

"St. Albans Has Been Surprised"

The battlefields of the Civil War were hundreds of miles away from
this small Vermont village . . . until October 12, 1864.

By DAVID LINDSEY

(This article on the Civil War raid by Confederate agents on St. Albans, Vermont was furnished by SPMC member Steven Whitfield. It originally appeared in the January 1976 issue of *American History Illustrated*. Steve took the initiative and secured permission for its reprinting from the publishers, The National Historical Society of Harrisburg, Pa. Its syngraphic interest lies in the plot to rob the three banks in the village. According to the SPMC listing of Vermont obsolete notes and scrip by Mayre Burns Coulter, the Franklin County Bank was incorporated in 1849 and closed in 1867. It issued \$1, 2, 3, 5, 10 and 20 notes, while the St. Albans Bank was chartered in 1853 and closed in 1866. No information is at hand about the First National Bank, which may have absorbed the two state banks.)

Five hundred miles to the south Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant was pounding at the stubborn defense works of Petersburg, while Major General Phillip Sheridan was ravaging the Shenandoah Valley. Another 400 miles southward William T. Sherman was gnawing his way through the heart of Georgia en route to Savannah and the sea. To the residents of St. Albans, Vermont, the Civil War was far away, something adventurous and distant that they read about in the local *Messenger*. In the bright Indian summer of 1864 the small village close to the Canadian border lay serene and peaceful snuggled among its protective hills. As October passed its mid-point villagers noted that the maples and elms along Main Street were shedding their scarlet-yellow-crimson leaves, and they sniffed the acrid smoke of countless bonfires.

Who among the townspeople could dream that the village would soon be part of the battlefield of the far-away war? To produce that nightmarish reality for the Vermonters took the fertile imagination of Confederate agent George N. Sanders combined with the bold execution of Lieutenant Bennett H. Young and his horsemen.

Earlier in the war Young had ridden with Brigadier General John Hunt Morgan's cavalry. A reckless Kentuckian of 21 years, he had been captured as Morgan's Ohio raid of 1863 aborted. He escaped from the Ohio State Penitentiary and returned South. As 1864's election approached, Confederate strategy called for sowing as much confusion, discord, and disruption as possible in the North. Although schemes to release Confederate prisoners of war from Northern prison camps backfired and attacks on Federal ships on Lake Erie failed, a plan for hitting northern Vermont from Canada matured.

Sanders, another Kentuckian, who attached himself to the Confederate diplomatic mission in Canada, concocted the plan in mid-1864—a surprise attack on the northern border of the United States that would scare the local populace, affect the presidential election, impress Yankees with war's horror, and hopefully bring the Federals to the peace table. With the Richmond Government's apparent blessing, Sanders got Lieutenant Young to recruit some twenty young Confederate cavalymen (most of whom had ridden with Morgan) to join in executing the daring plan.

At St. Catherine's, Ontario, Sanders sought out Confederate Commissioner Clement C. Clay for approval. Clay, who was troubled, crotchety, and suffering poor health, growled that he thought the scheme was all right, though he was less than enthusiastic. Sanders proceeded to forge Clay's signature approving the plan and notified Young that he had the green light.

During the morning of October 11, 1864 two well-dressed, well-mannered young men walked in and registered at the Lafayette Hotel in Philipsburg, Canada, just north of the United States line. One of the men asked the desk clerk how far it was to St. Albans, Vermont and whether the St. Albans newspaper had come in yet. Informed that the town was about fifteen

miles south and the paper had not yet arrived, the two newcomers went to their room. Later other young men signed in at the same hotel, and the clerk would later testify that he heard St. Albans mentioned numerous times in their conversation.

That evening Young gathered his men in his room. Tall and handsome, with dark hair and flashing black eyes, Young spoke incisively as he canvassed details of the forthcoming raid. As the men sprawled across the bed and chairs focusing on the map of the town of St. Albans, Vermont spread out on the floor, Young pointed out that the village was small, about a mile square with roughly 300 houses; its three banks, scheduled as the chief targets, were situated within a block and a half of each other, the livery stables just down Main Street. All were readily accessible and could easily be taken by the band of resolute men assembled in the room.

