



The St. Albans Raid: A Newspaper Perspective

The St. Albans raid raises interesting questions about how border crises, or events that are represented as crises, get treated differently at the local and national levels.

By WYATT EVANS

The St. Albans raid of October 19, 1864, has come down in Civil War history as a daring venture carried out in retaliation for the Union army's depredations in the Shenandoah Valley. In the popular telling, twenty-one rebel raiders swooped down on the northern Vermont town, robbed three banks, shot up the streets killing one citizen and wounding two more, and tossed bottles of "Greek fire" as they fled on stolen horses. With a posse led by a veteran Union officer in pursuit, they crossed into Canada in late afternoon and scattered to find refuge. Alerted by telegraph of events across the border, Canadian constables arrested most of the raiders the following day. Following drawn-out legal proceedings in the Canadian courts, the raiders were released in December 1864, to the consternation of United States officials and the press.

Writing in *Vermont History* sixty years ago, Yale historian and future diplomat Robin W. Winks noted that while familiar to Vermonters, the

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raid remained the least understood chapter in Vermont's history. It had been handled "in an unfortunate manner and, even in standard scholarly works, appears to be only a somewhat sensational and highly colorful episode in the Civil War."¹ Oscar Kinchen's *Daredevils of the Confederate Army*, published a year later, partially relieved Winks's criticism by providing a detailed account of the raid and its aftermath. But Kinchen stayed focused on the action and offered only limited interpretation of the raid's significance to the history of the war.²

Historians have since situated the raid among the several plots organized in 1864 by rebel commissioners based in Canada. Funded and authorized by the Confederate government in Richmond, Virginia, they worked to open a second front along the northern border through direct military action and by enlisting northern opponents to the war. The raid occurred one month after escaped Confederate prisoners attempted to free their compatriots on Johnson Island near Sandusky, Ohio. It was followed, in late November 1864, by the arson attack on New York City.³ The raid also numbered among the incidents that strained Anglo-American relations over Canada's harboring of rebel agents. It contributed to what recent scholars—with a nod to a previous generation including Winks and Canadian diplomatic historian W. L. Morton—argue was the "North American crisis." This crisis stemmed from unsettled national boundaries and continuing American attempts to expand at its neighbors' expense. Although much of this recent scholarship has focused on the situation in Mexico and French interference there, the Canadian provinces were also part of the story.⁴

This article offers a different perspective. It argues the St. Albans raid was a border incident appropriated by national officials and opinion leaders to pursue political objectives unrelated to the raid itself. Their reactions to the raid in the form of newspaper articles, official pronouncements, and orders, were unquestionably driven by the threat to northern security the raid revealed. At the same time, these reactions served to promote other causes, including the upcoming presidential election on November 8, trade disagreements with Great Britain, and the expansionist projects referred to above. With Lincoln's assassination in April 1865, the raid resurfaced to help argue that his murder was the product of a grand conspiracy organized by Confederate agents based in Canada.

The St. Albans raid represents an example in United States history, by no means universal but also not unique, when a local event or "crisis" gets amplified by national officials and the press to further unrelated causes. Comparing the coverage of northern Vermont's weekly

newspapers with that of New York's major pro-Union dailies highlights the difference between local and national perspectives. While there are similarities, the Vermont papers generally conveyed an attitude that was pragmatic and transactional in its treatment of the raiders and the Canadian government. There was an immediate and understandable concern for border security, followed by a desire to prosecute the bandits and recover the stolen money. Despite the assertions of the raiders and their lawyers that they had acted under orders, for Vermonters the rebels were never more than a gang of robbers.⁵ For the national press, on the other hand, assuming the raiders were sponsored by the Confederate government remained essential.

The different local attitude stemmed from the simple fact that the raid was a border affair, one event in a long series of cross-border incidents that occasionally punctuated life on the northern frontier. Northern Vermont had a history of commercial intercourse, smuggling, and military actions dating back to the revolutionary period, the War of 1812, the Patriot War in 1838, and which continued with the Fenian incursions after the Civil War.⁶ Located ten miles from lower Canada on the eastern shore of Lake Champlain, St. Albans admirably suited the purposes of Lieutenant Bennett Young and his band. As Vermont's northernmost commercial center, it hosted three banks (all of which were robbed), at least two hotels, and two newspapers. Beginning in 1862, the Vermont Central's construction of extensive rail facilities in St. Albans made the town a major transportation hub leading north into Québec and south to New York and Massachusetts.

