack. Secord had secretly acquired information about a planned American attack, and stole away on the morning of 22 June to inform Lieutenant James FitzGibbon in the territory still controlled by the British. The information helped the British and their Mohawk allies repel¹⁶ the invading Americans at the Battle of Beaver Dams

1813-1814 United States come back

- The United States pulled its act together in 1813 with the help of an improved navy, a larger army, new military commanders such as future President William Henry Harrison and more experienced troops. Over the span of a few months, American troops destroyed the British fleet on Lake Erie, took over strategically important Fort George near the mouth of the Niagara River and reclaimed Detroit
- The Americans also captured York (now **Toronto**) on April 27, 1813 and burned several government buildings
- More fighting took place along the Niagara River in 1814, but by that time the Napoleonic Wars were winding down and Britain was sending thousands of veterans to the American front. “Most people understood that the USA would now be mainly on the defensive and Canada was now beyond its reach

War of 1812-1814 White House set on fire by the British troops

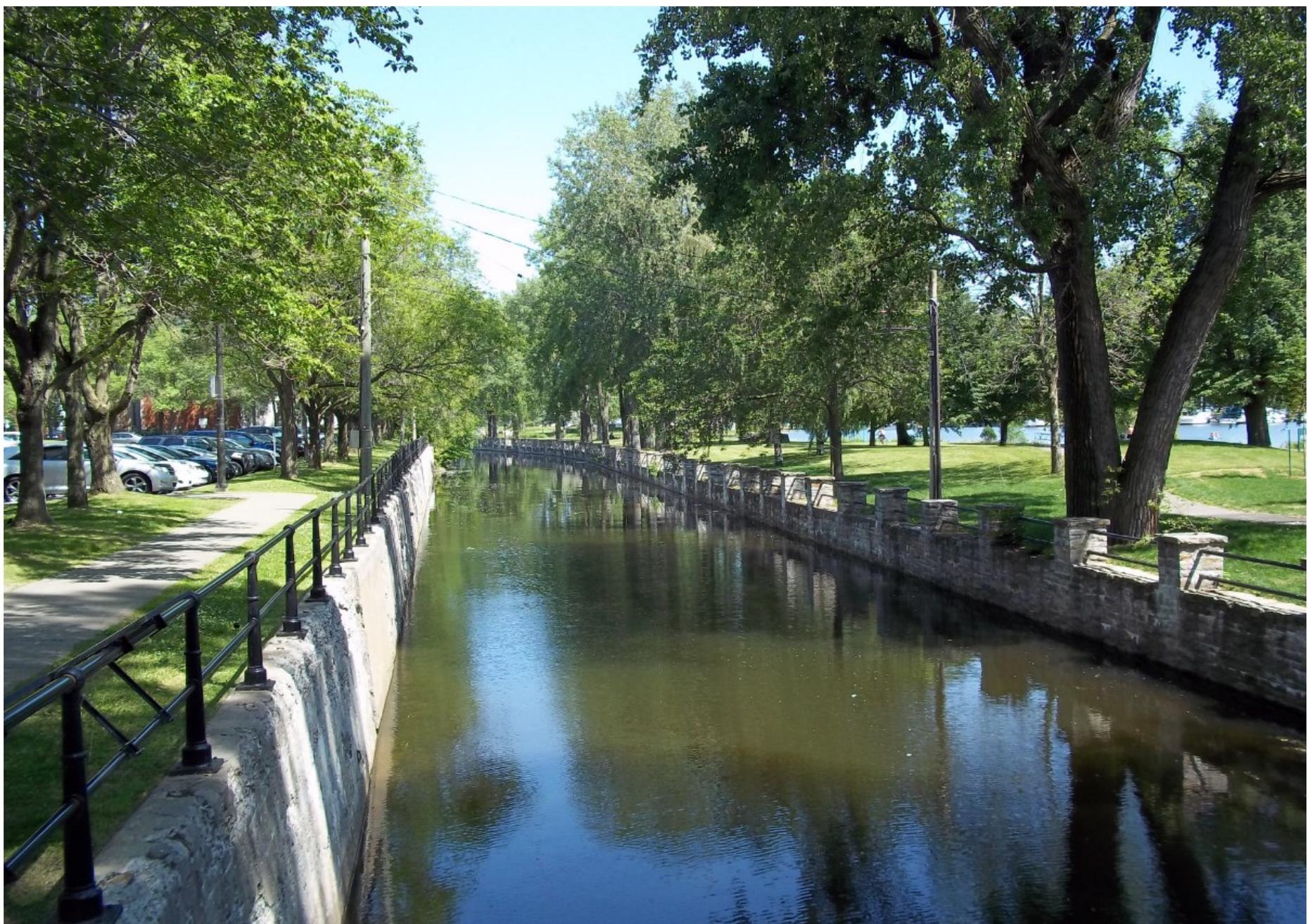


1814

- On **August 24, 1814**, after defeating the Americans at the Battle of Bladensburg, a British force led by Major General Robert Ross burned down multiple buildings, including the **White House**, the **Capitol** building, as well as other facilities of the U.S. government. This was the revenge for the burning of Toronto a year earlier
- The most formidable effort by the British in 1814 was the invasion of northern New York, in which Governor Sir George Prevost led 11,000 British veterans of the Napoleonic Wars to Plattsburgh on Lake Champlain. However, Prevost was hesitant to attack, and the defeat of the British fleet in Plattsburgh Bay by the American commodore, Thomas Macdonough, on 11 September led Prevost to withdraw his troops
- Prevost's decision to withdraw from American territory affected peace negotiations in Ghent, which had begun in August 1814. Had Prevost's invasion succeeded, **much of upper New York State might be Canadian today**. However, his withdrawal forced the British peace negotiators at Ghent to lower their demands and accept the status quo. When the treaty was signed on Christmas Eve 1814, all conquests were to be restored and disputes over boundaries were deferred to joint commissions

Ghent Peace Treaty

- The **Treaty of Ghent** ended the War of 1812 between the United States and the United Kingdom. Both sides signed it on **December 24, 1814**, in the city of Ghent, Belgium. It stipulated that all land captured by either side would be returned
- In the aftermath of the war, both the Americans and British fortified the border in preparation for future fighting, but tensions cooled relatively quickly