The soft spot of the Yankee, Young told his cohorts, was his pocketbook. So—they would crack the town's banks, take away the Yankees' money, and give the townspeople a mouthful of what Sherman and Sheridan were dishing out to Southern people in Georgia and Virginia. In his carpetbag, he said, were forty small flasks of "Greek fire," a liquid phosphorus compound, developed long ago in Byzantine times to defend Constantinople against marauding pirate attacks. The Confederates knew little about it other than that it ignited immediately on exposure to air.

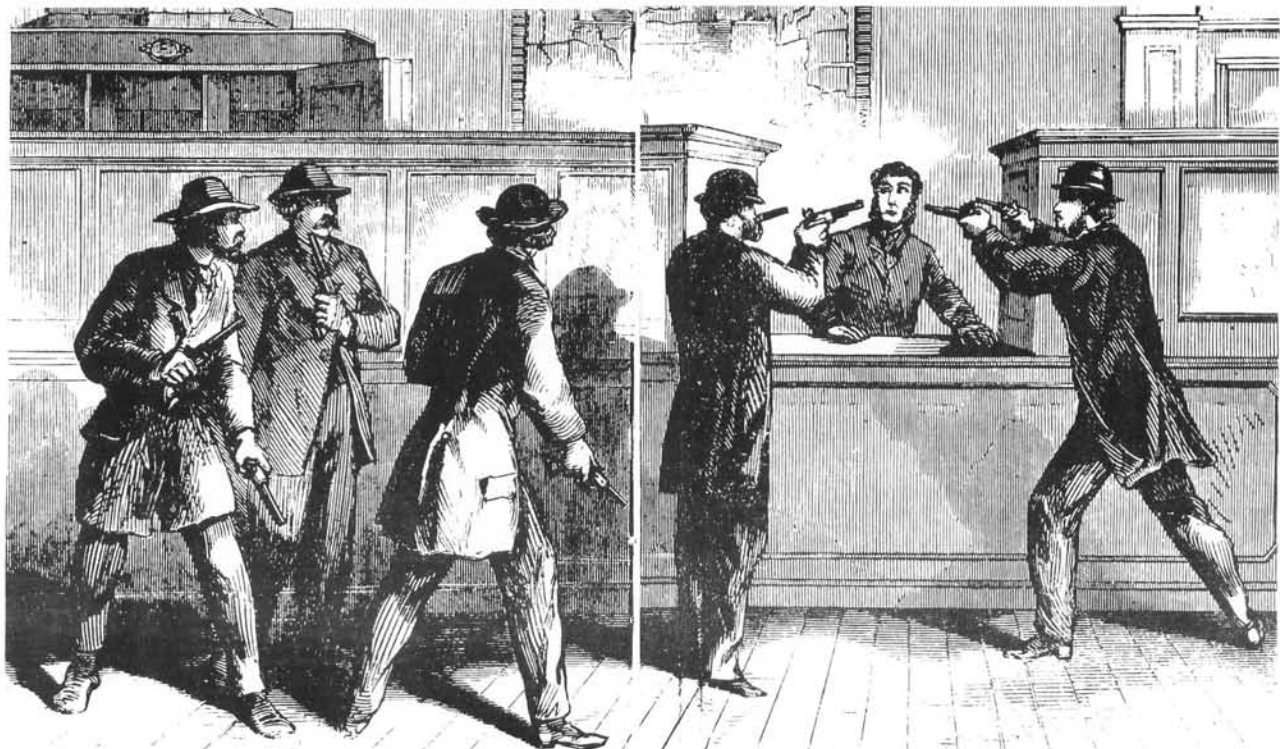
Looking ahead to the planned raid and in order not to arouse local suspicions, the men would have to proceed to St. Albans singly or in pairs — some by train, some on

horseback, others by stagecoach. At midnight Young rolled up the map and gave final instructions that all of them were to meet again in Young's room at the Tremont Hotel in St. Albans on the evening of October 18. The men then shuffled off to their rooms for the night.

On October 15 Young, accompanied by Lieutenant William Hutchinson, pulled up at the Tremont in St. Albans and took rooms on the second floor. After lunch they strolled leisurely about town, casing the three local banks and stopping in at Fuller's Livery Stable. Young, disappointed at finding only three horses in the stable, was further troubled over the suspicious look that Fuller gave him when answering his question about the best road to the nearby town of Sheldon. Townspeople, observing the strangers, noted that they were well mannered, quiet spoken, extremely polite, and well dressed. Young was wearing a plum-colored shirt. That seemed a bit unusual to conservative New Englanders, but otherwise the pair aroused few suspicions.