Technically speaking, the raid was not a raid at all, but an infiltration followed by a surprise attack, as the local accounts made clear. Their initial coverage ranged from publishing the original telegraphic dispatches from St. Albans to Governor Smith in Montpelier, to a full report in the *St. Albans Messenger*. While relating the details of the robberies, the *Vermont Transcript*, St. Albans' second paper, remained unsure as to the attackers' origins. It noted the "appearance of a party of strangers" and concluded that the robbers were secessionists from Canada "who have become desperate from want of means." Eyewitness testimony included false information that three of the raiders were deserters from Vermont regiments. The initial reporting also covered the measures taken to secure St. Albans and Vermont's northern frontier against further attack, noting that Judge Asa Aldis of the Vermont Supreme Court took the train from St. Albans to Montréal that evening. There, he contacted the U.S. consul and Québec Judge Coursol to help arrange the attackers' arrest and extradition. Coursol would play a significant role in the legal proceedings that followed.⁷

Over the next week Vermont papers provided “the particulars,” as they termed the details of the attack, the pursuit, the raiders’ capture, and the preliminary hearing held in the border town of St. Johns. *Burlington Times* editor George Bigelow took the lead in developing the story, traveling to St. Albans and then St. Johns as events unfolded. His interviews with witnesses and participants established the definitive version of events “clipped” by other Vermont papers. In addition to details based on eyewitness accounts, his reporting was noteworthy for its generous portrayal of the youthful rebels, and attention to the mood in Canada.⁸

We learn that Young first arrived on October 10, lodging at the Tremont Hotel for two to three days. He stayed mostly to himself, but several strangers visited him in his room. From other accounts we learn that Young took to reading his Bible aloud, convincing one local lady that the visitors must be from a theological school. They were all well-dressed “and intelligent looking men.”⁹ On the appointed day, they divided into groups, with four to five men entering each bank, while others remained outside to prevent interference. Passers-by were ordered to the town green, and when Collins Huntington, a jeweler, refused to do so, “not seeing the necessity,” one of the raiders shot him in the side, grazing a rib. After robbing the banks—Bigelow provided eyewitness accounts for each of the three—the raiders seized horses and headed north on the road to Sheldon. As they passed, a stable owner whose horses had been purloined tried firing with an old revolver. When the raiders returned fire, a bullet struck E. J. Morrison, a contractor standing on steps nearby. The wound proved fatal. That evening, the water closets of the American Hotel were found burning from a “phosphoric preparation” that was extinguished using grease.

Within twenty-four hours of their wild ride, thirteen of the raiders were in custody (another would shortly be arrested in Montréal, flushed from his hideout brandishing a brace of “seven-shooters” according to a Canadian report) and seven escaped. Canadian police recovered \$83,000 of the stolen money. The rebels’ fate now lay in the hands of the Canadian courts. Jailed in St. Johns, halfway between St. Albans and Montréal at the junction of the Vermont Central and Grand Trunk railroads, their preliminary hearing began on Monday, October 25. Bigelow found the “village” in an almost festive mood. Hotels were filled to capacity and the town’s residents “have opened their doors to accommodate strangers, judges, attorneys, bank officers, Federals, and Confederates, are all gathered together here watching with intense interest the progress of the hearing.”¹⁰ Americans expected that the raiders would be extradited under the terms of the 1842 Webster-

Ashburton Treaty. But the question of whether they would or not, noted the correspondent for St. Albans' *Vermont Transcript*, "trembles on every man's lip." If the court ruled the raiders were belligerents engaged in an act of war, then the extradition clause carried no weight, as it applied only to common criminal offenses. However, the correspondent believed that Canadian Judge Coursol's decision "will be in unison with the principles which lie at the root of the Ashburton treaty."¹¹

The raiders themselves were not hardened rogues, Bigelow reported, but "all manifestly Southern in looks and behavior; all young men; the oldest not over 25; good looking and seemingly happy and careless; they could very well be taken for a band of 'college boys' on a 'bender,' hauled up before a justice for a reprimand." Young took the opportunity to publish a vindication of his actions in the *Montréal Telegraph*, and the *Burlington Free Press* found "the impudence of the fellow . . . refreshing." Confederate agent George N. Sanders arrived in St. Johns to organize their defense, retaining eminent Canadian barristers for the men who were already winning the affection of the Canadian public. Before reporters and attorneys, Sanders discoursed upon the entire state of the war. He and *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley could have made peace in fifteen minutes, had Lincoln let them; McClellan stood no chance in the upcoming presidential contest, but if the Democrats had nominated a peace candidate, they might have carried the vote. If Sanders had known of the raid beforehand, he would have prevented it because it was too small, but the raid was just the start and if up to him:

Buffalo would have been burned long since, and that now there were over 20,000 men of the same stamp of those raiders in Canada, and that these raids would continue to take place and our towns would be burned and pillaged all through on the frontier. Furthermore, these men would not be delivered up and if this complication would cause a war between Great Britain and the North; What did they care? It could not hurt their cause at all but benefit it.¹²

Feeling in Canada, Bigelow continued, was mixed, with many people in St. Johns holding for the Confederate raiders. Female sympathizers from Montréal sent the prisoners some forty boxes of delicacies and liquor, which they enjoyed while confined. Other Canadians held a sterner view toward the Confederates and their deeds. Finally, Bigelow conveyed reports from "reliable gentlemen," knowledgeable about developments in the Canadian provinces and of Confederate actions there. They told him that two thousand veterans from rebel combat regiments had been detached and sent thither "to participate in guerilla expeditions which are now preparing within its borders."