- This lack of trust in one another led to the construction of canals allowing for navigation from Montreal to the Great Lakes while avoiding the St. Lawrence River between Montreal and Kingston
- **Lachine Canal:** Work on the canal commenced on July 17, 1821 under Chief Engineer Thomas Burnett and Construction Engineer John Richardson. Nearly 500 workers, most of whom were Irish, worked on the Lachine construction site. The canal officially opened in 1825
- **Rideau Canal:** The construction of the canal was supervised by Lieutenant-Colonel John By of the Royal Engineers. Since there was little local population in which to find labourers, Colonel By had to bring some 2000 men from Ireland. The canal work started in the fall of 1826, and it was completed by the spring of 1832



Lachine Canal, Montréal 1821-1825



Rideau Canal 1826-1832

Third American attempt to conquer Canada

The American Irish were an important part of the Civil War (Apr. 12, 1861 - May 9, 1865) where they gained battle skills. However there were Orange Riots between Irish Catholics and Protestants that killed scores of New Yorkers — indicative of the difficulty that confronted the Irish in assimilating into American culture. It took more than a generation — decades, in fact — for the Irish Catholic refugees who arrived in the United States after the Great Hunger struck Ireland in 1845 to blend into the American melting pot

Upon their arrival, the Irish faced the blistering scorn of anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant “Know-Nothings.” They had been able to survive seven centuries of British colonization by refusing to be acculturated, so why should they behave any differently in the United States?



John O'Neill, leader of the Fenians movement

The Fenians

- **John O'Neill**, leader of the Fenians, could never forgive the British for the horrors he had witnessed as a boy during the Great Hunger. After the Emerald Isle had endured 7 centuries of attempts by its occupying neighbor to exterminate its culture, many Irish saw the lackluster British response to their catastrophic potato crop failure in 1845 as nothing less than an endeavor to eradicate them altogether. Having emigrated to New Jersey in 1848, O'Neill transported his anger towards the British with him.
- Therefore, an association of Irish known as “Fenian Brotherhood” or “Irish Republican Organization” was created. Its goal was to weaken the British as much as possible in North-America to eventually force them to withdraw from Ireland. Hence all British Army forts, customs posts in Canada were targeted between 1866, and 1871
- While authorities in the United States arrested the men and confiscated the arms of the Fenian Brotherhood, there was speculation that some in the United States government had ignored the preparations undertaken by the Fenians because of anger over actions that could have been construed as British assistance to the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War

