

THE INVASION OF BAYFIELD, JUNE 1866

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By David Gillians

On June 5, 1866, many of the men in the Village of Bayfield and surrounding Stanley Township proved that they were willing to risk their lives to fight to save Canada from the American based Irish Fenians. When called to action, these farmers, fishermen and merchants left their families and marched in what could have been a suicidal mission to confront a well armed and experienced Fenian military force.

The Canadian authorities knew that the poorly trained and ill equipped militia forces and self organized Home Guard units stood little chance against the battle hardened Fenians. Since there were so few British troops available to defend the border, they had little choice but to make these locals, Canada's first line of defense.

Who Were the Fenians?

The 140,000 Irish born Americans who fought in the Irish Brigades and hundreds of thousands of soldiers who were of Irish descent were hardened veterans of the American Civil War and many nurtured a burning hatred of England. After the War, jobs were hard to find and about 10,000 of them had drifted into Fenian military clubs and many more were content to be part of an army in waiting. The dominant members of the Fenian movement planned to use this self styled army of liberation, to conquer and hold Canada hostage. They planned to intimidate Britain into surrendering Ireland.

Since the British had given support and recognition to the secessionist south, some politicians such as Michigan's powerful expansionist, Zachariah Chandler, were demanding that President Andrew Johnson should open negotiations for the surrender of all British possessions in North America because of Britain's support of the confederacy. Throughout the U.S. anti British sentiment was pervasive.

In 1866, there were more than 1.6 million Irish settled in the US and 2/3rds were bunched into the cities in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and the New England States. Since the Fenian leaders promised to deliver these votes to whichever politicians supported their activities, they were gaining a very influential voice in American politics. During reconstruction, immediately after the Civil War, beleaguered President Andrew Johnson couldn't afford to alienate them. His own party was not supporting him and he was leading a government while under the threat of impeachment.

The Fenians were allowed to establish a government in exile, to raise money, organize, make their battle plans, and recruit soldiers. Fenian troops moved easily on trains and ships and used military weapons were sold to obvious Fenian front men. The headquarters of the Fenian 'Senate' was in the Moffat mansion in New York City at Broadway and Union Square where the Fenian flag flew proudly. The Fenian Secretary of War was even a serving American officer.



Hero of the Mexican and Civil Wars, one armed, Major General, 'Fightin' Tom Sweeny was the Fenian Secretary of War

In England, the minority government was collapsing, the economy was in a shambles with runs on the banks, a plague was killing thousands of cattle, a cholera epidemic was breaking out and troops were being deployed to Jamaica, India, and Ireland to quash threatened rebellions. Canada was perceived by many to be an unsustainable financial burden and the British government was encouraging Confederation and independence.

The Fenian military plans were well publicized in newspapers of the day and paid informers made certain that every move was reported to the American, British and Canadian authorities. Secrecy was never an important issue with the Fenians. They needed more support and by publicizing their plans they believed that they would gain more financial support and soldiers. This left Canada in a state of alarm for over two years.

Canada was in turmoil!

Most newspaper editions carried articles detailing every Fenian boast or threat. They were taken very seriously, The Canadian government frequently mobilized troops. Rumors were spreading from farm to farm. As early as December 1864, George Cox, in an editorial in the Goderich Signal, which was the leading paper in this part of southwestern Ontario, tried to ease tensions. He wrote; **"If a tenth part of the flying rumors were true, people might well be alarmed. Coffins full of pikes were said to have gone up the gravel road from Seaforth towards the back townships, Rumors also came into Howick from the East that half the people of the township of Arthur had been murdered in cold blood and that armed Fenians were marching westward burning and destroying all before them. The Protestant farmers of Howick turned out at once and we are informed that they drilled for a whole day, expecting an uprising at any moment. It turned out, however, to be a false alarm. No Fenians appeared and no one was able to sift a single grain of truth out of the alarming stories put in circulation.**

In Wawanosh and Ashfield, the excitement was still more intense. No story, in fact; seemed too wild for belief. Whole families fled for refuge to the houses of their more courageous neighbours and several cases of hardship from exposure are reported.