In a development that initially received little attention, Judge Coursol agreed to move the proceedings to Montréal. Bigelow's reporting stressed Coursol's initial refusal to do so, but subsequently the judge had a change of mind. The *St. Albans Messenger* reported the change of venue hinged upon a legal technicality involving rights of appeal and that the U.S. attorney consented. Another factor, unfavorable for the Americans, was "the severe Confederate pressure that would be brought to bear against our cause in Montréal."¹³

At the end of October, the raiders were moved by special train and arrived in Montréal to even greater acclaim. They were feted in their jail cells by secessionist sympathizers. When the hearings began the first week in November, again under Coursol, the correspondent for the *Burlington Free Press* covered the legal details with finesse and predicted the outcome would favor extradition. He described Coursol as "a magistrate of decision and courage, not very erudite perhaps, but clearheaded and knowing how and where to get assistance when he needs it on a knotty point of law." Vermonters appearing as witnesses occupied a quarter of the courtroom in Montréal. And while the popular mood was very much for the raiders, "the great majority of intelligent citizens . . . realize the consequences of war, and the certainty of war if Canada is to be made the stronghold of rebel guerillas and marauding gangs." As for the prisoners, their appearance had improved since St. Johns, "thanks to the attention of their secesh friends in this city." But they were no longer as cheerful and unconcerned. When identified by the Vermont witnesses, they looked anxious and betrayed a growing awareness that the legal outcome "may result in their consignment to the felon's cell or gallows."¹⁴

THE NEW YORK PAPERS

It is a testament to the northern telegraphic network that news of the event appeared just as quickly in the national daily press. In addition to the major New York papers, the *Hartford Daily Courant*, *Baltimore Sun*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer* all carried the story the day after. The *New York Daily Tribune* published this brief notice:

A gang of twenty Rebels yesterday made a raid from Canada into St. Albans, Vt., plundered three banks, stole twenty horses—one apiece—kidnapped several citizens, shot two others, and returned to the protection of the British flag.¹⁵

The *New York Times* relied for its information on telegraphic dispatches from Burlington, likely provided by the editor of one of the local daily papers. Already, notes of exaggeration crept in, with the

Times initially reporting that “British guerillas” had done the deed, shot five people, and that “*Several citizens who resisted were deliberately shot.*” The *Times* wasted no time in offering editorial comment. Noting the recent incursions from Canada, the paper demanded decisive action by Canadian and British officials, more than had been forthcoming in recent violations of neutrality. If events like the St. Albans affair were to repeat themselves, it would prove impossible to prevent “the outraged people from pursuing their enemies across the lines.” Still, the paper struck a conciliatory note, concluding that peace and friendship between the nations were desired.¹⁶

Major General John A. Dix, one of Lincoln’s more able political generals and commander of the Military Department of the East, published an order in the *New York Post* that contributed to the initial coverage in the national papers. After receiving telegraphic dispatches, he ordered his commander in Burlington to “put a discrete officer in command and, if they [the raiders] cannot be found this side of the line, pursue them into Canada if necessary and destroy them.” Dix’s order raised concerns on the Canadian and British side. As historian W. L. Morton noted, if the order had been confirmed by Lincoln, it “would have been in its turn a violation of Canadian neutrality which might well have started the war with England for which the Confederacy longed.” In an editorial, the *New York Herald* took the opportunity to give Secretary of State William Seward, who opposed Dix’s order, a history lesson on British action during the Patriot War of 1838, when they, too, had crossed the international boundary to destroy a vessel threatening security on the border.¹⁷

As the story developed in New York’s major daily papers, reporting of the St. Albans raid quickly became entangled in the upcoming presidential election. The raid occurred at a propitious moment, politically speaking: one week after three crucial state elections and three weeks before the general election on November 8. Republican advocates made ready use of the Canada incursions to paint the Democrats as traitors and fan the flames of border panic. During the week of the hearing at St. Johns, Dix issued a general order directing provost marshals “to exercise all possible vigilance” in detecting persons crossing the border. Information indicated rebel agents in Canada planned to send “large numbers of refugees, deserters, and enemies of the Government with a view to vote at the upcoming presidential election.” Once done casting their ballots, they could be organized to murder and plunder, “as in the recent predatory incursions on the Detroit River and at St. Albans.” Dix ordered Southerners residing in

the department, and this mainly applied to New York City, to register with military authorities by November 3. If they didn't, they would be considered spies or emissaries of the Confederate government.¹⁸

The order and its publication contributed to the rumors circulating in northern cities of Confederate refugees and Southern sympathizers' plans to interfere in the election.¹⁹ The alarm it sounded was part of the Republican scare campaign preceding the election. Just before the raid, pro-Union newspapers published a redaction of Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt's report on the activities of a secret pro-secessionist order centered in the Midwest. Submitted to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton in August, the Republican Congressional Committee released a brief edition to the public that was clearly intended as a campaigning tool. The order's claimed membership numbered in the tens of thousands and was entirely Democrat. Its branches conspired to obstruct the Union war effort and assist rebel agents. Arrests over the summer had dulled their plans somewhat, but "its members assert that foul means will be used to prevent the success of the administration at the coming election."²⁰

Then, on the eve of the election, the flamboyant Major General Benjamin Butler arrived in New York City commanding a regiment sent to safeguard voting. In a lavish statement to the public, Butler announced that troops had been assigned to preserve the peace, "soothe the fears of the weak and timid," and dispel harmful rumors. If not for the government's knowledge of possible raids "like in quality and object to that made in St. Albans," there would be no need for military precautions.²¹ A brief item in the *Tribune*, appearing three days before the election, countered Democratic accusations that the presence of troops would intimidate voters. If New York's Democratic antiwar Governor Horatio Seymour didn't want soldiers at the polls on election day, then "let him advise his Canadian friends to call off their Confederate dogs. If nobody comes to be shot, there will be no shooting."²²

