

Septimus Julius Augustus Denison

Major General, C.M.G.

1859 - 1937

Timothy R. Martin

Great, Great, Grand Nephew

Midland, Ontario

February, 2021

Foreword

As a member of the Rusholme branch of the Denison family, I have always been interested in the role the Denisons played in early Canadian history. Much has been written about the Denisons and their service to Canada and the British Empire. This is especially true for my great, great, great uncle - Septimus Julius Augustus Denison, who because of his year of birth actually saw relatively little active military service but managed to rise to the rank of Major General in the British and Canadian armies.

Born in 1859, he was too late for duty in the war of 1812 or in the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837 and too young for the Fenian raids in 1866 and the North West Rebellion in 1870. However, as a forty year old he did see action in the Boer War in 1899-1900 (see discussion of his letters to his brother Henry and autographs of senior officers at the end of this story) and very briefly in the Great War in 1915.

Perhaps, because he was a member of the "Fighting Denisons" and his unique name and senior military rank, he is well known to modern-day members of the Denison family and is buried with his wife in St. John's Cemetery on the Humber located in Weston, Ontario.

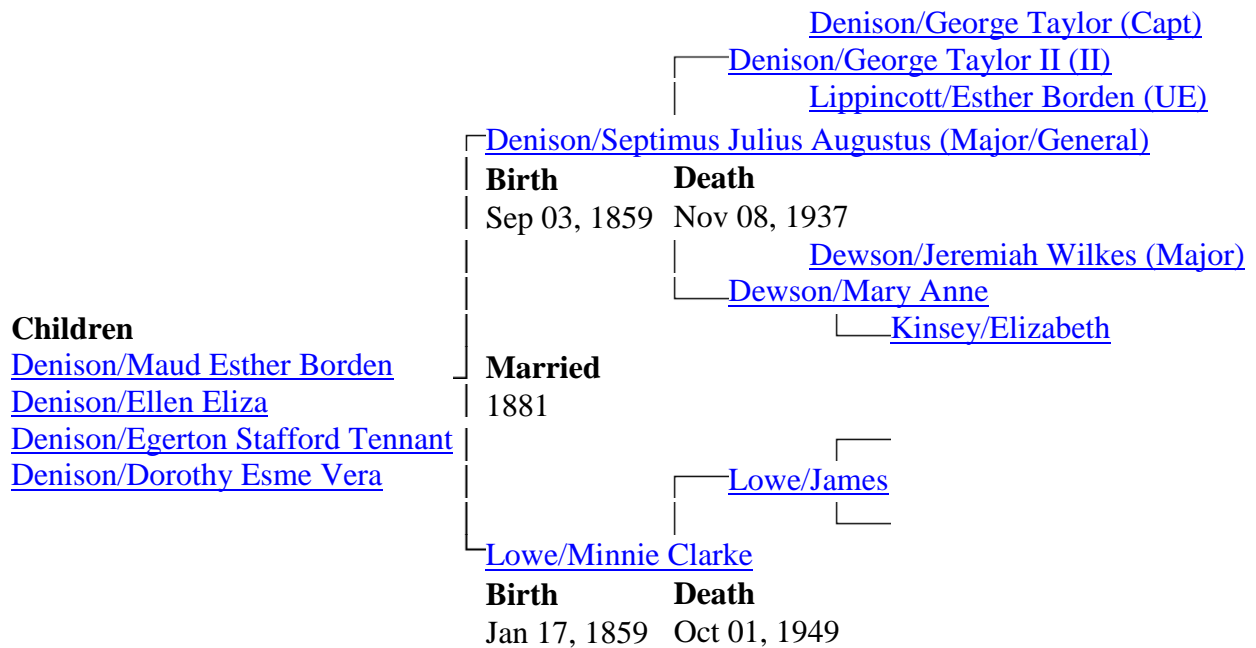


Septimus Julius Augustus Denison

Back Row, middle c 1878

About Septimus Julius Augustus Denison

Septimus was born into a prominent wealthy family which was part of the Canadian military and political elite, with roots that stretched back to the United Empire Loyalists. His great-grandfather came to Upper Canada with Lt. Gov. John Graves Simcoe in 1792. His grandfather fought with General Isaac Brock in the War of 1812. His father, George Taylor Denison II, built the family estate called Rusholme amid open fields on the western edge of Toronto. The home was later demolished in 1953.



George Taylor Denison II



Mary Anne Dewson

George Taylor Denison II and his wife Mary Anne Dewson managed to produce a total of ten children – each arriving every two to three years. Septimus was the seventh boy – hence the Latin name “Septimus”.

One can only imagine the mayhem at dinner and bed-time! It is also safe to assume that Mary had a fair amount of domestic help befitting their social status.