The Fenians

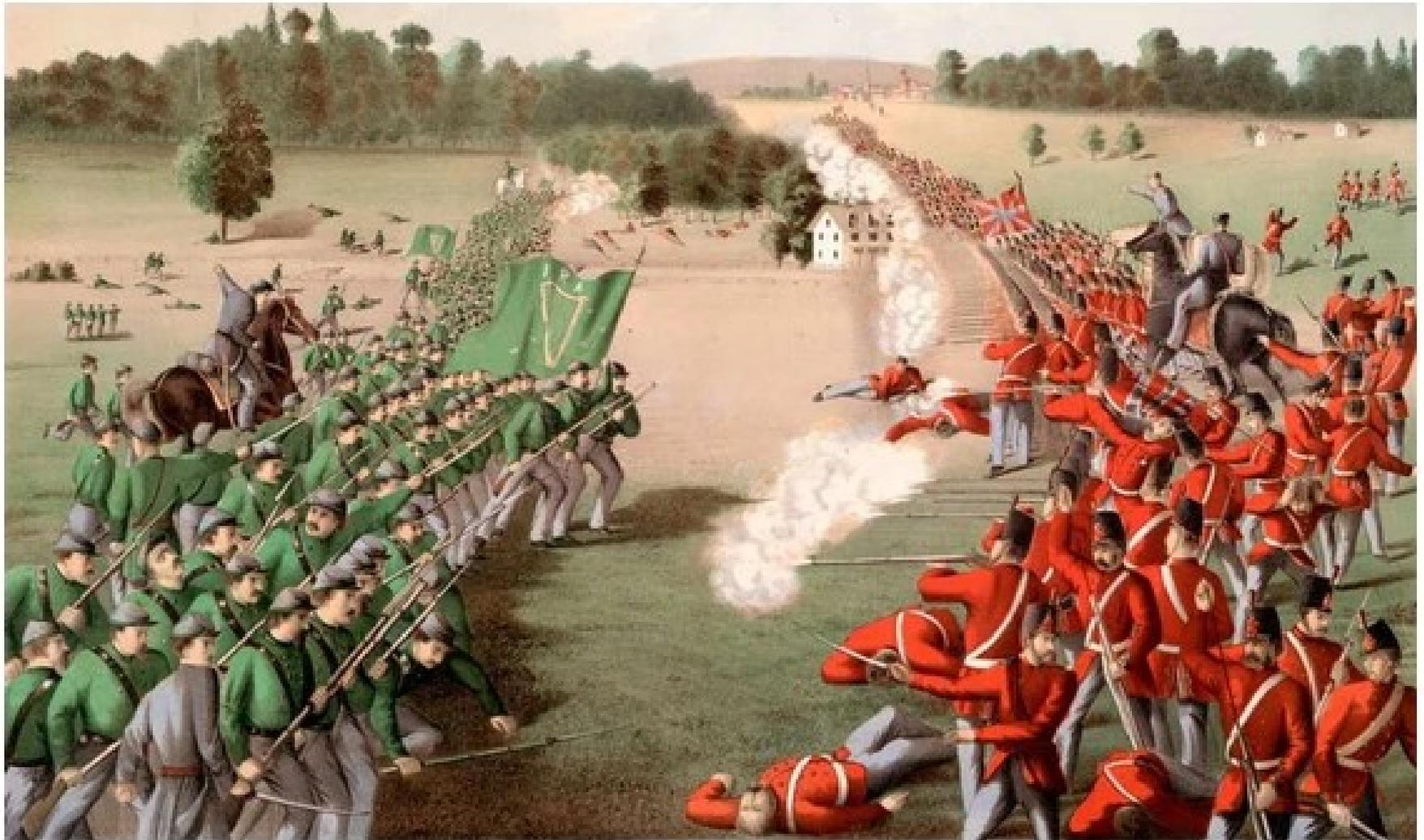
- Although an attack on a foreign country with which the United States maintained peaceful relations ran afoul of American neutrality laws, the plan also had the tacit approval of the White House
- Many Americans hoped Canada would become the next territory to be absorbed by the United States as it fulfilled its expansionist Manifest Destiny. The U.S. government sold surplus weapons to the Irish militants, and **President Andrew Johnson** met personally with their leaders, reportedly giving them his implicit backing
- In the early morning hours of **June 1, 1866**, O'Neill fulfilled a lifelong dream by leading his 800 men (Irish Republican Army) across the Niagara River and the international border

The Fenians

- O'Neill proved to be a talented commander and tactician when he confronted a combined British and Canadian force the following day outside the village of Ridgeway, 20 miles south of Niagara Falls. Although outnumbered, the grizzled army of Civil War veterans used its experience to rout a makeshift defense force
- O'Neill followed that up with another triumph in a guerilla fight through the streets of Fort Erie. It marked the first Irish military victory over forces from the British Empire since 1745
- Other Irish-Americans poured into Buffalo to join the fight. The American government, however, severed the Fenian supply lines in what the Irishmen saw as a **betrayal by Johnson**. Forced to retreat, O'Neill shook hands with nearly two dozen prisoners of war, informed them they were again free men and vowed to return to Canada soon



