

# The Story of Indian Island

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## Part One: The Island

Indian Island, a mile long and containing roughly 150 acres was probably visited by Frenchmen who accompanied Champlain and DeMonts; tradition holds that Champlain was here himself; we don't know.

The Indians named the island Mijegnagoose or as some called it Jeganagoose. The white man called it Fish Island; later it was known as Perkins Island; the Le Arterial; finally Indian Island.

In 1760 James Chaffey, called the Robinson Crusoe of Indian Island and its first white settler, came from Philadelphia. James Chaffey, an English man born in Somersetshire, was a goldsmith by trade; he had learned this trade in London from whence he came to Philadelphia then on to Indian Island. The records claim that here he built the first white man's house and store; he at once entered into the fur trade with the Indians.

In 1768 a man by the name of John Lafontaine, now called Fountain, came from Port Royal to Indian Island. Providentially, Mr. Fountain had a daughter and as we might rightly conclude since Chaffey had no competition, he married Miss Fountain. They had 11 children. Mr. & Mrs. Chaffey were my great-great-great-grandparents (author, Muriel Dixon).

According to Moore's International Adjudications Vol. 6, Page 198, Modern Series, Section 3: *"On October 18, 1765, a grant was made under the seal of the province of Nova Scotia to Thomas Falconer Esq. and 60 others named in the grant, commonly called the Canada Company of a large tract of land on the west side of the river St. John called the township of Burton; including an island in Passamaquoddy Bay called Perkins Island being the same island since called Indian Island. This island was occupied by the grantees, or their assigns under this grant, for the purpose of carrying on the fishery there until 1775 when the war interrupted all business in that quarter; this grant having been escheated, a grant of this island has been since made under the seal of the province of New Brunswick under which the present occupants hold the same."*

Through the influence of James Chaffey a man by the name of Goldsmith managed a company which had established salt works; the salt was manufactured from sea water boiled up in large kettles. The island was stripped of its beautiful trees for the purpose of providing fuel for Goldsmith's and Chaffey's kettles. In 1957 screaming power saws again converted stands of spruce and fir into pulpwood exported to the mainland.

At its high tide of prosperity over 100 years ago, Indian Island had approximately 100 residents and the old school registers show an enrollment of as high as 25 pupils. The waterfront had several long wharfs with large warehouses and with berthing accommodations for large vessels. Trade with the West Indies flourished at this time.

We span the years and come to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when trade with the West Indies especially brought Indian Island into its peak of prosperity. This island was the chief trading center for

the West Isles and Campobello and at one time its trade exceeded by one-half that of St. Andrews. Although there were a few small traders on the island the principal business was in the hands of James and John Chaffey and Charles Guay. This James Chaffey mentioned was the son of the original James Chaffey who came from Philadelphia in 1760.

The records of 1827 list the following vessels at Indian Island: *Indian Queen* - 122 tons; *Elizabeth Mary* - 103 tons; a little later the brigs (two-masted square rigged vessels) *Queen of the Isles* and *Cavalier Jovett* owned by James and John Chaffey. In addition to these mercantile vessels, numerous small coasters were busily engaged in trade with Saint John and border ports.

Indian Island enjoyed high prosperity for many years but when the West Indian ports were opened to American vessels, Indian Island traders suffered a disastrous blow. By 1835 the fleet had so dwindled that only one vessel, the brig *Chaffey*, remained as a solitary witness of the departed fleet. The brig *Chaffey* was wrecked in 1849.

Trade with Saint John and border ports continued; there was also fishing and a small amount of farming on the island.

As far as we know from early records, the Customs Office for this part of the County was in a big house on Thrum Cap, the little island to the left of Cherry Island on which a bell and light gave warnings to the seafarers. Later, after 1836, the Customs Office was moved to Welchpool but in July 1861, my great-grandfather, James Emerson Dixon, a school teacher, was appointed deputy treasurer and collector of customs for West Isles and Campobello. The office was removed from Welchpool to Indian Island - I mention this fact about James Dixon because of an event of importance in the history of Indian Island.

### **Part Two: The Fenian Raid of 1866**

The history of Indian Island could not be completed without mention of the Fenian Raid of 1866. It was previously supposed that the province of Ontario, Canada West, would be the scene of its marauding attacks and they would be confined to it. It proved otherwise, however.