Compared to the local reporting of Bigelow and other Vermont journalists, the national coverage assumed a more aggressive stance toward Canada, advocating for strong measures to prevent further raids. Initially the *Herald* complimented the Canadian authorities on their cooperation in nabbing the raiders, and their intentions to return them. The tone changed at the beginning of November, in an editorial that judged the Confederate depredations from Canada an intolerable threat to the United States. The immediate instigations were rumors of Confederate plans to attack Buffalo, New York, and Sandusky,

Ohio. Drawing from the British example when an Anglo-Canadian force crossed the Niagara River to destroy the steamer *Caroline* in 1838, the *Herald* asserted the same right to self-defense:

The Canadian government is then necessarily in this predicament. If it does not do us justice against those robbers now in custody in Montréal, we shall be fully warranted in following them with an armed force and taking possession of them ourselves. And in case any attack originating in the Canadas is made on Detroit or Buffalo, it will be our right as our duty to follow the raiders into the Canadian territory and “shoot them down.”²³

A week later, on the day of the presidential election and as legal proceedings commenced in Montréal, the *Herald* warned that any “failure in justice” in the St. Albans case would sit poorly with the northern public. The “daily increasing force of rebel cutthroats” threatening peaceful border communities made a quick and proper verdict imperative. If not, the next incident would be followed by an invasion of Canadian territory and summary justice upon the rebel perpetrators. Acknowledging that open conflict between the U.S. and Great Britain was the rebel aim, the *Herald* deemed it up to the Canadians to decide who would suffer most if this occurred.²⁴ And the following day, with Lincoln’s reelection secured, the journal launched even more broadly into Canada’s management of the rebel pirates in its territory. It called upon the new Congress to address the situation on the border, and to revoke the Reciprocity Treaty that gave the Canadas commercial advantages. Tired of the ineffective action of the Canadian government toward rebel agents, the *Herald* again asserted the right of American interference: “Your government is a muddle, in fact no government at all. In such cases the law of the strong hand is the only law that we can recognize.”²⁵

ASSESSING THE THREAT

To this day, historians do not agree on the danger posed by Confederate insurgents based in Canada. Although Jefferson Davis and his Secretary of War James Seddon had funded, to the tune of \$1 million dollars, a “Secret Service” to operate out of Canada, this never translated into a sustained military operation.²⁶ However, there were several incidents following St. Albans, including a foiled attempt to free Confederate prisoners from Camp Douglas in Chicago on election day, reports of an attempted bank robbery in Bellows Falls, Vermont, and the reports of attacks on Buffalo and Sandusky noted above.²⁷ With the election over and Lincoln victorious, the rhetoric and military measures toned down. Dix never followed through on registering southern

residents, and Butler and his forces departed New York City. Two weeks later, on November 25 to be precise, eight Confederate arsonists tried to start a major conflagration by setting fire to hotel rooms and Barnum's Museum with phosphorous bombs.²⁸

How serious was concern in Vermont about the security of the northern frontier? It was serious, without question. But instead of recriminations against Canada and Great Britain, newspapers devoted more discussion to protecting against further raids, reporting on community incidents that might suggest a cross border action, and relaying the details of the legal goings-on in Montréal. Local papers in the weeks following the attack reported on the formation of militias in Vermont border communities and suspicious strangers. The *Vermont Phoenix*, located in southern Brattleboro, offered that while the various rebel plots including St. Albans had so far proven ineffective, "these attempts at mischief show the spirit of our enemies, and the necessity of being watchful...In every village and town of any considerable size, these desperate men may be looked for, and they should be guarded against with great care and vigilance. Every suspicious character, who cannot give a satisfactory account of himself, should be put where he can do no harm. In these perilous times extraordinary measures are called for."²⁹

The *St. Albans Messenger* for December 6 reported that Saturday last, "a stranger stopped at the brickyard about a mile from East Highgate to feed a jaded worn out horse which he rode. His conversation excited so much suspicion that a boy was sent to notify the authorities of the village, who waited in vain for the ill-fated stranger and finally started out to meet him." They did not find him, but did find the horse, completely exhausted, abandoned by the roadside. The next day, a woodcutter ran across "a rough looking fellow" seated on a stump next to a revolver. The woodcutter turned on his heels and headed away. The man was later seen entering the woods "evidently steering for Canada."³⁰

