

## Looking Outside Ontario Part 1 - A Clump at Gettysburg

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In 1863, the most significant change in the Canadian political scene took place outside the country. A small clump of trees in a field outside the southeast Pennsylvania hamlet of Gettysburg had little or no significance prior to July 3, 1863. Yet on that hot summer day the clump, grove or copse became a silent witness to an important historical event.

General Robert E. Lee's 75-thousand-strong Confederate Army of Northern Virginia had swung up the Shenandoah Valley and at Gettysburg clashed with the 90-thousand-strong Union Army of the Potomac. On July 3, the third day of battle after two days of major but inconclusive attacks against both Union flanks, General Lee ordered an infantry assault against the Union centre. After an artillery duel, some 15,000 Southern soldiers in echelons attempted to advance a kilometer, in what has come to be known as "Pickett's Charge", into a hail of fire up a low ridge. It is said that the little umbrella-shaped clump of trees on the horizon of the Union line was pointed out by Lee as the objective of the assault. Approximately 200 or more Confederates were able to temporarily break through the stone fence into the vicinity of the clump. However, Union soldiers were fighting on their home turf and reinforcements rushed into the breach. The Confederate attack was overwhelmed and repulsed with many thousands of casualties.

The acre or so of land around the clump of trees has become known as the "High Water Mark of the Rebellion". This was the turning point of the American Civil War as it became clear that the North's numbers and industrial productivity meant that the war's eventual outcome could no longer be doubted. For Canada, the question then became what would happen to it.

During the months after Gettysburg, the Scottish-born Upper Canada politician John A. Macdonald plotted his way through all the post Civil War possibilities. His objective, together with his collaborators, was to ensure the survival of British North American colonies as a distinct non-American society in North America. Conferences in Charlottetown and Quebec City in 1864 proposed the foundations of a new country. Among the details, delegates seemed to have either little interest or were compromisingly vague on the specifics of respective powers of the federal and provincial governments, or for providing an amending formula.

General Lee finally surrendered the Confederacy in April 2005. As the U.S. federal army that had grown to 2 million men began demobilizing, fear of an invasion northwards receded. However, in June 1866 about 800 Irish-American Fenians from the United States invaded the Niagara peninsula. Canadian militia were overwhelmed at Ridgeway, suffering 9 killed and 38 wounded. Three of the militia men killed were teenaged students from the University of Toronto. The Fenians withdrew back across the Niagara River, but Canada had been given a jolt.

The push for Confederation proceeded to a final conference in London (England) with realization by the Maritimers that in order to remain British, they had to become Canadians. In February 1867, the text of the British North America Act was presented to the Queen and the 52 year old widower Macdonald married 31 year old Agnes Bernard. The BNA Act was signed by the Queen on March 29 and was proclaimed into law on July 1.

The BNA Act was the law that created the Canadian Confederation. It set the legal ground rules for Canada and listed the powers of the federal Parliament and the Provincial Legislatures. To the Provinces was given the responsibility of “The Management and Sale of the Public Lands belonging to the Province and of the Timber and Wood thereon”. No thought was given to the status of cities. However, governments then did little because the people wanted them to do little. Some 80 percent of Canadians were farmers, fishermen or woods folk, and they generally looked after themselves.

At Gettysburg, the battlefield has become a prominent attraction for visitors. Roads, facilities and many monuments have been built. Today there is more wooded land than in 1863. The U.S. National Park Service has an ongoing program to restore portions of the battlefield to their historical non-wooded conditions, as well as to replant historic orchards and woodlots that are now missing.

The clump of trees turns out to be a group of oaks and hickories now surrounded by an iron fence. That the protection from visitors is needed is seen from the decline of a nearby hickory tree that was not enclosed. Some have recently suggested that this clump would have been about three metres tall in 1863, barely visible to only a portion of the attacking columns, and that Lee’s goal was actually another more prominent grouping of trees. History may never know the true story of Lee’s intentions at Gettysburg. He never published memoirs, and his after-action report from the battle was cursory. The clump of trees has become iconic because that is about as far as the butternut-coloured Rebel forces were able to reach in their mythical “High Water Mark”. It was a turning point in history with wide-reaching effects.





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