

The Cobourg Conspiracy

In mid-July 1838, Samuel P. Hart traveled to Rochester, where he came across John Montgomery. Montgomery had recently fled from Fort Henry and opened a tavern that had become the meeting place of a group plotting to wage war against Canada. It was at this tavern where he also met Henry J. Moon, another refugee. Moon expressed interest in a money-making venture and was informed of a scheme to acquire a schooner equipped with two cannons and carry out subversive activities.

Hart journeyed to Oswego, where he acquired a schooner named the *Guernsey*. On July 26th, Ben Lett, a notorious criminal, and nine other men joined him aboard the vessel. The next morning, the schooner set sail from Oswego accompanied by another ship, both stocked with ammunition, matches, and turpentine. The flammable liquid was intended to ignite Cobourg in flames after the bank had been robbed and two or three "Tories" plundered, and as an example to others. Hart specifically targeted Sheppard McCormick, the customs officer at Cobourg, whom he wanted to kill because of McCormick's involvement in cutting off the *Caroline* in the Niagara in December 1837.

Under the cover of midnight, a group of conspirators landed five miles from Cobourg, near the Evan's farm and made their way to the farmhouse of a reformer Joseph Ash. There, they hatched a plan to murder a wealthy farmer Maurice Jaynes, rob the private bank opposite St. Peter's Church, and seek retribution against Hon. George S. Boulton and D'Arcy Boulton. The Boltons had defended the Short Hill raiders at Niagara* the previous year. However, the group ultimately decided to delay their revenge until Monday night.

Initially, Moon had planned to take action against the bandits, but he ultimately decided against it. Instead, he contacted D'Arcy Boulton the following Monday and revealed the conspiracy. This led to the Ash family farmhouse where the bandits were hiding being surrounded, and several of them were captured.

On September 13, 1839, the conspirators, comprising British subjects charged with treason and Americans charged with felony, were brought to trial. As ironic as it may seem, the very same D'Arcy Boulton whom they conspired to murder (assigned by the Crown to defend them) stood as their legal representation. After 17 hours of trial, a verdict of guilty was reached and the Cobourg Conspiracy came to a close. Hart was sentenced to seven years in prison, while Lett unfortunately managed to escape, only to wreak further havoc later on.

*The Raid on Short Hills was an attack by the Patriots on the Niagara Peninsula during the Upper Canada Rebellion. On June 11, 1838, a rebel raiding party of 26 Patriots, led by James Morreau, crossed the Niagara River into Upper Canada. After camping in the woods, they attacked a detachment of Queen's Lancers lodged at John Osterhout's tavern in St Johns. The Patriots fled westward towards Hamilton, but were captured by the Lincoln Cavalry, Gore

District militia volunteers, Queen's Lancers, and Natives from the Grand River. The leaders were gaoled at Niagara, and the rest at Drummondville (Niagara Falls, Ontario).

Here's a brief summary of the Raid on Short Hills during the Upper Canada Rebellion:

- On June 11, 1838, a group of 26 Patriots, led by James Morreau, crossed the Niagara River into Upper Canada.
- They attacked a detachment of Queen's Lancers at John Osterhout's tavern in St Johns after camping in the woods.
- The Patriots tried to escape towards Hamilton but were captured by the Lincoln Cavalry, Gore District militia volunteers, Queen's Lancers, and Natives from the Grand River.
- The leaders were imprisoned at Niagara, while the rest were held at Drummondville (Niagara Falls, Ontario).

The Cobourg Conspiracy of 1839 – Youtube video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DiNZ7powFQ>

- Smith, R. (n.d.). *Smith, Ron: Joe Ash and "The Cobourg conspiracy."* Lakeshore Genealogical Society. <https://www.lakeshoregenealogicalsociety.ca/stories/2013-mystery-ancestors/smith-ron-joe-ash-and-the-cobourg-conspiracy>
- (2020). *The Cobourg Conspiracy of 1839*. YouTube. Retrieved September 11, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DiNZ7powFQ>.
- Nasmith, C. (2013, March 5). American-canadian relations could begin to get rocky. *Northumberland Today*, p. 7.