It being rumoured and believed by many that bands of Fenians were organized and armed in those townships, the Protestant yeomanry formed themselves into companies and for several nights kept up regular patrol upon the cross roads, but without seeing an enemy, or stopping any suspicious person. No want of evidence however could stop the stories which seemed to swell the further they traveled.

A Coffin full of pikes, it was said, had passed through Goderich, secret Fenian meetings were being held and to crown it all, it flew from mouth to mouth that Dr. McDougall had gone out to hold an inquest on the bodies of 6 murdered men, somewhere near Belfast. Of course, there was not the least truth in this last report. Although everybody

had heard all this, not a soul had seen anything to create alarm. But alarmed the people were, in earnest, and during the week a constant demand upon the storekeepers of Goderich for guns, pistols, lead, shot, caps, etc. In one case a farmer was so eagerly bent upon having a pistol home with him, that he actually left his watch as security!"

Cox went on to say; "We feel convinced that every reader of the Signal, Protestant or Catholic will concur in the view we take with regard to the necessity of an investigation into the cause of the trouble. It is a serious matter and for the sake of the timid women and children dwelling in lonely country houses, we earnestly trust that all good men will, if they can find nothing against their neighbour, try by every means in their power to allay the excitement ere it leads to irreparable mischief."

Throughout Huron County including the Township of Stanley, neighbours suspected all Catholics, despite the fact that their Church opposed Fenianism, and anyone with Irish ancestry. Many believed that the Fenians had imbedded themselves into Canadian society and were awaiting the call to rise up and strike. In the Huron Signal, on December 22, 1864 there was a notice; "we have been waited upon by John King, Esq. a magistrate of the township of Ashfield, who inform us that there is not a single word of truth in the story about a Fenian organization being in existence in his township. The people are indignant that such a charge should be brought against them."

In the January 5, 1865 edition of the Huron Signal there was another article entitled "A Fenian Story" that tells of the hysteria that gripped the local population; "During the intense Fenian excitement of a few days ago, the settlers of one of the new townships of this county heard that a band of armed marauders were marching upon them from Wallace. Whereupon, the worthy farmers gathered their families into a neighbour's house and held a council of war as to the most effective mode of defense. It was finally resolved to form the main body around the house for the night, and throw out pickets in every direction. Any scout, observing the enemy's approach was to fire his gun, which was the signal for a general rally to the threatened point. Hour after hour slipped away quietly, until about midnight, when a scout saw a fox prowling near him. The sporting instinct was so strong in the good fellow that he couldn't resist a shot at 'Reynard.' Naturally enough, the brave little garrison thought that they were in for it, and in a moment all was in excitement-husbands took leave of their wives and children and marched off boldly to meet the Fenians. But the only Fenian visible was a dead fox, much to the relief of all concerned."

False Alarm in Brucefield

In his book 'Settlement of Huron County', James Scott tells how some pranksters took advantage of the extreme tension; "On another occasion the citizens of the Village of Brucefield had still another alarm, About 9 o'clock one Saturday night, the Fenians were heard advancing without warning with terrific shouts to the shrill music of fife and the loud measured tones of the big brass drum. To hear was to tremble. Parents looked into each others eyes and the faces of their dear ones. In the winking of an eye, every light went out. The Whole village was in darkness and every citizen fled to the particular nook or cranny he deemed most secure. It seems as if in vivid anticipation of this most terrible moment, each had previously selected his peculiar hiding place and knew just where to find it in the pitch darkness of that awful night."

Scott explained; "There was in the village a middle aged man who had been a sailor and who loved a night out with the boys. Enjoining strict secrecy, he arranged for all to meet

him at Peter's Creek, a quarter of a mile from the village. He had provided fifes and drums, selected his musicians and after silent drill for a night or two, had made sure that each was master of his part. Hence the Fenian raid on the peaceful little village of Brucefield."