That evening at the hotel Young met a lively young lady, also a guest. (We do not know her name, though Young was clearly smitten by her pretty face, winning smile, and vivacious talk.) After having dinner together, they walked down elm- and maple-lined Main Street to the village green. When Hutchinson later protested about his taking up with the lady, Young replied that they had talked about religion, and further he found the village green the ideal place for holding civilian prisoners during the forthcoming raid.

The following day other strangers drifted into town (nineteen in all)—a few by train, some by coach, but

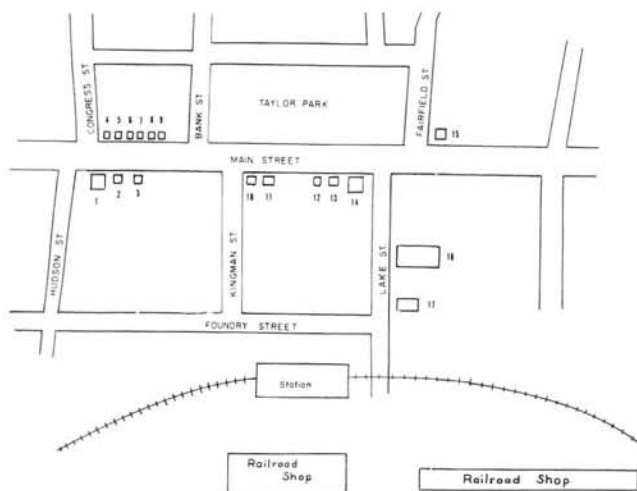


Confederate raiders holding up one of the St. Albans banks. (All illustrations for this article, unless

otherwise noted, are from "Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper," November 12, 1864.)

most riding their own horses. A few of them registered at the hotel, but most took rooms in nearby boarding houses. These men, too, were quiet and well mannered but clearly attracted attention in the small village as they, too, walked about visiting the banks and asking about the out-of-town roads.

After an afternoon stroll and dinner with his lady friend, Young gathered all the men in his hotel room in the evening of October 18. He again went over the plans for the next day's attack—the banks as the main targets, but Fuller's Stable as well. The bottles of "Greek fire" were distributed, and each man's Navy Colt six-shooter was checked and filled with ammunition. Those men who had come by train or coach would have to seize horses at Fuller's. The time for raiding the banks was set for 3 o'clock sharp the next day. (Young had learned that most of the town's able-bodied men were scheduled to be off at Montpelier then, attending the legislative session.) The conspirators went off to their rooms and a fitful night's sleep.



Map of St. Albans showing: 1. Tremont House; 2. Fuller's Stable; 3. Cross's Studio; 5. Miss Beattie's Shop; 9. Dutcher's Drug Store; 10. St. Albans Bank; 13. Franklin County Bank; 14. American Hotel; 15. First National Bank; 17. St. Albans House. Note village green. (Taylor Park)

The next day (October 19) was cloudy, already with a hint of rain. Watching the morning street traffic of farm wagons and pedestrians, the Southerners shivered slightly as cold Vermont air bit through their overcoats. Young and Hutchinson sent their horses off to be curried. The stableboy who returned the animals to the hotel hitching post would remember later the quarter tip that Young tossed to him. The two men now doffed their long overcoats to show what they later insisted were gray Confederate uniforms (doubtful, in that all local testimony later insisted that they wore "ordinary street clothes").

At exactly 3 p.m. Young, standing on the American House front steps, brandished his Colt revolver and cried out loudly, "This city is now in the possession of

the Confederate States of America." Farmers and local residents passing in the street stopped and stared; some smiled and a few laughed at what was surely a joke (the nearest battlefield was over 400 miles away). Townspeople of St. Albans had never seen a Confederate soldier; indeed the only Federals they had seen were Captain George Conger's cavalrymen who had ridden in the Fourth of July parade. But seeing Young with pistol in hand now and observing ten Confederate horsemen with their horses wheeled into line at the north end of Main Street and with their revolvers aiming down the street, the Vermonters quickly sobered. A few shots fired overhead brought the realization that it was no joke. Young repeated his proclamation and assured civilians they would not be hurt so long as they obeyed his orders to proceed to the village green and wait there.