The Early Years



Septimus at RMC

Following family tradition, Septimus attended Upper Canada College in Toronto from 1870 to 1875. At the age of seventeen, he then enrolled in Canada's newly formed Royal Military College (RMC) in Kingston, Ontario. He was part of the very first class from 1876 to 1878 which has come to be known as "The Old Eighteen".

Each cadet was assigned a number – his was #6. This practice continues today. He successfully completed two years of training and qualified for a Military Qualification (M.Q.) Certificate. Septimus was not the only Denison to attend the Royal Military College. He was followed by #72 Egerton Edmund (1879-81), #377 Frederick Conyngham (1893-95), #385 Garnet Wolseley (1894-98), #426 Vivian Dewson (1897-00) and #425 Walter Wallbridge (1897-98).



Septimus portrait 1881

According to his memoirs, Septimus understood that he could not simply rely on inherited wealth from his grandfather and father. He knew that in order to achieve social status and advance his career, he would have to rely upon his own self-confidence, bravado and abilities. For example, he wrote:

"I do believe that being a non-smoker and non-drinker until forty years of age, spending from one to three hours daily in a Gymnasium and eliminating excesses of all kinds that, I had twice the strength I otherwise would have had and I consider this one of my best tricks - allowing the heaviest man in the room to sit in a chair and lift him chair and all and place them upon a table."

Two years after graduation, he joined the King's Own 1st Staffordshire Regiment as a 2nd Lieutenant and quickly became a Captain in the 4th Staffordshire Regiment in 1881. That same year, at the age of twenty-two he met and married Minnie Clarke Lowe. They had four children. The first born (Maud) married a clergyman and lived 84 years. The second (Ellen) died the day after she was born. The third (Egerton) lived slightly over 4 months and finally the fourth (Dorothy) lived only 26 years.

Septimus was not always focused on all things military. Like many family members after him, he enjoyed years of pleasure on Muskoka Lake in northern Ontario. Beechgrove Island has been the summer home of successive generations (who now prefer to spell it "Beachgrove") of the Denison family since 1887.

His brother, Frederick Charles Denison purchased crown land on the island from Her Majesty, Queen Victoria in 1883 and four years later added to the property. A few years later, his sister bought even more of the island and ultimately left her holdings to Septimus's daughter Maud. That piece of land is where, in 1890 Septimus built a brick cottage and named it "Agiochook", an Indian word meaning, "Place of the Spirit of the Pines".



Beechgrove Island



Septimus, Minnie and daughter Maud

Travelling to Muskoka in the early days was very difficult via train, coach, steamship and sometimes by row-boat. Septimus loved family life on the island including entertaining, camp fires, swimming and fishing. While serving as Aide-de-Camp to the Earl of Aberdeen (Governor-General of Canada) he even entertained the Earl and his wife for a few days on the island during their last year at Government House. By all accounts, the Earl enjoyed the experience despite relatively primitive conditions. (Agiochook is still standing to this day)

In his memoirs, Septimus told a quick story about his love of fishing in Muskoka:

"When I see anyone impertinent enough to cast a line within a mile of my Island I promptly produce my Martini-Henry, with the object of improving my ability to use that weapon, and, somehow or another, accidentally select as a target something close to them and when they find bullets landing all about them they, usually and with the same alacrity... (leave)"

He is also quoted describing Muskoka as:

"Intensely quiet, romantic lakes, even if intermingled, at times, with that exceedingly weird call of the Loon".

Further stating that:

"My greatest pleasure has been to return every summer to these waters"

Peacetime Military Career

Septimus had a varied and seemingly confusing career path in both the Canadian and British military establishments. The following timeline after graduation and leading up to the Boer war is courtesy of the RMC Museum:

1880	2nd Lieut. (K.O.) 1st Staffordshire Regiment
1880	Lieutenant 4th Staffordshire Regiment
1881	Captain 4th Staffordshire Regiment
1888	Lieut. Infantry School Corps (later became the RCR)
1892	Brevet Captain, Canadian Militia
1893	Major, South Staffordshire Regiment
1897	A.D.C. to General H.R.H. the Duke of Connaught
1897/1898	A.D.C. to the Governor General of Canada
1899	Captain, Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry

In his continuing effort to curry favour with the royal family and senior government officials during peacetime, Septimus organized a dazzling ball for 2,500 guests in 1897 to honour Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee year.

The Boer War



Boer War theater

Britain, like other colonial powers had claimed possession of vast territories in Africa. The Second Boer War (1899 – 1902) was fought between the British Empire and two independent Boer states: the South African Republic (Republic of Transvaal) and the Orange Free State. The root cause of the war was the discovery of diamonds and gold in the Boer states as well as Britain's desire to link up the two states with its northern colonies in Africa.