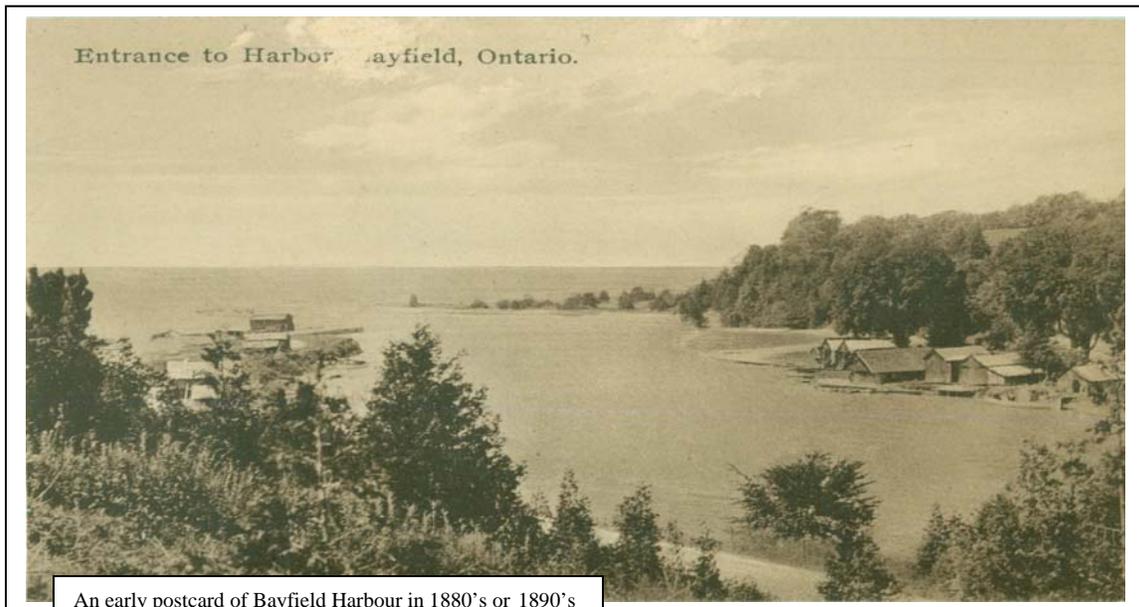
In June 1866, the threats were real!

On May 31st, Sweeny gave the command for all Fenian units that had been staged in the northern U.S., to proceed to attack Canada on several fronts. On June 1st; the Irish Fenians attacked at Fort Erie on the Niagara Peninsula.

The Canadian authorities truly believed that they were up against a formidable enemy. They didn't know that the Fenian leadership promised a great deal and delivered very little. General Sweeny had been promised 10,000 men and \$450,000 to transport, equip and feed them. The actual manpower, money and equipment fell far short of his minimum needs but Sweeny was forced to put his plans into action because he knew that the whole Fenian movement in America would collapse if he waited any longer. His window of opportunity was small because you couldn't keep prepared troops cooped up in railway stations and shared hotel rooms for long, and he didn't have the resources to sustain an army for more than a few days.

It had been well publicized that the seizure of the well defended Goderich was a vital part of the Fenian's military strategy. If they could take control of the harbour they would dominate Lake Huron and by seizing the railway lines, they could attack Stratford and then London and force the British North American troops to fight battles on several fronts. The Fenian leaders figured that the British regular troops only numbered about 8000 in all of Canada and they were widely separated. They didn't have much respect for the shabby, ill trained and poorly equipped volunteer Militia. The Fenians believed that concentrated attacks would see very little resistance and they felt that the support of the disaffected French and the 10,000 Irish Canadians of military age would pave the way to easy victory.

In 1866, there were only two harbours on Lake Huron where soldiers could be landed.



If the Fenians decided to attack Goderich from land as well as sea, a landing at lightly defended Bayfield was likely.