In the Spring of 1866 the Fenians began to congregate at Eastport in large numbers under the leadership of one named Killian who seemed well fitted to lead a band of ruffians; they commenced training on a sandy beach at the foot of a long range of a bank a few rods above Dog Island; and as the beach is nearly opposite Indian Island, the Fenians were observed quite clearly. They drilled daily at this spot near Dog Island daily they viewed the hated British flag flying at the Customs House. Killian and his men saw an opportunity to win time without shedding blood - they would seize the British flag.

At midnight, on the night of April 14, 1866, the Fenians crossed to Indian Island, surrounded Mr. Dixon's home and tried to batter their way into the house. My grandmother was ill at the time; there were two of three women in the room with my grandmother and one of them hearing the commotion went to the door and heard: "*We want the English flag. Give it quickly or we will burn down the house.*" By this time my grandfather had awakened, dressed and appeared on the scene. He opened the door to see pistols leveled at him with a demand to give up the flag. At this time other Fenians were trying to tear off the window shutters. Here I shall again quote from the record. "*Taking in the inevitable and the danger to Mrs. Dixon by this midnight attack, he thought wisely that prudence in this case was the better part of valour and surrendered to those worse than Italian banditti, the flag that had waves over the Customs House.*"

Those valiant Fenians having performed such a gallant exploit returned to Eastport taking with them the British flag as a bloodless trophy of unparalleled heroism. No wonder that flag was sent on to New York to the "*Head Center*" office to be displayed there as the first flag taken on the battlefield.

A day or two before the raid an English man-of-war, the *Pylades*, commanded by Capt. Hood arrived at Welshpool. On Sunday morning (the flag was taken Saturday night) the circumstance was laid before Capt. Hood; he sent a telegram to one Beverly Robinson in Saint John; alarm was heard from Saint John to St. Stephen. St. George, St. Andrews and even Bocobec felt the insult and the outrage and the Old Lion of England began to stir himself among the colonist. In bold type the newspapers heralded alarm. A week later again the Fenians came to Indian Island and on April 21 they landed at Guay's Wharf on which stood four large stores. They set fire and burned those stores to ashes. The Queen's warehouse was in one of them containing a large quantity of liquors and other goods - brandy, rum, gin, wine, whiskey, tea and tobacco also a large supply of salt - all was lost.

Capt. Hood had been notified of the danger on the previous evening with a request for protection but the captain disregarded the fears and considered the matter as trifling,

The flames had been seen from the *Pylades* and a Lieut. Vidall with a boat crew crossed over to ascertain particulars. Another war vessel, the *Duncan*, had arrived from Halifax bearing the flag of Sir James Hope and having General Doyle on board. On the afternoon of the day of the fire, Admiral Hope, General Doyle and Captain Hood came to Indian Island and visited the scene of the fire and made strict enquiry of the taking of the flag from the Customs House. A guard of marines and sailors from the war ships were sent over, and the new schoolhouse was placed at their disposal.

Troops and volunteers now poured into all the border towns. Intense excitement prevailed all over the province - especially in Fredericton, Saint John and the frontier towns and rural districts adjoining. Governor Gordon telegraphed to Indian Island to have the books, papers and all documents pertaining to the collector's office removed to Welshpool, but after a guard was put on the island, the order for removal was countermanded.