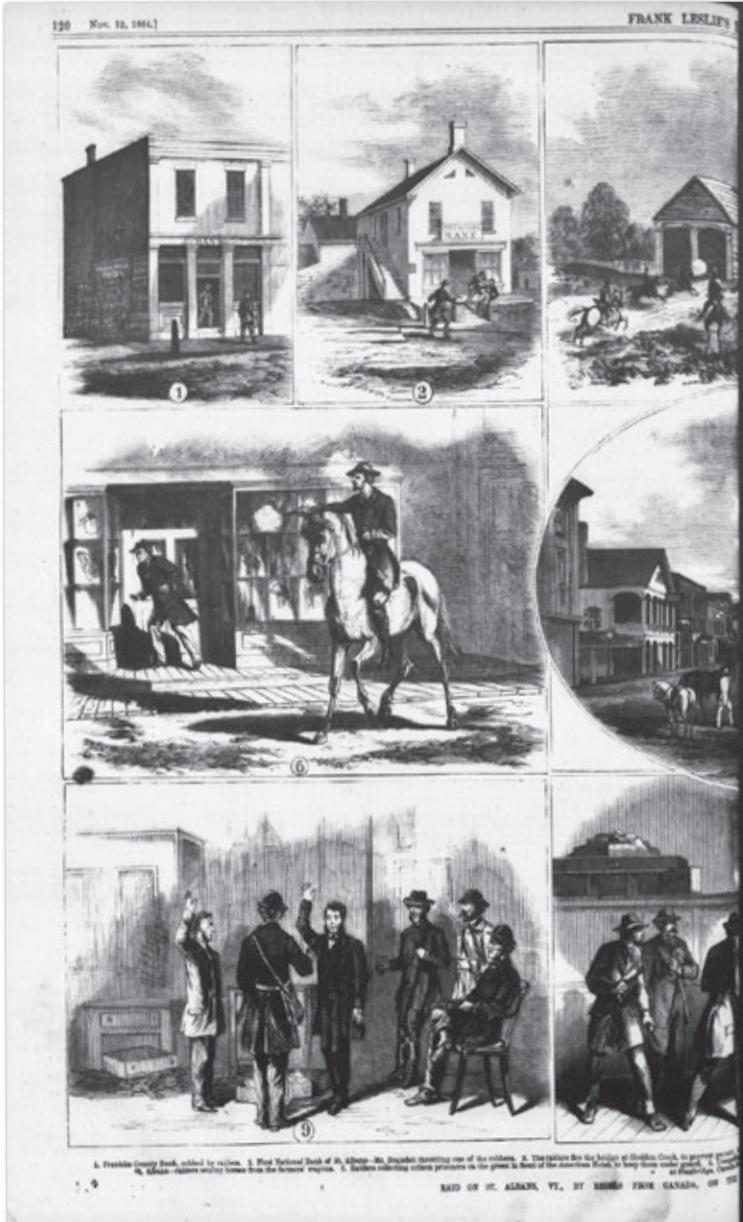
The *Bellows Falls Messenger* reported an attempted nighttime robbery of its bank, with spots of blood found near the vault. Evidently one of the burglars had injured himself in the attempt. Early Sunday evening "a stranger called at O. F. Wood's drug store with a freshly wounded thumb and obtained some spirits to put upon it." Since the break-in had yet to be discovered, no suspicion was aroused. The attempted raid on the bank had stirred up excitement, "but with our present arrangements for meeting such raiders, they are becoming more quiet and rest with a feeling of security."³¹ And finally, a week earlier the *Irassburg Orleans Independent Standard* reported on a feared raid on Ogdensburg, New York, relaying information on strangers seen in the

town and the massing of a rebel force occupying Wells and Mapleleaf islands, eighteen miles upstream.³²

There were also lighthearted takes on events, like the letter to the *Burlington Free Press* by a Congregational minister from Hinesburgh: “While neighboring towns have been scared and excited by actual or threatened invasion, and some have seen robbers in rocks, or imagined the knell of their peace in the report of a hunter’s gun, we have followed our industrious and peaceful ways with none to molest or make us afraid.”³³

The local papers also printed the acts passed by Vermont’s General Assembly, in session when the raid occurred. In what proved a striking coincidence, Governor J. Gregory Smith delivered his annual message to the opening session on October 13. The weekly papers’ slight publication delay, depending on the day a paper appeared, resulted in Vermonters reading his message right before or after the raid took place. In requesting passage of a militia bill, his second request in as many years, Smith noted that Vermont stood “utterly destitute of any arm of defense or any efficient power to resist or prevent invasion.” The recent rebel attempts on Lake Erie and Johnson’s Island “are but evidences of thoroughly organized plans, limited by no means to those special locales, but extending through the whole line of our frontier.” While not overly prophetic given wartime circumstances, Smith’s prescience was hard to miss. The *Rutland Weekly Herald*, strongly supporting establishing a state militia before the raid, remarked that a militia act could hardly be delayed “after this eye-opening demonstration of its necessity.”³⁴ Debate ensued in the legislature over cost, uniforms, and whether the militia should be formed on a select basis to act along the lines of a rapid-response force, or organized on a general plan for twelve of the state’s counties. In the end, uniforms and a general organization won out, and the act passed on November 21.

