

The Black Bag of Dr. Wiltse (Prologue)

During the Colonial Era (1607-1776), many Dutch people immigrated to America seeking religious freedom. After the American Revolution (1775-1783), a significant emigration from the United States to Canada followed, including about 75,000 British Loyalists. For their service to Britain, they were given citizenship and land in the area that became known as Ontario. These Loyalists introduced English to the French and native-speaking people.

The Black Hawk Treaty of 1833 opened most of Iowa to white settlement. In 1834 Iowa became part of the Michigan Territory—which included what is today Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and parts of the North and South Dakota. When Michigan withdrew to become a state in 1836, the remaining area was called the Wisconsin Territory. On February 6, 1838, Congress voted to establish the Iowa Territory. Iowa became a state on December 28, 1846.

After 1850, most European settlers came through ports in New York or Canada. The first European settlers to Iowa were French-Canadians who worked in the lead mines near present-day Dubuque. Between 1850-1860, the population of Iowa nearly tripled.

Before 1906, a man's wife and minor children were considered naturalized citizens when the man completed his application requirements.

The Black Bag of Dr. Wiltse (Excerpt)

CHAPTER ONE

Guérisseur, Healer - 1855

If I could have foreseen the future in *Amérique*, would I have changed anything? How could I have predicted the hideous murder at Stone's Grocery? I would ne'er forget the final moments my colleague Dr. Stout lay on the floor, gasping for air. How is it another avowing the Hippocratic Oath can kill? With each passing year, the list of murderous transgressions grew longer and more diverse—Indian massacres, mob hangings, prairie banditti; then a great war, sanctioned murder. In the end, 'twas my own mortality which taught me what none other could.

Admittedly, it was the Ontario newspaper article that beckoned me in the spring of 1855 to leave my beloved Canada—for Iowa, which had become a state and opened to new settlement. Being near *famille* was to my considerable liking; then the article named three murders in a nearby village where Cousin Uriah Wiltse resided. Perhaps only my dear wife Phebe knew of my interest in investigating murder. My durable oiled black canvas bag simply allowed me into emplacements where others may not go. Still, my Dutch family and fellow French Canadians called me *Guérisseur*—Healer.

Within the year we said *adieux* to family and friends, and to pretty stone chalets, rose flower gardens, and ancestral farms. My relations had started Wiltsetown, arriving at the time of the American Revolutionary War, when the British recompensed soldiers with land in Canada West. Benoni Wiltse, who'd served in the British Army, once owned my farm overlooking a vale. The Wiltse colony would look after our Ontario farm in our absence. If Iowa grasshoppers ate our crops or hailstorms forced us from the land, we could still return, but I dearly hoped our love for our *nouvelle* homeland would become as deep and wide as mine for my family. Phebe and our three *enfants*—Charles, age 5, Vidella, age 6, and Edwin, “Neddy,” our youngest, age 4—plus, my parents, *Père* Philip, 55 years, and *Mère* Rachel, 54 years, as they wished to be called—and several stragglers, would join us on the voyage.

On the day of our departure, I insisted we stop at a fresh mound in Forest Home Cemetery, called out by undertaker Josiah in previous weeks. Clearly, the grave had been dug the previous fall, and the intruder spent the winter in Canada's frigid snow. Nearby, lay another soul who had left this world a decade earlier in horrible *douleur*, the result of a *fistule* on the rectum and *hernie*—I had signed the *homme's* death certificate. The vacant lot beside him awaited his wife Abigail. With her recent passing, the fresh grave was discovered, marked by a flat rock narrowly chiseled VIRGINIA C. My mind ached to encounter the *squatter*; how I itched to grab my shovel and identify the cause of the mysterious death.

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From the rail of a side-wheeler tied up at the river's edge, each of us dressed in our finery, we watched barrel trunks filled to the rim with chattels—including one holding my diatonic accordéon, carefully painted in large letters GENTLE, SINL VOUS PLAÎT—brought aboard the 775 tons steamer built by the Ontario and St. Lawrence Steamboat Company's lines.

The twisting river required navigational changes, and by mid-afternoon our vessel had traversed the first of the Williamsburg Canals.

Days later, at the mouth of Lake Ontario, the schooner Orcadian awaited our transfer. The crew consisted of six persons including the captain. A heavy beam sea arose on our second evening, and we were frightfully tossed to and fro. More than once I went to the deck to empty my stomach. In the darkness it appeared the ship would surely capsize and sink, reminding me of my dream the night before leaving home. Had the dream been a presage—a warning? Was I embarking on a voyage of personal ambition, rather than of duty? Was I destiné for failure? At one point, I thought I saw a roiling wave with two young boys waving—so real, I outstretched my hand before they disappeared before my eyes. The visage—face, of one resembled a childhood friend who had drowned in the Ottawa River twenty years earlier. By some fortune, the other lad swimming with him was saved.

Why wasn't the boy who remained the one taken?

Early the next morning I learned a woman had been washed overboard in the storm and perished.

The Orcadian moved onto Lake Huron, where we were delayed by several days to take on a heavy freight of merchandise. After a few days at sea, on one particularly calm morning around seven bells, Captain Stanard summoned all passengers to the deck for a burial at sea. The âgé monsieur—older man, had first complained of an infection upon boarding at Ontario. The captain requested I give an effective treatment, but applications of carbolic acid to his festering blesure—wound, did little to inverse his condition. He was in good health upon retiring the previous evening; at dawn, he was no more. His sudden death left me quite upset. Captain Stanard read a prayer for the dead before signaling to a member of the crew to raise one end of the slat, when the corpse dropped from beneath a couverture and splashed into the deep lake. A pealing of the ship's bell followed.