Fenian Troops were Gathered in Chicago ready to attack Goderich

Canadian military intelligence sources warned that there were over 3,000 battle hardened, and heavily armed Irish Civil War veterans under West Point graduate, Brigadier Charles Tevis, assembled in Chicago who had received orders to embark on a raid against Goderich. They had five sailing vessels, a tug and 2 steam transports. Fenian soldiers from Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Wisconsin, Iowa and Michigan had been instructed to move to Chicago and Milwaukee. The invasion was planned for June 5th to coincide with raids planned for the Niagara Peninsula, London and Quebec's Eastern Townships.

Bayfield Militia unit mobilized

On Saturday, June 2, 1866, the Bayfield Infantry, Number 5 Company of the 33rd Huron Battalion, with men from Bayfield and Stanley Township, were amongst the 20,000 volunteers mobilized by order of the Governor General, Viscount Monck and Commander –in Chief of the Canadian military, Lieutenant General Sir John Michel. They were to repel any Fenian invaders who might land at the mouth of the Bayfield River.

This local militia group was led by Irish born Captain W.W. Connor, who was one of the village's earliest and most active settlers, Lieutenant Thomas R. Jackson and Ensign J.M. Pollard. The unit was made of up local farmers, fisherman, labourers and business men. Armed with old hunting rifles and pitchforks, they had been marching and training on a drill field that is located approximately where the liquor store is today, in anticipation of an attack.

Here are the names of the men in Bayfield and Stanley Township who were called to duty as Volunteer Militia:

1 st Battalion	33 rd Huron	Battalion of	Infantry
John McDonald	James Dales	Duncan Thompson	Thomas E. Sanderson
Charles Gibson	James Gibson	James Neven	Peter Campbell
George Beard	Ronald McInnes	James Whitman	Samuel Reed
John McNair	George McNair	Peter Cameron	John Kain
John McFarlane	William Smith	Winston Shivelin	Daniel McGilles
James Mitchell	James McKay	David Hardy	Joseph Champagn
Sam Turner	James A. Buchanan	James Bolts	Asot Gravell
Joseph Colville	William Rankin	Thomas Lang	John Stickle
Duncan McFarlane	John Duncan	James Cook	Charles Dewar
Alex McEvery	Robert Rouck	Buchard Robertson	James Hannah
John Stevenson	George Kennedy	William Peck	James Campbell
George Clark	William Sherritt	William Dowson	Daniel Stewart
Alex Johnston	Thomas Stevenson	William Stevenson	Patrick Johnston
Richard Boyes	William Johnston	George Johnston	George Campbell
Robert Wells	James Mitchell		James Sparks
Andrew Reed	John Galbraith		

<i>2nd Battalion</i>			
James Blair	James Mustard	John McQueen jr.	Adam Home
Alex Innes	Matthew Greenside	Donald McLean	John Penhale
Arthur McRea	William Moffat	David Galbraith	James McGrugan
Neil McGill	Charles W. Smith	Peter McLaren	Richard Crook
William Richardson	George McKay	James Turner	James Grainger
George Ward	Duncan McTavish	Harrison Harrison	John Robertson
James Redman	John Stodghill	Edward Robertson	Milo Church
Henry Dowson	Thomas Seddy	William Clark	John Wideman
Mathew Stole	John Algison	Robert Elliott	John Crook
Ralph Stevenson jr.	Edward Boyes	Solomon Pollock	John Grainger
John Campbell	Allen Asler	Alexander Campbell	Donald Ballantine
Thomas Hannan	John Bannerman	Henry Howard	John Duncan
Edward Westlake	Lorenzo Spikeman	James Castle	William Crook
Alexander Johnston	William Johnston	Antonie Pearce	Thomas Mitchell
Adam Home	John Robertson	Donald Ballantine	William Rose

Many of the men in this Militia unit were ancestors of families, such as the Mustards, the Penhales, the Elliott's, the Castles, the Dowson's and the Westlakes, who have played a prominent role in Bayfield's history. They were responsible for guarding Bayfield's harbour, the bridge and patrolling the beaches.