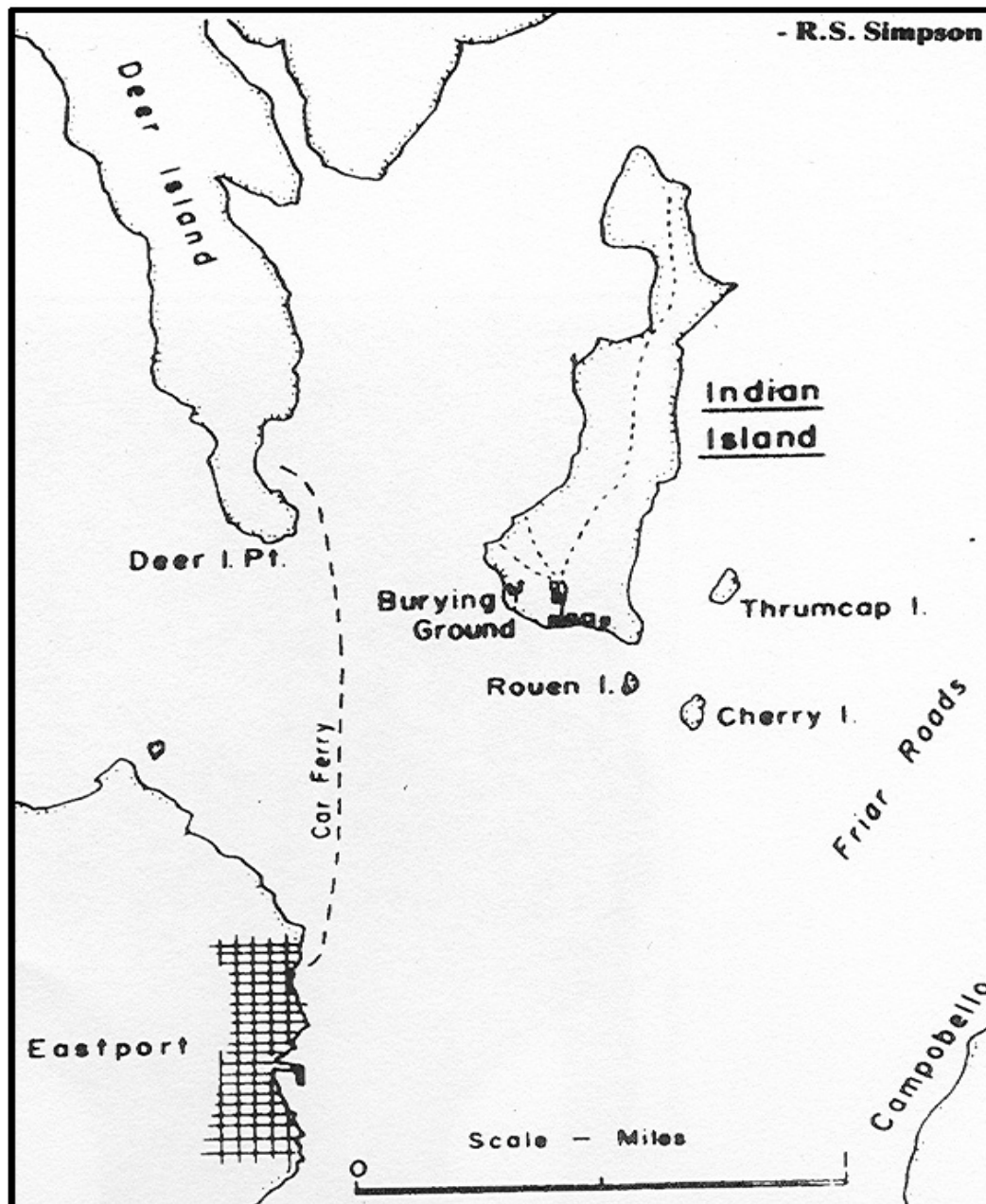
A third attempt made by the Fenians was repulsed and by the autumn of 1866 the Fenians, who had gone earlier to New York, were chief subjects of fireside chats. Excitement and apprehension dwindled although one may rightly conclude that the colorful recalling of episodes furnished many of the Island's storytellers themes for tales in the deep winter evenings.

Apparently Indian Island was the mart of all the surrounding islands. This island was the chosen spot by the red man as a charnel house for the dead. Here the mournful plaintive "*ugh*" of the savages over the remains of one of their tribe would blend in strange cadence with the moaning surf song of the whirling tides. The red man's burying ground attested to the fact that the Indians brought their dead from the adjoining islands to Indian Island for interment.

The days which we have been mentioning naturally are often called "*the good ole days*" when West Indian rum flowed like milk, and West Indian sugar was sweet as honey; When everybody treated everybody; when everybody got merry; when everybody would sing, swear, dance and fight.

When Election Day came the inhabitants of all the islands including Grand Manan, had to attend the polling at Indian Island. The militia law sent the male population of the surrounding islands to this island to learn their drill and the art of war. A Colonel McKay of St. George and a Colonel Hatch from

St. Andrews may be here today in spirit with us. On Election Day and on Militia Days this little Indian Island held high carnival.



\* Note: This paper was presented by the author, Muriel H. Dixon, to the Charlotte County Historical Society in August 1964. Material for this paper has been taken from J. G. Lorimer's book "History of the Islands and Islets in the Bay of Fundy, Charlotte Co., N.B.", printed at the office of the St. Croix Courier, 1876, and from the writings of Chester Allen Dixon. The paper was published in the St. Croix Courier as a two part series in October and November 1977. Illustration by R. S. Simpson. Parts of this paper/article (introduction) were edited for the purpose of this current document which was made available on the internet at the website [www.heritagecharlotte.com](http://www.heritagecharlotte.com) in August 2008, by Janice Scott for Heritage Charlotte.