

The Mystery of Maple Island

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A little mystery story for Halloween. I only recently heard of this mystery and investigation has brought about several references, factual and fictitious, but many feel the most factual account can be found in a book printed in 1895 since it was written close to the event date. Recently that book came across my desk. Today I will summarize the story, as it is quite lengthy.

Maple Island is located just outside of the shipping channel across from Fisher's Landing between Picton Island and Grenell Island. This six-acre island was covered by thick undergrowth and large trees. There was a triangular shaped clearing with its apex at the top of a dividing ridge along the south side. There was nothing notable or attention gathering about the island.

In the summer of 1865, in early June, a stranger appeared at the hotel in Fisher's Landing. He gave a name that has not been remembered and did not sign the guest register. He was genteelly dressed and no more than 25 years of age. He was friendly but quiet and had the characteristics of a Southerner. He spent many hours scouting the area. He visited Omar and the surrounding area and rented a rowboat to scout island settings. Eventually he announced that he was building a cabin on Maple Island to further pursue his hobby of fishing. He purchased lumber and all the necessary items in Clayton and hired men to transport the supplies to Maple Island and build the cabin. He purchased a skiff, fully outfitted and in short order, made Maple Island his home. Money did not seem to be a problem for the stranger, he always paid in full with English Gold, for he had no American currency. He purchased food supplies from farmers on Grindstone Island and other groceries from Clayton. He made acquaintances but no friends and if by chance had a visitor to the island, there was never an invitation for a return visit. He was known to have several books and a violin which those across the water could hear him play. The cabin was built back into the island and passersby were unable to see it. Had it not been for his occasional visits to Clayton for supplies, he may have been forgotten all together. He was often spoken of as a hermit.

The summer of 1865 moved along and in late August, or early September, several Southern strangers made their appearance along the River. They stopped for a time in Alexandria Bay, Fisher's Landing and Clayton. This was not an unusual situation. Visitors often came to the area to fish or hunt. During this time, an unusual event occurred which brought about the memory of these 'Southern' visitors.

One September evening a bright light was seen on Maple Island. Immediately, it was supposed that the hermit's cabin had caught fire. It was impossible to give any timely assistance and the spectators expected the man to come ashore and take a room at the hotel the next day. He did not appear at the hotel. The locals thought that maybe he had rowed to Grindstone Island, or down to the Grenell Tavern, where the Pullman Hotel would eventually stand, so no more was thought about the man. In the morning, some fishermen rowed to Maple Island to view the destruction. The cabin had burned to the ground and there were suspicious facts that led them to believe it was not accidental. There were many footprints on the ground and evidence that a struggle had occurred. Blood was found on the bushes and at that point, the fishermen suspected robbery and murder. They began a careful search of the island and discovered the body of the hermit at the lower end of the island. His throat was cut, and a knife had been thrust into his heart. His shirt was missing and upon his chest three crosses were cut in a triangle formation, one cross forming the apex, and two the base. These had no significance to the fishermen.

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The hermit was known to have money and they sufficed robbery and murder. The coroner was summoned and after examination done and verdict rendered, the hermit was decently buried. After a short story in the local newspaper the hermit on Maple Island faded into the history of the 1000 Islands. The author relating the story I am using for reference names himself Amateur Historian and states that at the time on writing, only two or three people were still alive and he proceeded to investigate and interrogate anyone he could find to try and determine what happened on Maple Island. I will summarize his findings.

On April 9, 1865, Robert E Lee surrendered the confederate army to Ulysses S Grant at Appomattox Courthouse. For many, this was a time of celebration and joy. For some, the defeat of the Confederate Army was a disappointment that spurred plans to overthrow the Lincoln presidency and reclaim the capitol. One group was the Knights of the Blue Gauntlet. This group was also known by the name Knights of the Golden Circle, and Sons of Liberty and was known by the local authorities who did not consider the group to be harmful.

This group, I will refer to as Sons of Liberty, gathered members and formed groups along most of the lake cities on both sides of the border. Large groups of southern gentlemen swarmed the lake cities of St Catherines, Toronto, Kingston, Ottawa, and Montreal forming groups of Sons of Liberty there. Other lake cities on the American side with large representations were along the shores of New York, Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio and smaller groups in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Messages and arms were sent via courier between cities and countries. The Sons developed a plan to take over steamships in the St Lawrence River, fill them with army men and descend on the cities of Rochester, Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland, and Chicago to rob, pillage and murder patriots and escape to Canada. An alternative plan was to flood those cities with smallpox infested rags but that plan soon dissolved.

The Sons of Liberty eventually realized their plan would not accomplish the statement for the confederacy that they hoped. New conversations developed involving assassinations of key government figures and they soon realized they needed someone to lead the attack. They were looking for a leader with a strong will, unlimited zeal, unbounded enthusiasm, and strong personal magnetism. They wanted someone who had an overwhelming desire for notoriety.

They found this person in John Wilkes Booth. Booth was an actor performing along both sides of the border. He strongly professed his faith in the confederacy and flew flags showing this at opera houses he performed at. The plan the Sons of Liberty decided upon was to assassinate President Lincoln, Vice President Andrew Johnson, Secretary of State William Seward, General Ulysses S Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan and as many other prominent men of affairs as could be reached and struck down at the same hour through a concerted action. They felt this would bring victory to the South.

We all know what happened, Booth assassinated Lincoln, Seward was shot but survived. The man assigned Vice President Andrew Johnson lost his nerve, Grant left the city the night before so was no longer a target, and several other people were stabbed at Seward's house. Several members of the Sons of Liberty were captured after the assassination, tried, and hanged. Some Sons of Liberty escaped, many headed to Canada. The night of the assassinations and attempts on life, a Canadian group, met under the name of Brotherhood of the Blue Gauntlet and two men were chosen to take a large sum of money to the United States to assist with rescue of any Sons of Liberty that needed help in the States.

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The men's names were John H Surratt and John A Payne. The money never arrived to help any of the Sons of Liberty. Surratt and Payne absconded with the money. It is thought they split it evenly. Through several letters noted in the story it was discovered that John H Surratt made his way to Three Rivers, Quebec, where he was protected for a time by a Catholic priest. He then departed to Italy. A man matching John A Payne's description was seen near Smith Falls, Ontario in late May 1865 and then in Gananoque, Ontario where he stayed for a day or two, and then, settling his hotel bill with gold coin from England, left. Was John A Payne the hermit of Maple Island? Was he murdered by members of the Brotherhood of the Blue Gauntlet? Draw your own conclusions, the murder was never solved. All the facts seem to point to John A Payne and no other suspect has been noted. I found other references to the Maple Island man of stories told by women on their deathbed describing rendezvous with a certain Southern gentleman. More recently, John Lefevere wrote a story called *The Scimitar and the Snail* about the Hermit of Maple Island. If you are interested, you may like that story also.

I based most of the information here from an article in *The Picturesque St Lawrence River*, published in 1895 by Jno A Haddock of Watertown and Clayton. The author of the story lists his name as Amateur Historian. The book has a wealth of stories Jno gathered at that time. You may hear another story from this book in the future.