All along the shoreline, everyone expected to see Fenian ships on the Lake Huron horizon at any time. On Saturday night, June 2nd, most of the 500 soldiers who were stationed in Goderich, rushed down to the harbour and almost blew up their own patrol boat, the 'Bonnie', because she displayed improper lights as she made her way into the harbour. The chains were stretched across the harbour mouth, the cannons were mounted on top of the bluffs, and salt barrels were stacked high so that soldiers could safely shield themselves from enemy fire. They thought that they were ready to repel the Fenians.

On Sunday, June 3rd, more troops arrived in Goderich. At 4 AM a detachment of soldiers from London arrived by train with 7,000 rounds of rifle ammunition. At 1:30 P.M., the pride of the Canadian boats on Lake Huron, 'the Silver Spray', came in with 2 Kincardine infantry companies under Captains Barker and Daniels and the Southampton Rifles under Captain Sproat. It then quickly left to pick up more troops from the Paisley Infantry under Captain Bruce which arrived at 6:30 AM on Monday.

The Battle of Ridgeway on the Niagara Peninsula occurred on Sunday, June 3rd and by Monday, the 4th, the Fenians were retreating because their 5,000 reinforcements were held up by U.S. forces commanded by Ulysses S. Grant in Buffalo.

Important Harbour/Railway Meeting held despite threat!

In spite of all of the military activity, in Varna, 5 miles east of Bayfield, on Monday, June 4th, a very important business meeting was held. Despite rumors that a Fenian attack was imminent, about 100 of the most influential citizens of Bayfield and Stanley Township met to organize a plan to attract the railroad to Bayfield and deal with the costly harbour.

1866 was a turning point for business in this part of Ontario. The biggest discovery in Canada of oil had been found in Petrolia and wells were being drilled in every township including Stanley. In Goderich, this drilling led to the discovery of the Saltford salt reserves. The Bank of Upper Canada which had a branch in Goderich, declared bankruptcy and the Grand Trunk Railway built its first large grain terminal in the harbour in Goderich.

There were about 3,700 people in Stanley Township and the area was falling behind economically. Its business leaders felt that they had to do something dramatic and quickly. According to the book, 'History of Stanley Township' the political process in the Township had collapsed. **"This proved an interesting year as council split with Reeve Thomas Simpson, Deputy Reeve Dr. Ninian Woods and James Elliott on one side and Robert Gairdner and Thomas Baird on the other. At the February meeting Dr. Woods sent a disclaimer as to his right to sit on council as his election was not legal."** Now the council was evenly divided and they disagreed on almost all motions and were unable to do any business until later in the year when Dr. Woods was re-elected.

Despite this political deadlock, the Reeve, Thomas Simpson, called the meeting, and Peter Adamson, who was a Bayfield man and the highly respected Huron County Council Clerk, was the secretary. Presentations were made by A.B. Brownson, Alexander Johnston, W. Turner, Dr. Ninian Woods, E. Kay and D.H. Ritchie. **It was decided to offer any company that would construct a railway line to Bayfield the sum of \$20,000 and unrestricted ownership of the Bayfield Harbour.**

Reeve Simpson forms Home Guard to protect Bayfield

Just after this motion was passed, D.H. Ritchie brought a Toronto newspaper into the meeting. According to the Goderich Signal newspaper; **"he read to a large excited audience that our soil had been invaded by the plundering murderers, and that Canadian blood had been shed. The rumor still maintained that suspicious boats were seen on the Lake and the fear increased that there was danger near home. A Home Guard was formed at Varna, and a detachment under Reeve Simpson started for Bayfield to look out. From all this you will readily believe that the most of us made for our homes pretty well disposed to believe that the villains would land on our lake shore."** They were armed with any weapon that they could get their hands on, including pitch forks, scythes and old muskets. They were going to help the local Volunteer Militia unit defend Canada!