Young with two raiders then crossed the street and strode boldly into the First National Bank. Meanwhile Caleb Wallace with two men went into the St. Albans Bank, while Hutchinson and three men went into the Franklin County Bank down the street. At the entrance to the first bank Young's men seized a man about to rush out and hustled him off to the green to join the other townspeople, now under guard.

At the Franklin Bank Hutchinson asked the teller what the bank was paying for gold. The response was that Mr. Armington, the gold buyer, was down the street. Hutchinson exploded, "the hell with Mr. Armington." At pistol point he then rounded up the clerk and the bank's president and demanded they take the rebel oath. When they objected, "I'll be damned if I'll do it!" Hutchinson cocked his pistol and aimed directly at them. No one spoke a word. Outside shooting erupted, screams followed, and horses raced past the bank windows. Hutchinson pushed his gun closer. Quietly in unison, the president and teller recited, "I solemnly swear to obey and respect the Constitution of the Confederate States of America and its President, Jefferson Davis." The raiders then cleaned out the vault, shoveling the gold, currency, and securities into large carpetbags. President and teller were shoved into the vault and locked inside with the key left on the outside. As the president protested, Hutchinson shouted, "You Yankees are treating the people in the South in the same manner."

At the First National Bank Young used the same approach. "What are you paying for gold," he demanded of the teller. Told that Armington handled that, he pushed the clerk to the floor, Colt at his head, while his companions seized the gold and currency from the vault. At that moment Armington walked in. Young inquired what price he was giving for gold — and proceeded to sell him some of the gold just removed from the vault. When the men hauled the gold-and-currency-filled carpetbags from the bank and loaded them on waiting horses outside, Young realized they would need more horses. Having already appropriated the animals from Fuller's Stable, he sent five men to the edge of town to seize any horses they could find.

Up to this point the local residents had been relatively passive, partly out of shock, partly from realizing the

futility of resistance. They sheepishly obeyed the armed raiders, moving off to the green where they waited quietly under the threat of Confederate guns. But with the seizing of private horses, some resistance now began. Fuller ran into his office and grabbed his own Colt revolver. When he emerged and saw Young barking orders astride his horse, Fuller cocked his pistol, aimed at Young, and pulled the trigger, but the weapon misfired. He reloaded and aimed again, but it misfired once more, and he retreated into the stable.

The town's photographer, L. A. Cross, "hearing the commotion," came out of his house to see what was happening. Noting a raider struggling with a bag loaded with gold, he called out, "What are you celebrating here, young man?" The man turned, drew his revolver, and fired. The shot passed overhead as Cross plunged back into his house.

By this time the bags of gold were finally tied securely across the saddles of the stolen horses. A man from an upper window fired at Young but missed. Young whirled and fired. The man slumped across the window sill, badly wounded. From a porch a townsman's bullet just missed Hutchinson. Hutchinson's return shot hit the man in the chest. Friends helped him away, carrying him to Dutcher's Drug Store where he died just inside the door. Villagers were now fully aware that the raid was real. Long past was the sense of its being a joke.

When Hutchinson's hat blew off in the wind, he collared a man near the door of the Franklin Bank and demanded his hat. When the man refused, "Hutch" cocked his pistol and aimed. The man yielded his hat as Hutchinson ordered him taken off to the green with the other prisoners. When commanded to move faster, the hatless man turned and spat out, "I'll be darned if a rebel will make me."

As a final gesture Young determined to give the Yankees a taste of the medicine the Georgians had been swallowing at Sherman's hands. Forming into a "not very regular line," the raiders charged up Main Street, loosing the shrill whoop of the rebel yell and hurling bottles of "Greek fire" into windows and doorways. The American House was hit, fire racing up one side. Other buildings and houses caught fire, but quickly sputtered out. Only a woodshed was destroyed.

Meanwhile, the villagers were beginning to recover from the early shock. Captain Conger of the 1st Vermont Cavalry, on leave in town, dashed about on his horse, urging men to get arms and horses, to fight back. A defense line of armed men formed at the lower end of Main Street. Observing this, Young determined it was senseless to attack it and ordered his men to get out of town fast. They rode off shouting the rebel yell over their shoulders and urging on their gold-laden horses at breakneck speed.