A painting by Toronto artist Alexander von Erichsen of the Battle of Ridgeway in 1866. PHOTO BY COURTESY OF THE FORT ERIE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



A heavily stylized lithograph of the Battle of Ridgeway published soon after the clash. In reality, the lines weren't nearly this close, and the Fenian forces weren't nearly as green. PHOTO BY LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA

The Fenians in Vermont

- O'Neill was not discouraged by his failed attempt to conquer Canada and on May 25, 1870, he launched another **attack from the Vermont border**. O'Neill's force, which included many men from the mill cities of New England, cheered as it charged past the iron post marking the border
- However, Canadians had been informed of the intended raid. Hiding behind bushes and in rifle pits concealed by time-scarred boulders atop Eccles Hill—which rose steeply on the west side of the road between Franklin and Frelighsburg, Quebec—approximately 50 Canadian militiamen and farmers rained down bullets upon the invaders and the panicked Fenians scrambled for cover behind stone walls, outhouses and chicken coops. The Fenians retreated to Vermont in a totally disorganised fashion
- Moments later a U.S. marshal suddenly appeared at John O'Neill's side. The marshal declared that he was under arrest by order of **President Ulysses S. Grant**. Thrown into the backseat of a waiting carriage, O'Neill was whisked away from the battlefield and jailed in Burlington, VT
- At the end of July 1870, O'Neill was sentenced to two years' imprisonment, but with other Fenian prisoners was pardoned by President Ulysses S. Grant in October



Canadian militia pose next to a dead Fenian killed during an 1870 raid into Quebec. PHOTO BY MISSISQUOI HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTIONS



A painting of the scene at Frelighsburg, Quebec, where British troops fought a Fenian force on June 8, 1866. PHOTO BY LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA



MP D'Arcy McGee assassinated by a Fenian

One of the most prominent Irish critics of the raids was Thomas D'Arcy McGee. An Irish Catholic and Father of Confederation, he objected vehemently to secret paramilitary societies trying to tear down the very country he had just helped to create. McGee called the Fenians “impediments to Ireland’s reconstruction” and urged Irish nationalists to put down the gun and obtain independence the way Canada had; peacefully, and by remaining in the British Empire.

A Fenian fatally shot McGee outside his home on April 7, 1868.

CITY OF OTTAWA
ADVANCE

PROCLAMATION!

WHEREAS, THE
Honorable Thomas D'Arcy McGee
A Member of the House of Commons of the Dominion of Canada, was
FOULY ASSASSINATED IN THIS CITY, on the MORNING of the
SEVENTH DAY of APRIL, 1868, in accordance with a Resolution of
the CORPORATION, I, HENRY JAMES FRIEL, Mayor of the City
of Ottawa, do hereby offer a

REWARD

\$2,000

For the Apprehension and Prosecution to Conviction of the Assassin.

I hereby also offer a like sum of

TWO THOUSAND DOLLARS

For the APPREHENSION and CONVICTION of any party or parties IN ANY WAY
IMPLICATED IN or CONNECTED WITH, OR PRIVY TO, THE PERPETRATION of this
ATROCIOUS CRIME.

Given under my Hand at the City of Ottawa, this SEVENTH day of APRIL, A.D., 1868.

HENRY J. FRIEL,
MAYOR OF OTTAWA.

BELL & WOODHEAD, PRINTERS.

End of the Fenian raids on Canada

- On October 5, 1871 O'Neill, launched his **third attempt** to conquer Canada. With a small number of supporters he seized the Hudson's Bay Company post at **Pembina, Manitoba** on ground then considered to be in dispute between Canada and the United States
- He was at once arrested by U.S. troops, but was discharged by an American court on the ground that his offence had been committed in Canada. This was his last raid. Seven years later he died of a paralytic stroke. This was the last attempt by an American (Irish) to conquer Canada
- **Both countries have since enjoyed the longest undefended border in the World and remained each other's best allies**



Today's Canada-US Border



General conclusion

- **Battle of Quebec:** It was a very menacing attack on Quebec City but the fortifications and the American decision to attack in the middle of a snow storm allowed the British to resist but the margin was thin
- **The 1812 War:** The British were very engaged on the European front waging Napoleonic battles. Americans believed they had a chance to conquer Canada and expand their country. They almost succeeded but the victory in Waterloo allowed the British to reinforce their colony and Americans pulled back
- **Fenian attacks:** This was the third and last American attempt to conquer Canada. We could categorise it more as skirmishes than conquest battles because it was never officially supported by Washington