Other measures spurred by Lieutenant Young’s adventure accompanied the militia bill. They provide an interesting example of a state legislature attempting to fill the void in laws addressing Confederate actions in the northern states. Federal statutes were of little use. The constitutionally defined crime of treason proved difficult to prosecute, and the conspiracy act passed in July 1861 too vague in defining actual criminal offenses. Federal confiscation laws provided for the seizure of property from insurrectionists, a punishment unlikely to have bothered the foot-loose young rebels. The assembly’s “An Act to Prevent Raids,” passed less than a month after the raid, made felonies of conspiring, committing, or assisting in what we would today likely call terrorist acts. They were



Scenes from the St. Albans Raid. Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, 12 Nov. 1864, 120-121. Accessible Archives. The newspaper sent a sketch artist and photographer to St. Albans the week following the raid to capture the scene.

punishable, in the case of conspiring, by up to twenty years hard labor and a \$10,000 fine. If committed, the punishment was death, and for those convicted of assisting, their punishment was the same as those directly involved. A second law, “An Act in addition to an Act to Prevent Raids,” shows the legislature having second thoughts about holding and trying captured rebels near the frontier, where their compatriots could attempt a cross-border rescue with the attendant risks to public safety. The act authorized the governor to remove anyone arrested for raiding to the state penitentiary at Windsor. The chief justice of Vermont’s Supreme Court could likewise relocate the trial to another county.

Two more acts, more quixotic and probably unenforceable in practice, saw the state grant itself the power to pursue legal process under the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, and arrest persons deemed vagrants. The first empowered the local justices of the peace to compel testimony from anyone witnessing a serious crime in which the perpetrator fled into Canada. If convinced that a crime did take place, the justice could then issue a warrant, in the same fashion that grand juries issued warrants for domestic crimes. To whom the warrant was to be served the legislation did not say, but Canadian judges would not have recognized warrants served by local U.S. authorities. The second, entitled “An Act relating to Vagrants,” appears on first glance a latter-day version of the “warning out” measures wielded by colonial New England communities to discourage the indigent poor from entering their towns. This one, however, went further, declaring anyone who was idle, not having visible means of support, not employed, living in taverns, barns, out in the open, “and not giving a good account of themselves,” to be vagrants. Further, the act called out anyone “having his face painted, discolored, covered, or concealed, or be otherwise disguised in a manner to prevent him from being identified and discovered.” If found upon a public road or out in the open, the person was deemed a vagrant liable to arrest.³⁵

THE RAIDERS GO FREE

Following the U.S. presidential election, the raiders’ able Canadian lawyers obtained a postponement to secure confirmation from Richmond that Young and his band had operated under direct orders. Their attempts proved futile as northern detectives intercepted the Confederate messengers. But the Canadian defense team had another card up its sleeve. When court reconvened on the morning of December 13, the raiders’ attorneys challenged Judge Coursol’s jurisdiction in the case. Because the warrant for the raiders’ extradition under the

Webster-Ashburton Treaty had not been issued by an imperial authority, the warrant was not valid. As a provincial magistrate, Coursol also lacked jurisdiction. The judge ordered a recess to consider the matter. When court reconvened that afternoon, he read a prepared statement concurring with the defense and discharged the raiders on the spot. Celebration for the raiders' release spread across Montréal. Police chief Guillaume Lamothe then gave them back the stolen money! The raiders, it was reported, "headed West."³⁶

This was the one point in the St. Albans affair when the local Vermont and national press united in outrage, but still the Vermont papers withheld calls for action against Canada. The *Lamoille Newsdealer* carried the first notice of Coursol's decision after receiving a night dispatch from Montréal. Stating the basic facts, it commented on the likelihood of more cross-border raids and hoped "there will be a sufficient military force so as not to permit such miscreants to reach, alive, the protection of rebel-sympathizers in Canada." The St. Albans *Vermont Transcript* published its Montréal correspondent's letter covering the legal details (noting among other things the absence of the U.S. attorney at the proceedings), and the mood in the courtroom—when applause broke out it was quickly checked. "Your vigilance at St. Albans," the correspondent emphasized, "must not be relaxed at your peril...I have seen nothing in the conduct or appearance of these prisoners...that excites any other feeling than of contempt. The leader pretends to be a 'Lieut. of Retributors' in the Confederate service." The *Caledonian* found the decision to be "in accordance with the general conduct of England and her subjects all through this war."³⁷

Congress received President Lincoln's annual message exactly one week before the raiders' release, and Vermont's weekly papers published it in the same edition as the news from Montréal. With input from Secretary of State William Seward, Lincoln addressed the "recent assaults and depredations carried out by desperate and inimical persons" on the Canadian border.³⁸ Measures contemplated to address the problem included increasing naval forces on the Great Lakes, establishing border controls for persons entering from Canada, and regulating imports, currently duty free according to the terms of the Reciprocity Treaty. Lincoln made it clear that despite the possibility of these measures, "the colonial authorities of Canada are not deemed to be intentionally unjust or unfriendly toward the United States; but on the contrary, there is every reason to expect that, with the approval of the paternal government, they will take the necessary measures to prevent new incursions across the border." The *Burlington Free Press*

naturally found this portion especially relevant to the region, observing that it “can hardly fail to have a favorable effect on the question of the extradition of the raiders. The damage which, without open war, could be inflicted on the Canadian provinces, by the suspension of the Reciprocity treaty, and the restriction of the privilege of free transit across our territory would be immense.”³⁹