Within ten minutes Conger, Fuller, and others made up a posse and set out in pursuit. The Confederates, well ahead of their pursuers, headed for Sheldon, eight miles along the road to the Canadian border. Here they were momentarily delayed but they succeeded in firing a hay wagon on the only bridge into town, thereby forcing



The Franklin County Bank, one of three robbed by the raiders.

their pursuers to alter their route. At Sheldon, too, Young ordered his band to break up into small parties and head for Canada at top speed.

Back in St. Albans the local *Messenger* rushed into print an evening special edition, proclaiming in a masterful understatement of a headline, "St. Albans Has Been Surprised and Excited Today." The lead article reported some \$170,000 stolen from the town's banks. Vermont's governor proclaimed a state of emergency and called out the Home Guard, with instructions to track down the marauders. In neighboring New York, Major General John A. Dix threatened immediate court-martial and the gallows for any rebel raider caught, as he dispatched troops northward.

About 9 p.m. Young, Hutchinson, and Wallace crossed the border into Canada and headed toward Montreal. The following day they learned that seven of their comrades had been captured near Stanbridge just inside Canadian territory. Young decided to give himself up and over Hutchinson's protests turned his horse south toward the United States border. Stopping at a Canadian farmhouse that evening, Young paid the owner \$5 for room and food for himself and his horse. After dinner as Young lazed before the kitchen fire, Conger's posse rushed in and had Young surrounded with pointing pistols before he could rise. Young's protests that this was violating British neutrality were brushed aside. Captain Conger later testified that he had his hands full restraining his men from hanging Young on the spot.

Finally they tossed him, rope around his neck, into a wagon escorted by horsemen aiming pistols and riding alongside the wagon. Through the dark they started on the road leading to the Vermont line. Conger, who by himself was driving the wagon, turned to shout commands to his men. Young threw himself forward,

knocked Conger from the driver's seat to the floor, and grabbed the reins, wheeling the wagon around. Under the crack of the whip, the horses surged forward.



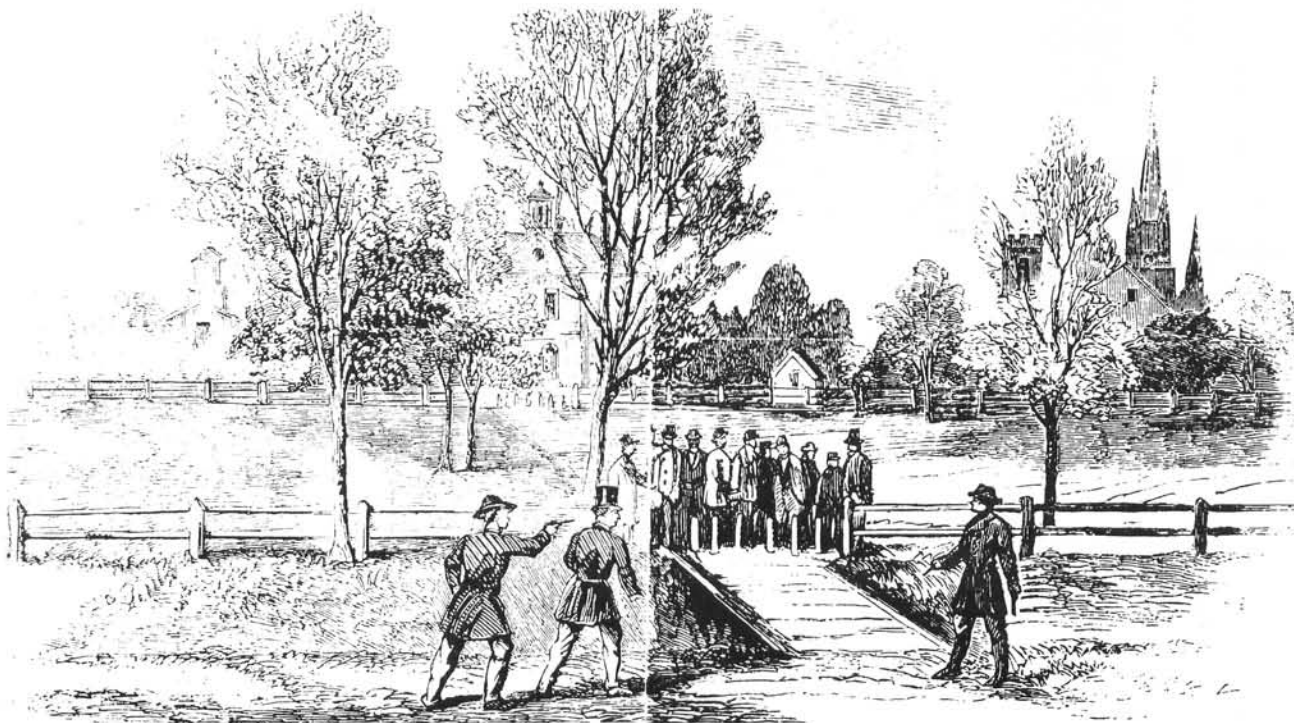
The First National Bank, showing the encounter between Mr. Blaisdell and a raider.

