

## Uncovering History

### Ayr: The Secret Meeting Place for Mackenzie Followers of the 1837 Rebellion

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Before Ayr had received its name, the town was split between settlements Jedburgh, Mudge's Mills and Nithvale. Nithvale was a smaller settlement at the time, and began with a sawmill that ran along the Nith River. However small the Nithvale settlement was, it was at this very spot that William Lyon Mackenzie's followers secretly met and drilled just before the Upper Canada Rebellion. Mackenzie was a motivated and determined man and also a bit of a rebel. In his early days he was a journalist who published a newspaper in York (today Toronto) called *The Colonial Advocate*. Within this paper he attacked the wealthy class also known as the 'Family Compact' who controlled the government.

The British colonial government had a bureaucratic method of granting land. Many pieces of land were set aside for the Crown which lowered the value of the land of neighbouring farmers. Most of the Crown lands were reserved for the wealthy class. Men such as



Nithvale Bridge, Still there but not used

William Lyon Mackenzie did not agree with these procedures and he hoped to eradicate the discrepancies in the government placed upon Upper Canada by the 'Family Compact'.

He wrote many articles concerning this however everything went downhill when a mob came in and threw his printing press in Lake Ontario in 1826.

Two years later he was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Canada only to be expelled and re-elected five times in a row. In 1825 there was a bad harvest, and in hopes of obtaining support he began reaching out to farmers in the area in hopes of establishing a rebellion. A year later he became mayor of Toronto and began writing articles about his Reform Party. In 1837, he opposed Sir Francis Bond Head and the Family Compact which instigated the Rebellion of 1837 which failed the following year and led to his escape to the United States.

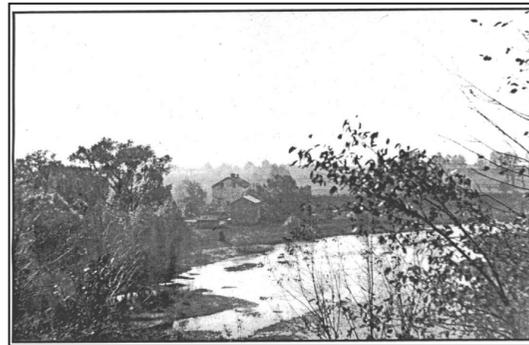
During the time of the rebellion followers emerged from not only Toronto but also London and coincidentally Ayr. Perhaps, because Mackenzie himself was an immigrant from Dundee, Scotland he had much to relate to the Scottish settlers in the area.

Once it was discovered that the Nithvale settlement was used as a meet and drill location, two men by the name of Captain Rich and Captain Wilson were ordered to capture the potential ringleaders by the surnames Hill, Webb, Kenny, Foster and Church. Three of which were caught. *Young's History of Galt and Dumfries* explains the event.

As recorded, Mrs. Kenny, the wife of one of the supposed ringleaders was at Webb's home when troops arrived for his arrest. When she saw them coming, with great courage she ran with all her might out the back door and 'cleared the back fence like a deer'. Being pursued by a soldier she fortunately was able to escape unscathed and warned her husband. Soon they disappeared.

Mr. Foster was captured and released and Webb was found guilty although he was granted freedom upon his word that he would "keep peace for three years". Hill was sentenced to be transported however he died in prison before his judgment took place. A substantial amount of time was spent in prison by Mr. Sylvanus Wrigley who was brave enough to pronounce his support for the rebel army.

Nithvale had served a significant spot for the rebellion and continues to serve as a piece of our history. It shows that the men of this area were not faint of heart. They fought for their beliefs and the rights of the citizens of Canada even placing their lives at risk.



Nithvale In 1800's



Nithvale Mill In Early 1900's