

A Saint-Colomban Connection to the American Civil War

By Kelley O'Rourke

As Memorial Day is observed in the United States, it is important to remember that the American Civil War also touched communities in what was then Lower Canada — years before Canadian Confederation in 1867.

Tens of thousands of men from British North America served during the American Civil War, many crossing the border into the United States to enlist. Some were recent immigrants or sons of immigrant families who had settled throughout Quebec and Ontario in the decades before the war. Economic hardship, adventure, political beliefs, and enlistment bounties all contributed to why many young men became involved in the conflict.

One such story survives in the Saint-Colomban Cemetery in Quebec.

Richard Ryan was born on March 4, 1838, in Saint-Colomban, Lower Canada, to John Ryan and Johanna Bourke (Burke), Irish immigrants from County Tipperary who had settled in the region during the early 1820s. The Ryan family became part of the growing Irish Catholic farming community that helped shape Saint-Colomban during the nineteenth century.

For many years, little was known about the exact circumstances surrounding Richard Ryan's death. Family memory preserved only that he had died during the "American War." However, a newspaper notice published in the *Montreal Gazette* on July 7, 1862, provides an important historical clue. The notice states:

"Killed in battle of Corinth, on the 28th of May, Mr. Richard Ryan, son of John Ryan, Esq., Parish of St. Columban, County of Two Mountains, Canada East."

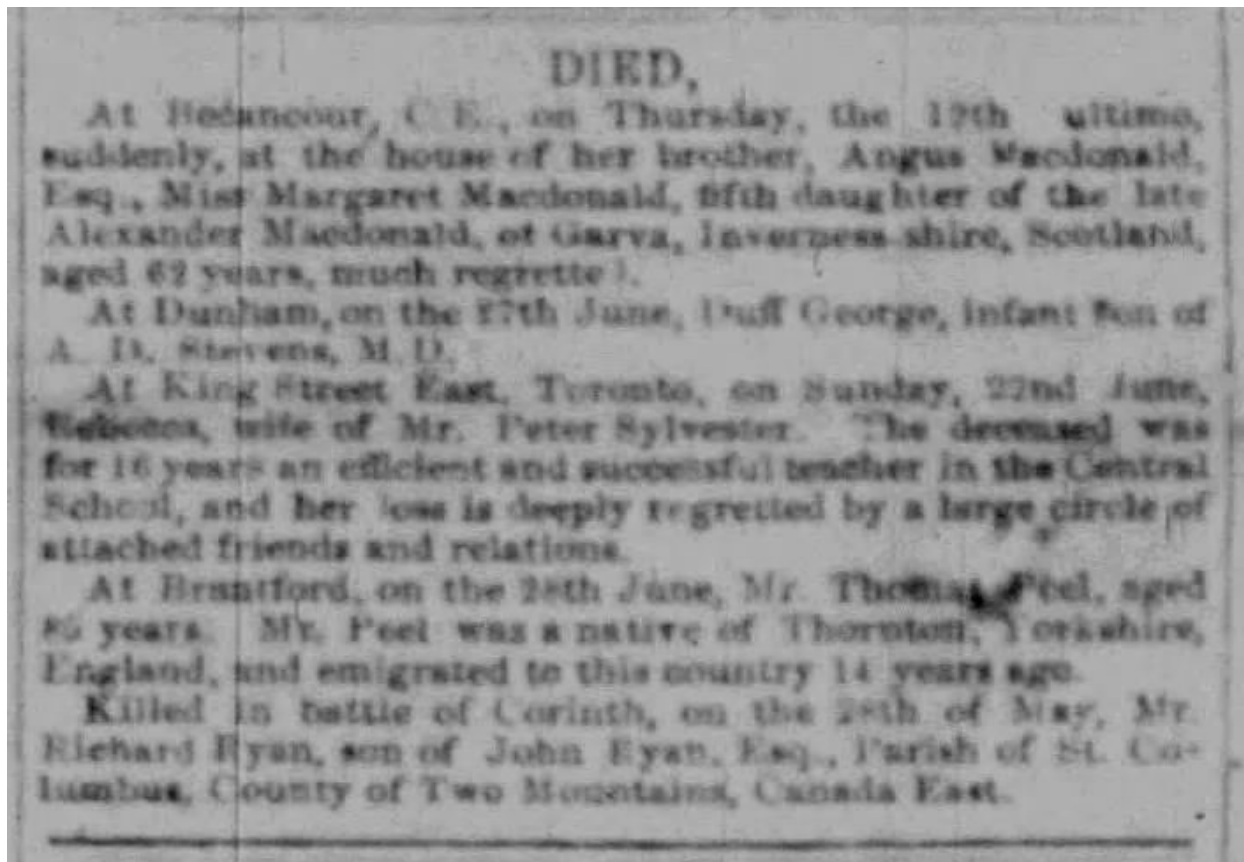


Image Credit: *Montreal Gazette*, July 7, 1862, obituary notice for Richard Ryan.

This brief obituary connects Richard Ryan directly to the Siege of Corinth in Mississippi, one of the major military campaigns of the American Civil War.

The Siege of Corinth, also known as the First Battle of Corinth, lasted from April 29 to May 30, 1862, only weeks after the devastating Battle of Shiloh. Corinth was considered one of the most strategically important towns in the western theater of the war because it sat at the junction of two major railroads: the Mobile and Ohio Railroad and the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. Control of Corinth meant control over vital transportation and supply routes throughout the South.

Union forces under Major General Henry Halleck slowly advanced toward the town with more than 100,000 troops, including forces commanded by Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, George H. Thomas, and Don Carlos Buell. Rather than launching an immediate attack, Halleck ordered a cautious month-long siege in which Union troops gradually surrounded Confederate forces commanded by General P.G.T. Beauregard.

The campaign involved constant skirmishes, artillery exchanges, disease, exhausting heat, and difficult camp conditions. Although the siege did not produce a single dramatic battlefield clash, soldiers died regularly throughout the campaign. On May 29, 1862 — one day after Richard Ryan’s death — Confederate forces evacuated Corinth, giving the Union one of its most important strategic victories in the western theater of the war.

At present, no military record has yet been located identifying Richard Ryan’s regiment or confirming which side he served with. However, the timing and location of his death clearly place him within the Corinth campaign in Mississippi during May 1862.

Richard Ryan died at only twenty-three years of age, far from his home in Saint-Colomban. Like many families during the Civil War era, the Ryans never had the opportunity to bring their loved one home for burial. Instead, the family chose to memorialize him in Saint-Colomban Cemetery, where a monument still stands today.

The inscription reads:

“...and to poor Richard who sacrificed his precious life in the American War on the 28 of May 1862 aged 23 years. Though not here in body is here in spirit.”



Image Credit: Kelley O'Rourke

The memorial quietly reminds visitors that the American Civil War was not solely an American story. It also touched immigrant communities and rural settlements throughout British North America. Families in places like Saint-Colomban experienced the same grief, uncertainty, and loss felt across the continent during one of the nineteenth century’s deadliest conflicts.

More than 160 years later, Richard Ryan's story survives through cemetery preservation, newspaper records, and local memory. His monument continues to connect a small Irish Catholic cemetery in Quebec to the larger history of the American Civil War.

Sources

Montreal Gazette, July 7, 1862, obituary notice for Richard Ryan.

The Canadian Encyclopedia – “American Civil War.”

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/american-civil-war>

Find a Grave – Richard Ryan Memorial, Saint-Colomban Cemetery.

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/200960472/richard-ryan>

National Park Service – Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center.

<https://www.nps.gov/shil/learn/historyculture/corinth.htm>