At length, under United States Government pressure the trial was resumed. If the raid were held a felony, the raiders would be returned and tried in the United States. On the morning the proceedings resumed, Young and his men were sitting at the defense table. Heads swung

about to observe a commotion at the entrance. In walked the Kentucky widow. She delivered a large envelope to the defense table. In it were copies of orders from Confederate officials authorizing the raid. Two days later Cameron brought duplicate documents provided him by Confederate Secretary of War James A. Seddon and Secretary of State Judah Benjamin. No document mentioned St. Albans, but one order directed Young to "collect twenty escaped Confederate prisoners [of war] and execute such enterprises as may be indicated to you," the twenty men to be entitled to pay, rations, clothing, and transportation at government expense. Other orders indicated that Young was "under the direction of the Confederate War Department" and that he would be "reporting to Messrs. Clay and Thompson." The case for the rebel raiders brightened markedly.

While awaiting conclusion of the trial, Young and his followers were held in a cell, the converted parlor and rooms of Guillaume Lamothe, Montreal's chief of police. Here Young, entertaining many curious visitors, was said to be "amusing and gay." During the trial Young wrote many letters. Among them, one went to the editor of the St. Albans *Messenger* enclosing \$3 for a subscription to the paper and saying, "I am extremely sorry I cannot visit your town to subscribe to your valuable journal in person. My present business in Montreal prevents my coming. Please address me care of the Montreal jail." A *Messenger* editorial commented, "We fear the \$3 bill did not come into Young's possession honestly," but copies of the paper were forwarded anyway.

A Young communication also went to the Tremont Hotel proprietor: "I regret that I neglected to settle my



Raiders herding citizen prisoners onto the village green.

hotel bill. Nevertheless, I am enclosing \$5 drawn on the Bank of St. Albans. Please tender my regards to Mr. Bishop [teller of the robbed bank] in hopes that he still bears faith and allegiance to the Confederate States of America, which he solemnly swore to do." Later in the same letter he asked about a "ruffled shirt" he "left behind" and "a flask of Old Rifle Whiskey, which we intended to use in case our ammunition was all used up." And in closing he wished to be remembered to "the lady next door whose good opinion I had the fortune to win on account of our theological proclivities. Make to her your best bow...."

The proceedings drew to a close. Presiding Judge Charles J. Coursol held the raid was "a hostile expedition by the Confederate States against the United States" and not a felony, and therefore not extraditable under the existing treaty. The raiders were ordered released, but were immediately rearrested for formally violating Canada's neutrality. Within three weeks they were found not guilty and finally and fully freed. By this time it was spring 1865. The fighting war was over. Lincoln lay dead of an assassin's bullet. Secretary of War Stanton issued a warrant for the arrest of all raiders as bandits while calling for them to return and stand trial.



E. J. Morrison, shot in front of Miss Beattie's Shop, died as he was carried into Dutcher's Drug Store. He was the raid's sole fatality.

Within moments the horsemen caught up, firing wildly, and pulled the wagon to a stop. Young attempted to leap down but was seized by the pursuers, who wrestled him to the ground and began pummeling him mercilessly. Suddenly, a voice in the dark cried out in a sharp British accent, "Here, here, what is this all about?" It turned out to be a British major, who, perceiving that Young was a Confederate lieutenant, insisted on taking the raider into his own custody. To still the clamoring protests, the major informed the Americans that already seven raiders were being held by the authorities at nearby Stanbridge. He would take Young there, and all would be escorted back across the

border to St. Albans the following day. Grumbling, the Vermonters yielded.

