

The Sealed Letter

Memoir Of The Early days

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William Lyon Mackenzie was a bit of a ruffian in his time acting as the leader of the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837. He hoped to destroy the rigid British colonial government known as the 'Family Compact' which gave the best land to the Crown. This decreased the value of the land of neighbouring farmers who had recently made the long journey from their country with barely any money. The rebellion was soon in full swing however on one winter's day it all ended.

On December 7th, 1837, William Lyon Mackenzie's rebellion was crushed at the Battle of Montgomery's Tavern on Yonge Street. Immediately he and his colleagues fled for safety. To my surprise there are a few rather intriguing stories of his escape through Galt. One story was recorded by Harry Spencer Howell in the Daily Reformer on December 21, 1899.

Mr. Howell acquired this story while he was visiting Australia in 1881 when he met up with a man by the name of Jimmy Tillin who had lived in a log house on the road to Preston (which is where Cambridge Memorial Hospital now stands). As Mr. Howell spoke with him he uncovered a story that enveloped adventure, suspicion and a sealed letter. This is how the story was told:

Jack Mardson and his sister Elsie both lived on the other side of the river and would frequently visit Mr. Tillin with their boat. Jack Mardson was a man of great determination and one day grabbed his musket and headed out the door deciding to be one of Mackenzie's right hand men fighting for the rebellion.

As days passed by, Elsie became very troubled about her brother's departure and would seek Mr. Tillin's company more often. Soon news spread that the rebels had been defeated. Worried about her brother's safety she decided to venture out and find what information she could about the fleeing fugitives. She stopped at Groff's, perceived to be a general store in Dumfries on a main road. There she received some useful information.

She discovered that the government messenger who had been sent out to deliver a letter had not only lost his way coming from Dundas, but he had also broken his leg. Elsie was aware that the letter was for Captain

Rich: a man sent by the government to collect any traitors left from the rebellion. It was quite possible that the letter had information that could alter her brother's safety. Cunningly, Elsie convinced the messenger to give the letter to her and that she would pass it on to the authorities.

Walking away from the messenger towards her home, she decided to take it to Jimmy Tillin as she was anxious to open it, however knowing that it could lead to some dangerous circumstances she sought his help. When she stood in front of him she was reported to have said, "Oh, Mr. Tillin, I feel so sure there is something in it that will tell us about Jack, or at least the whereabouts of his friends. If I can save him I don't care what they do to me".

Mr. Tillin could see she was quite adamant about the letter and so he made a plan. He created a mould from wet clay and pressing it against the seal replicated the imprint. He then put it on a shovel and baked it on the fire until it became solid.

He loosened the seal by taking the bowl of a clay pipe and warming it in the fire. He held it over the wax and blew the hot air over the seal until it melted and the letter was able to be opened. Opening the letter they discovered that the government had outlined multiple possible routes that the rebels would take. At the bottom was a note that Mackenzie and Mardson were headed towards Galt.

At that they quickly folded the letter back up, heated the wax seal again and pressed the clay mould into the wax recreated the seal. Knowing that Mardson was a man who knew the routes of the area, Elsie and Mr. Tillin knew that he would not travel on any of the commonly used roads. However, she did know of a possible place that he would travel, on a route that would take him across a bridge over Mill Creek (where Dundas Street now crosses the stream in Soper Park).

With the letter they headed out to the bridge where they planned to hide until they saw the men approach. They planned to stay there all night if need be. So they cautiously headed out into the night to the bridge. Once they had drawn near to the bridge, they heard rustling and the sound of digging in the darkness. Shadowy figures moved in the distance directly on a spot where only three years before there was a mass grave of cholera victims. Supposing they were phantoms of the deceased Elsie was startled and began to sprint away in fear, Mr. Tillin just as afraid tailed behind her.

Suddenly out of the night they heard Jack Mardson's voice, "Stop, or I'll shoot!" Mr. Tillin and Elsie immediately stopped in their tracks. Recognizing her brother's voice, Elsie and Mr. Tillin approached the shadowy figures recognizing them to be William Lyon Mackenzie and Jack Mardson. Covered in dirt and claspings shovels in their hands they let them know that he and Mackenzie were burying important documents. Soon after Elsie secretly



HARRY SPENCER HOWELL

took her brother and Mackenzie across the river with her boat while Mr. Tillin brought the letter with the imposter seal to Captain Rich hoping that he would not determine what they had done.

Mackenzie and Mardson escaped to the States and later a letter arrived claiming that Mardson had arrived in Australia. The guilt of the whole situation became quite overbearing for both Elsie and Mr. Tillin as they worried each day whether it would be found out that they were involved in such a plan and so they moved to Australia as well.

That is how the story was told by Mr. Tillin. At the time of Howell's visit Mr. Mardson had already passed away. And today some claim it to be one that was deeply embellished by Mr. Tillin. Others perhaps see it as one with a portion of truth, remaining a secret between him, Elsie, Mackenzie, Mardson and the sealed letter before it was revealed to Howell. And if this is true it could be very well possible that the important documents buried by Mackenzie and Mardson still rest beneath the soil of Soper Park in Cambridge where they had been buried, along with the mass grave of victims left from the cholera epidemic. As for now, it remains a mystery.