A farmer, John McClymont rode down Parr Line urging the men to gather early in the morning for the march to Bayfield to help repel the rumoured invasion force. According to the book, 'The History of Township of Stanley'; "The township men loaded guns, moulded bullets, sharpened pikes, collected pitch forks and anything that else that could be used as a weapon. Early in the morning they headed for Bayfield, being joined by more and more men as they moved to meet the threatened invasion."

The Goderich Militia officers were so certain that an attack was going to happen, they sent two soldiers, William Swafields and John Campbell, who were familiar with the lakeshore road to Bayfield, out in the night, to warn settlers to be vigilant. Their certainty that an attack was imminent may have triggered the panic that ensued.

The Attack Alarm is sounded!

Since everyone's emotions were so inflamed, it's not surprising that at four A.M. on Tuesday, June 5, 1866, an alarm was sounded by a farmer that the Fenians had landed in large numbers from 8 ships, 3 or 4 miles north of Bayfield. It was assumed that the raiders were preparing to march cross country to attack Goderich. News of the invasion traveled quickly and someone rode to the telegraph office in Clinton where the story was sent out across the wires.

At 6:30 AM, in Goderich, the bugle sounded and the town bell set ringing as a signal for the brigades of Militia Volunteers and the area Home Guard to immediately assemble and then march to Bayfield to repel the invaders. Major A.M. Ross led some of his troops down the Road to

Bayfield to meet the invaders. In Clinton and Stratford, the militia units were mobilized and ordered to report to the railway stations so that they could quickly be deployed wherever they were needed

Here is how a reporter for the Goderich Signal described the events; **“Early this morning, along nearly every side road and concession in Stanley and Hay, flew men on horseback with ghost like faces, yelling at the top of their voices that the Fenians had landed 4 miles from Bayfield and had taken up a strong position in the woods-I was on horseback at once and made for the scene of action. The road I took was literally clad with men on foot, men on horseback and in wagons-and Bayfield and the Fenians was the cry. We were a motley squad-a few with rifles, more with shot guns, some of the later to all appearances if they would go off at all, more dangerous to be behind them than in front of them, a few butcher knives – and I noticed a stout farmer with an old scythe. There was nearly a complete turn out, and if the tide had not turned there might have been 500 men in Bayfield before night. Were it not lamentable to be thus menaced and badgered by rumor and suspense, some of the stories told of parting scenes between men and their families this morning are ludicrous in the extreme. The poor women are the greatest sufferers-many of them took to packing up little necessities, and getting ready for a sojourn in the bush. Happily for all it turned out a false alarm.”**

Schools were emptied throughout the county!

In the book ‘Settlement of Huron County’ by James Scott, he writes an account of the day as told by a Brucefield (a community inland 10 miles from Bayfield) school teacher, Hugh Ross; **“I was teaching school in 1866 when all Canada was on the alert for a landing of Fenians and at any time and at almost any point along the extensive coastline of our boundary rivers and Great Lakes. The whole country was in a state of suspense and terror for many months and guards were posted here and there on the shore of Lake Huron to give the first intimation of a Fenian Landing.**

On a hot day in June 1866, the alarm spread that the Fenians had landed at Bayfield, en route for Seaforth which they meant to take at the point of the bayonet, and that, after sacking the town, they were going to ravage the whole countryside.

Messengers were dispatched at all the schools in the immediate neighbourhood. I shall never forget the one who came to the old log school where I taught that year. He was covered with sweat and his horse with foam as he came galloping up the road during the morning intermission. I was out with the pupils. In a loud, excited voice he ordered me to dismiss the pupils at once and to instruct them to tell all the men old enough to bear arms to repair to the village of Springhill, now the village of Staffa.

As the dread messenger disappeared in a cloud of dust, his orders were promptly executed and a hundred from the community, myself included, hastened to the rendezvous where a company of Militia and a body of Homeguards had already been organized.

