

*Lewiston
History
Mysteries*

Arrest of Canadian at Frontier House in 1840 Sparks Local and International Outrage

In the late 1830s, Canada was still a British colony and was in civil turmoil.

A group of rebels in Canada, led by the Mayor of Toronto, wanted to establish a republic, similar to the United States. History books call it the Upper Canada Rebellion. (Today, Upper Canada is known as Ontario. It is called “upper” because it is higher in elevation than

Quebec which is referred to as Lower Canada.)

The Canadian revolt was quelled and the rebels fled to Navy Island, just above Niagara Falls. Many Americans supported the rebels and their cause and supplied them with guns and ammunition. The privately owned steamboat Caroline was suspected of transporting arms to the rebels on Navy Island, so British forces sailed across the Niagara River to the American side and set fire to the Caroline and set her adrift over the falls.

Alexander McLeod was a Scottish-Canadian who served as sheriff in Niagara, Ontario, and later boasted that he was part of the group that burned the Caroline and was the one who shot and killed an American citizen during the attack.

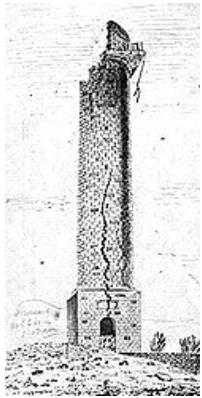
McLeod was arrested in Lewiston for the murder. However, Canada and Great Britain strongly

protested his arrest and said the attack on the Caroline had been ordered as a military action and that individual citizens like McLeod could not be held responsible. Britain said that if he wasn’t released, it would lead to war between the two countries. Western New Yorkers were furious that Britain had invaded the U.S. and welcomed a war.

Cooler heads prevailed in Washington, D.C. and war was avoided. McLeod was later tried, acquitted, and was released back to his home in Canada.

While the Upper Canada Rebellion failed in one sense, it began a turn of events that led to Canada’s self-rule and unification of the provinces in 1867.

Canadian rebels were still wreaking havoc in 1840 when the first Brock’s Monument was bombed. Even though it remained standing, it caused irreparable damage. A larger replacement monument was constructed and dedicated in 1859.



Alexander McLeod Timeline

Dec. 30, 1837: British troops from Canada cross the Niagara River and burn the U.S. merchant ship, Caroline, and set it adrift over the falls. The British thought the ship was being used to supply rebels intent on overthrowing the Ontario government. A Canadian, Alexander McLeod, is later overheard bragging about the incident and admitting he shot and killed an American citizen in the attack named Amos Durfee.

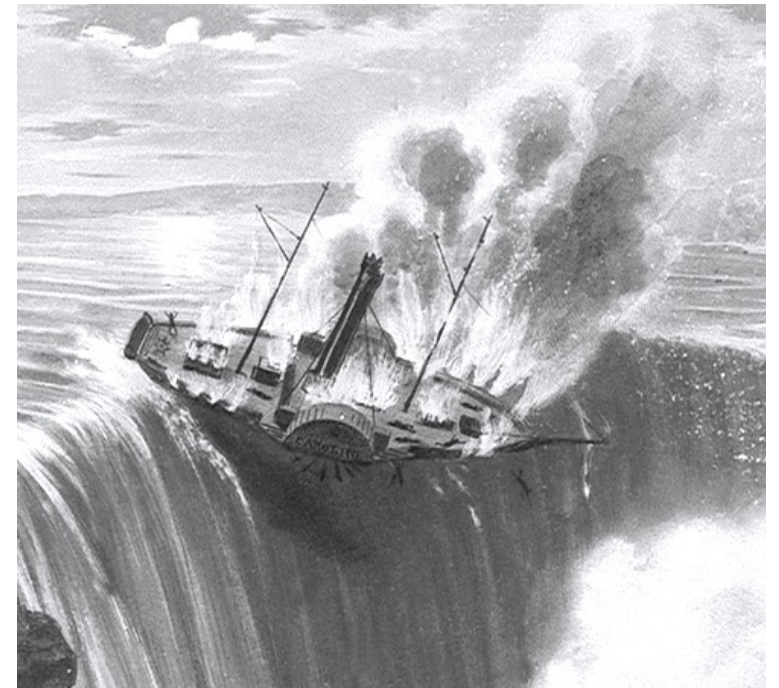
Sept. 2, 1840: McLeod is arrested in Niagara Falls, NY, on charges of murdering Durfee. He is released because of a lack of evidence and returned to Canada.

Nov. 12, 1840: Thinking that he was out of danger, McLeod crosses the border and is arrested again — this time, at the Frontier House in Lewiston. He is taken to the county jail in Lockport. An angry lynch mob surrounds the jail but the Sheriff protects him so he can be properly tried in court.

Jan. 28, 1841: McLeod’s friends in Canada try to free him on bail. When word gets out several hundred armed local citizens wait outside the jail to make it impossible for him to escape back to Canada.

Jan. 29, 1841: Vigilantes place two cannons outside the jail, pointed directly at McLeod’s jail cell. Blank charges were fired and rocks were thrown at his window. Later, President William Henry Harrison sends General Winfield Scott to Niagara County to preserve the peace and convince local authorities for a change of venue for McLeod.

Oct. 4 1841: McLeod is tried in Utica for helping set fire to the Caroline and killing Durfee. He is found innocent on all charges and is allowed to return to Canada. Some believe the trial was fixed to calm the relations between the U.S. and Great Britain and prevent a war.



American Ship, Caroline, Set on Fire by the British in 1837, Goes Over Falls

Why did the British attack and set fire to an American ship that was docked on the American shoreline, just above the Falls? Because the British thought it was supplying rebels on Navy Island who had plans to topple the Ontario government. It was a “pre-emptive” strike and a local citizen was killed in the attack. Western New Yorkers were furious and wanted retribution, even all out war. However, the President and Congress had no interest in having another war with Great Britain.



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