For Vermonters, the juxtaposition of Lincoln’s message and Coursol’s action surely seemed ironic. A week later, the *Free Press* reported more details on the release, suspicions that Coursol and Lamothe were bribed, the opinions of Canadians opposed to the proceedings, and sentiment in the region. Indignation was intense and increasing “as the facts become known. If what we see and hear is any indication, the country is ripe for the repeal of the reciprocity treaty, non-intercourse with Canada, and absolute prohibition of the right of way across our territory for any Canadian. The course of the Canadian government may possibly modify this feeling to some extent, but it cannot extinguish it.”⁴⁰ And the week following, December 30, the *Free Press* reported the rearrest of the raiders and that Dix had sent a “confidential agent” to Canada: “The Canadian authorities took every necessary step to perform international obligations. The best understanding prevails between the Québec and Washington Governments.”⁴¹

On the national level, the raiders’ release generated official threats and journalistic assaults. Major General Dix issued another order, more inflammatory than October’s. Given the court’s discharge of the “rebel marauders” and that further enterprises of the same kind were under preparation on Canadian soil, military commanders were henceforward instructed “to shoot down the perpetrators, if possible, while in commission of their crimes, or, if it be necessary, with a view to their capture, to cross the boundary between the United States and Canada. Said commanders are hereby directed to pursue them wherever they may take refuge.”⁴² If carried out, these orders would have brought Great Britain and the United States into open conflict. Lincoln disapproved them and Dix revoked the border crossing provisions three days later.

The *New York Tribune* opined that Dix’s orders were justified given Coursol’s decision and established international law. The *Tribune* matched this editorial with another denouncing the frauds of the Reciprocity Treaty. Some had condemned the treaty as “a Slave State policy fastened upon the North to prevent the acquisition of more free territory by the annexation of any of the British Provinces, which were immensely bribed by the treaty to stay out of our Union and not come into it.” The editorialist then focused upon the economic issues, the

export of agricultural produce and the return of manufactured goods, to Canada's advantage.⁴³

There was a flurry of activity in Congress following Lincoln's message and the raiders' release. Resolutions on St. Albans and the Reciprocity Treaty were offered and passed in late December and early January 1865. Although the St. Albans raid and the raiders' release renewed calls for its termination, opposition to the treaty had been growing for a year if not longer. June 1864 marked the treaty's tenth anniversary, at which time either country was free upon notice to terminate the agreement. Opposition in the United States to this early NAFTA-like agreement stemmed from the perception that the treaty provided unfair advantages to Canada. Duty-free imports of Canadian wool and lumber hurt American producers in the Upper Midwest. The imposition of provincial duties in Canada, supposedly to help finance the system of canals built to bypass Niagara Falls and the St. Lawrence rapids, further disadvantaged American manufacturers. There was also the issue of fisheries. But some interests supported the treaty as it allowed the transshipment of American goods using the Canadian canals to Atlantic seaports.⁴⁴

Over the winter, the Vermont papers carried news on the treaty, noting the impact on Canada's economy, a Canadian delegation's travel to Washington hoping to forestall abrogation, and the resolution of the New York Chamber of Commerce to support the treaty "as very favorable to lake commerce and the lake cities." In a lengthy editorial, the *Rutland Weekly Herald* homed in on the economic consequences of Canada's refusal to extradite the raiders: continuation of the passport system imposed following the raid, which had emptied their railroad cars of passengers, and termination of the Reciprocity Treaty. In late January, Congress debated the treaty again, and Charles Sumner's speech on the floor of the Senate was published (or clipped without attribution) on the front page of the *Burlington Free Press*. St. Albans did not enter into the picture, but the disadvantages to the United States under the terms of the treaty did.⁴⁵

The national papers also covered the treaty debates, although the New York papers found themselves declaiming against it while the Chamber of Commerce supported its commercial provisions. In the main, however, the major pro-Union dailies maintained their bellicose tone, with the *New York Herald* leading the way. A December 15 editorial stated the American people were "prepared" for Dix's order: "Shoot the raiders on the spot—capture them wherever found—surrender them under no circumstances whatever. Such orders have the

true ring, and will be applauded and approved by all true Americans.”⁴⁶ The next day, the *Herald* reprinted detailed reports from Canadian newspapers on the proceedings in Coursol’s court, and an editorial from the *Toronto Globe* noting the similarities to the 1838 raids on Canada from the United States and the possibility, in the present, of further raids from the Fenians (intent upon liberating Ireland) with the cooperation of the Confederates: “We have at the present two distinct bodies of conspiritors [sic], both interested in creating a war between England and the United States. We have the Confederates, who see in it their only hope of salvation; we have the Fenians, who think by it to be able to ‘rekindle the fires of liberty on the altars of Ireland.’ It would be very strange if they did not coalesce.”⁴⁷

This treatment continued into the following year, when a retrial of the raiders (those who had been recaptured) led to a second release because the judge ruled the extradition clause invalid. The *New York Tribune* lambasted the decision and the *Toronto Leader’s* coverage, concluding that Canada must decide whether to honor the Webster-Ashburton Treaty and if not, “we can then decide what measures will be necessary to obtain indemnity for the past and security for the future.”⁴⁸

