

*à vapeur pour le compte de la Marine royale, où il a joué un rôle particulièrement efficace. Par contre, il n'a pas été en mesure de surmonter les effets au Canada du ralentissement économique international des années 1870. Wyatt est décédé alors qu'il travaillait sur un nouveau projet, la promotion de l'immigration dans l'Ouest canadien.*

George Henry Wyatt, a Toronto businessman, served as Canada's one-man navy department in the defence against Fenian insurgents from the United States in the late 1860s and early 1870s. With the Fenian attack on Fort Erie, Canada West (Ontario) on 1 June 1866, he immediately volunteered for naval service, sailing as the navigation expert (quartermaster) in a steamer that had been hastily armed for patrol duties on the lakes. Wyatt had arranged the charter of the steamer at the moment of crisis, and within weeks the government appointed him Canada's "Gunboat Agent," to arrange the charter or purchase and maintenance of five steamers that kept watch in the waters from Montreal and the upper St. Lawrence River in the east through to Lake Huron in the west. He held the position until it disappeared when the last of the vessels left military service in 1874.

Wyatt has only recently had more than a passing mention in Canadian maritime history and solely in connection with his eight years in government employment.<sup>1</sup> The research for this paper began in an effort to find out how such a capable individual was immediately available to a government that had previously been unwilling to undertake naval defence measures. Who was George Henry Wyatt, and how did he come to be so well qualified and well connected? What was his later career? The answers provide an intriguing case study of the opportunities open to an ambitious British immigrant to Canada West, how Toronto became a transportation hub with the rise of steam shipping and railways, and the risks of doing business in the emerging national economy following Confederation.

### **Seizing Opportunity in Canada West**

Wyatt was baptized in Brome, Suffolk on 19 December 1828, the son of Henry Wyatt Jr. and the former Emma Squibb.<sup>2</sup> He was named for his

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<sup>1</sup> The only account of more than a few lines known to the authors is Cheryl MacDonald, *Gunboats on the Great Lakes 1866-68: The British Navy's show of force at the time of Confederation* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 2017), 79-93.

<sup>2</sup> Genealogical Society of Utah, *British Isles Vital Records Index*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Intellectual Reserve, 2002).