Near evening, as no enemy appeared and we had no further word of his approach, our warlike ardour cooled somewhat. We dispatched two of our most stalwart young men to Seaforth or as near as they could approach the by this time beleaguered town with instructions to bring back all possible information from the army of defense.

About midnight, the two spies returned weary and forlorn with the word that the whole scare was a hoax, that Seaforth was unharmed and that the fair homes of Springhill were in no peril.”

The Canadian spies didn't realize that the promised troop numbers fell far short and the money for ships and supplies weren't there. In Chicago, only 1,500 troops showed up and General Tevis couldn't find and couldn't pay for enough ships to move them. So he disobeyed Sweeny's order to set sail and remained in port.

The Fenian military operation had turned into a hopelessly disorganized comic opera but the Canadian government didn't know. Sweeny's command structure fell apart. Tevis was unable or unwilling to obey his orders. Brigadier General A.G. Malloy, the commanding officer of Wisconsin and Michigan didn't respond to the orders that were telegraphed to him and it was later learned that he had quit without telling anyone and accepted the position second lieutenant in the United States Army. Brigadier General Lynch who was supposed to headquarter in Cleveland and in charge of the raid on London through Port Stanley didn't show up.

To compound these troubles, after arms were sold to Fenian agents, US authorities, aided by double agents within the Fenian movement, were raiding places where they were stashed and seized them. In his Official report to Fenian Headquarters after the planned invasions failed, a bitter Sweeny, angrily wrote; **"The United States Government, in selling these stores to my agents, was perfectly well aware of the purpose for which they were intended, and their willingness in allowing these sales to be made, together with the sympathy expressed for us by individuals in eminent positions at Washington, caused me to be totally unprepared for the treacherous seizure of our arms and ammunition, which rendered a successful movement into Canada hopeless, at that time."**

The threatened invasion of Bayfield and Goderich in 1866 never occurred. Here is how the Goderich Signal described how the rumor got started and spread; **"Happily for all it turned out to be a false alarm. The advance was checked, no Fenians had landed yet, it has either been a cruel hoax or a mad panic of some parties on the lakeshore, probe it to the bottom as you will, all that can be found out is that some body saw some other bodies who had seen a man flying with his family in his wagon, yelling out that a man told him that he had seen the Fenians landing 3 or 4 miles north from Bayfield. There has been little work done in Stanley and Hay this day and come what will the panic of the day will be long remembered. The spirit shown is excellent, and the prevailing opinion is that is the country was armed the Fenians would have a tough job to spoil our homes"**

The strength of the Fenian movement had been exaggerated and the American Government betrayed them by banning troop movements on ships and trains at the last moment and by not allowing reinforcements to supplement the attackers in the Niagara Peninsula. They had decided that the time wasn't right for a war against England.

The population of this area was made up mainly of British farm labourers who had to leave their homes in England in order to survive. They were the mongrels of the British Empire! Poorly educated peasants who had little hope or prospects. They weren't risking their lives for a beloved British Empire; they were ready to fight to preserve their new homeland. They were prepared to fight for the right to have a better life in Canada.

The Fenian leaders believed that the Irish Canadians, the disaffected French Canadians and the rejects from Britain would welcome them with open arms. They had listened to some of the pre Confederation debates which supported Canada joining the United States. They had heard about the disaffection many Canadians felt for the English and assumed they would be treated as conquering heroes. They were wrong!

No shots were fired and no one was hurt, but this day changed everyone's lives. Huron County had been nervously anticipating an invasion for two years and when the alarm finally sounded, most of the residents reacted heroically. The men of Bayfield and Stanley Township knew that they were ill prepared to march against a much larger and better equipped enemy but still, they were ready to fight and perhaps die for their country.

Throughout Canada, people realized that they had made a stand even if there had been no great battles. Canada was a place worth fighting for and in 1867, it legally became a country but in fact it was in villages like Bayfield in June 1866 that it actually became a nation!