AFTERSHOCKS

With Lincoln’s assassination on the evening of April 14, 1865, the St. Albans raid reentered the national news. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton’s telegraphic dispatch published in the national papers announced that Lewis Payne, Seward’s attacker, was one of the St. Albans raiders. Although the identification proved incorrect, it stemmed from the theory held by Stanton and others in the Union government that John Wilkes Booth’s murder of the president was a grand conspiracy involving the Confederate leadership and its agents in Canada. This theory found ready believers in the national press. For the *New York Herald* Lincoln’s killing was,

not the first great outrage that has been planned in Canada and approved at Richmond. No doubt it was only a part of the same plot which instigated the St. Albans raid and the attempt to burn down the city of New York. The St. Albans raid was not an act of war. It was a combination of robbery and murder too despicable to be dignified by any martial name.⁴⁹

The *New York Times* echoed the same opinion, offering there was little doubt that Confederate agents in Canada were the authors of the St. Albans raid and other depredations. Lincoln’s assassination “was but one incident of a conspiracy which they devised and set in motion.”⁵⁰

But the *Times* laid these events at the door of slavery and the evil spirit it manifested in the Southern cause. “The barbarities practiced on the black man prepared the way for the barbarities practiced on the white.” The instances of this barbarity during the war included the Fort Pillow massacre, the attack on St. Albans, piracy on the oceans and Great Lakes, and the attempt to burn New York.⁵¹

A week later, President Andrew Johnson’s proclamation offered rewards for the arrest of Jefferson Davis and the Confederate agents, including George N. Sanders, who had been based in Canada.⁵² During the military trial of Booth’s co-conspirators beginning in early June, there was tantalizing evidence offered to support the theory that the Confederacy had organized Lincoln’s murder through its Canadian commissioners. Godfrey Hyams, a Southern agent involved in a plot to spread yellow fever through contaminated blankets, testified to seeing Booth with Sanders in Montréal at the time of the St. Albans raid. A photographer’s assistant testified to regularly seeing Sanders in Montréal, and of having photographed Booth there.⁵³ Drafts on the Bank of Montréal had been found on Booth’s body, the same bank that served as the temporary depository for the St. Albans loot when the raiders went to court. George Sanders’ pronouncements at St. Johns the previous fall came back to haunt him, as a Burlington attorney present at the initial hearings recalled his threats against the northern homefront.⁵⁴

The government’s attempts to prove a grand conspiracy foundered on a lack of direct evidence. The chief prosecutor, Joseph Holt, also relied on the testimony of Sanford Conover, a witness whose fabrications knew no bounds. Conover, whose real name was Charles A. Dunham, testified that as a clerk in the Confederate War Department, he traveled to Canada in 1864. There, he became privy to plots including St. Albans, the poisoning of New York’s Croton Reservoir, and Lincoln’s assassination. He was also an occasional correspondent to the *New York Tribune*, and wrote the paper in March 1865 of the plot against Lincoln.⁵⁵

As for the Vermont papers, although there was ample coverage of the conspirators’ trial and mention of the Confederate agents who figured in it, little attention was given to the St. Albans raid as part of a grand conspiracy. For Vermonters, Young and his gang remained a band of outlaws who robbed three banks and murdered a townsman. Following Stanton’s announcement regarding Payne’s identity and the discovery of rebel documents in Richmond, St. Johnsbury’s *Caledonian* offered that the St. Albans raid, along with the New York arson attacks and piracy on the Great Lakes, proved the Confederacy’s new means of

warfare “was robbery, arson, and murder.” St. Albans’ *Vermont Transcript* found the most insidious action by Confederate agents in Canada to have been the planned bio-warfare attacks revealed by Godfrey Hyams: “We did not believe that such monsters of crime exist on the face of the earth. But it was too true. The plot was formed.” At the end of June, at the same time Booth’s co-conspirators received their sentences, St. Albans saw the trial of Hezekiah Payne, one of the real alleged raiders, for the murder of the unfortunate Morrison. The *Vermont Transcript* carried the entire testimony.⁵⁶ Found not guilty, local constables rearrested Payne for the robberies and held him in the county jail for want of bail.

Once the conspirators’ trial ended, the St. Albans raid faded from the national story. For northern Vermonters, the affair continued for years, as the local banks worked to recover the stolen money.

In retrospect, the St. Albans raid raises interesting questions about how border crises, or events that are represented as crises, get treated differently at the local and national levels. As noted earlier, the episode presented an instance when a local event was amplified by the national press and public officials to advance objectives unrelated to the event itself. It provides an example of a border incident that, the further it moved away from the actual scene of events to the centers of national political power, lost its details and became politicized to serve other ends.

Historian Jason Miller argues that national-level explanations can distort what happens at the local level. In his study of community violence in Civil War Illinois, he argues that the national narrative adopted by historians understates the level of community violence as antiwar opponents battled local federal officials, and then overstates the degree of political conflict in 1864, once the combatants reached an uneasy truce.⁵⁷

St. Albans presents an opposite case. While remaining steadfast in supporting the Union cause, northern Vermont deescalated the potential for further conflict by ignoring the raid’s political nature and by treating its Canadian neighbors in a less bellicose way. The national press and officials were insensitive to these priorities and politicized the raid to pursue further political ends. This difference in coverage raises the interesting question of how original reporting shapes subsequent historical accounts. It also raises the question of how border crises in our own time—the actual ones as well as those represented to be crises by national politicians and the press—would benefit from a local approach.

NOTES

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