Young went off with the officer to the military quarters at Philipsburg where he joined the already captured members of his band. The Confederates found the British officers sympathetic to their plight. They were not sent back. Instead on November 5 they were taken to Montreal. Here a few days later an extradition hearing began. Young and his men were defended by one of Canada's ablest attorneys, J. G. K. Houghton, who won a thirty-day postponement.

The extradition proceedings against "Lt. Bennett H. Young and Command" as reported in the 420-page transcript provide absorbing reading. The Confederate Commissioners' office in Canada provided vigorous support. George N. Sanders, agent attached to the Commissioners, who had originated the whole scheme, bustled about in the court. It was Sanders who engaged defense attorney Houghton, Sanders who testified at length. He asserted that Commissioner Clay had approved the raid, even produced a letter from Clay to Young saying, "... for a raid on accessible towns in Vermont commencing with St. Albans ... you are authorized and required to act" Sanders, as suggested earlier, had probably forged Clay's signature to this document, but Clay had long since departed for home and was unavailable to testify. But Sanders swore that "Clay gave him (Young) \$400 to burn the town and sack the banks — the checks had been drawn on Clay's personal account and signed at his private residence at St. Catherine's, Canada."

The question that the magistrate had to decide was whether the raid was an officially approved military action or a criminal felony of robbery and arson (the latter was extraditable under the Webster - Ashburton Treaty). The defense contended that the Richmond Government had given official approval, but it had no proof. In order to have time to secure evidence, a postponement was authorized.

Several Southerners residing in Canada volunteered to go to Richmond to bring back the official documents — Lieutenant Sam D. Davis of Kentucky, the Reverend Stephen Cameron, a Virginia army chaplain, and a young Kentucky widow, whose name we do not know. Commissioner Jacob Thompson's request to send a messenger to Richmond under a flag of truce was rebuffed by Washington. Lieutenant Davis was later reported arrested by Federal detectives and wound up in Fort Lafayette in New York. Weeks passed without word from the chaplain or the widow.

Young stayed on in Canada, studying law there for a time. The postwar sequel offers a fascinating follow-up. In time he returned home to Kentucky, although Vermont's governor threatened extradition for trial in his state.

Over the years Young's fortunes prospered. In time he became president of the Monon Railroad operating between Louisville and Chicago, still later president of the Louisville Southern Railroad and the Kentucky and

Indiana Bridge Company. In addition to railroading and practicing law, Young became a public orator of renown. in great demand for public ceremonial occasions. As president of the Confederate Veterans Association he delivered the dedication address at Arlington Cemetery in 1914. In time he turned to writing and produced a collection of exciting stories on the Civil War entitled *Confederate Wizards of the Saddle*, but unfortunately included nothing on his own Vermont raid.

In 1904, as part of an historical celebration, the state of Vermont decided to include a re-enactment of the St. Albans raid. An invitation to participate was accepted by Young, and he looked forward to leading a mock raid in person. But the national GAR raised objections to the old Rebel raider and wired Vermont's governor to cancel the affair as having "aspects of a commercial proposition." Gracefully but clearly with regret Young rushed word to Vermont that his business would make it impossible for him to participate. Shortly before the United States entered World War I, Young died and was given the traditional cavalryman's funeral, with riderless horse, empty boots turned backward in the stirrups, muffled drums. As a Civil War horseman who carried military operations to the northernmost point in the war, Young would have liked that.



The raiders firing the bridge to delay the posse at Sheldon Creek.

*Professor of history at the California State University, Los Angeles, David Lindsey is a frequent contributor to the pages of AHI. For in-depth exploration of his topic, he recommends James D. Horan's *Confederate Agent* (1954), and Philip Van Doren Stern's edition of *Secret Missions of the Civil War* (1959).*



Some of the captured raiders pose for their picture in the jail office in Montreal. Left to right, standing: Rev. Cameron, George Scott, and Turner Teavis; seated:

William Hutchinson, Saunders (an organizer of the raid but not a participant), and the leader of the raid, Bennett H. Young. (Courtesy Robert P. Ashley)