Septimus was an experienced staff officer and answered the call. My father (John Hamilton Martin) recounted an amusing story about Septimus's attempts to get into the action.

“Around the time of start of the Boer War, Uncle Septimus made application to the British Army for transfer from the Canadian Army. He obtained the forms, filled them out and signed in his usual manner – S.J.A. Denison. The papers came back from England with a cold note that he should have signed with his full name. Uncle Septimus revised the form as directed and returned it. Back it came with an even colder note accusing him of unsuitable levity since obviously no-one would have names like those on the form!”



Septimus Portrait, 1901

Undaunted, Septimus was appointed quartermaster of the 1st Canadian Contingent and sailed from Quebec to South Africa on October 30th, 1899 aboard the *Sardinian* complete with his servant and horse. His family was living at 24 Cecil Street in Toronto when he left behind his wife of eighteen years and two daughters seventeen and seven years of age.

The contingent, 1039 strong arrived at Cape Town November 29, 1899 including the Second (Special Service) Battalion, Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry (2 RCRI) under the command of the country's most experienced professional soldier, Lieutenant-Colonel William Dillon Otter.

It was made up of eight 125-man regionally-based companies, one from western Canada, three from Ontario, and two each from Quebec and the Maritimes. A total of two contingents totalling 7368 Canadians soldiers served in South Africa. Of these, 267 were killed in action, and 252 were wounded.

Shortly after arriving, Septimus was seconded to the British army from January 29th 1900 to March 4th 1901. He served as Aide de Camp to Field Marshal Lord Roberts, Commander-in-Chief South Africa. During this time, as an Aide, he had access to privileged communications and wrote at least eleven letters to his older brother Henry describing conditions, military actions and generally opining about the various officers he served with. In one of his letters, he writes about pulling strings to get his nephew Bertram Noel Denison transferred to the front with his father's (Admiral Denison) blessing.

He also had a habit of collecting autographs of high ranking officers theorizing that one day such a document would become quite rare and a valuable addition to the Denison collection. He sent the autograph document to Henry. Fortuitously, it survived the sinking of the mail ship *SS Mexican* on the way back to England.

During his time in South Africa he was laid low with enteric fever for two weeks in hospital. Upon release, he was present at the surrender of Paardeberg, thus ending the conflict which had deteriorated from set-piece engagements into brutal guerrilla warfare. The conflict was a portent of modern warfare which would soon come to Europe.



Queen Victoria's funeral procession – Is one of these riders Septimus?

He shipped out to England in late October, 1900. While still A.D.C. to Lord Roberts he rode very close to the gun carriage carrying the late Queen Victoria in her funeral procession on February 1, 1901. It was witnessed by millions of mourning Londoners lining the route from Osborne House.

Septimus dined at Buckingham Palace later and within days, he returned to Canada and was given a hero's welcome in London, Ontario.

In recognition of services during the war, he was appointed Companion of the "Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George" (CMG). He received the decoration after the war at an Investiture at Government House, in Ottawa by HRH the Prince of Wales, being the very first occasion such a ceremony took place in Canada. He was also awarded the Queen's South Africa Campaign Medal.

Septimus went on to become the Aide de Camp to the Duke of Cornwall (Later to be crowned King George V) as he toured throughout Canada in the fall of 1901. Family lore suggests that during the tour he somehow managed to 'acquire' souvenirs including a hand-painted menu card from the CPR *Pacific Steamer* dining room sailing from Vancouver to Victoria commemorating the tour.

After the Boer War

The following time-line traces Septimus's military service in Canada after the Boer War up to the start of the Great War:

1901	A.D.C. to Duke and Duchess of Cornwall during their tour through Canada
1902	Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel, Canadian Militia
1904	Major, Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry
1905 to 1910	Chief Staff Officer, RCR Western Ontario
1910	Commandant, the Royal Canadian Regiment

In 1906, Septimus commanded the detachment of Royal Canadians and Dragoons (which included his brother Frederick Charles Denison) dispersing street-car rioters in Hamilton, Ontario after they had defied local police for several days.

On August 4th, 1914 Britain declared War on Germany. At the time, Canada was obligated to follow suit. Septimus again answered the call and was attested in Toronto for active service on Sept 22nd, 1914 to be paid at the rate of \$250.00 per month.

At the age of 56, as Adjutant General of the Canadian militia, he was appointed commander of the 4th Infantry Brigade and to command the 2nd Infantry Division on Jan 1, 1915. He travelled to England and then landed in France on June 4th, 1915. However, suffering from ill health, Septimus was subsequently relieved of duty in June 1915 shortly after arriving and was replaced by Lord Brooke.

Septimus returned to Canada as medically unfit on July 31, 1915. He was promoted in August, 1915 to general officer and retired on a pension June 8th, 1916 with rank of Major General. In retirement, Septimus remained attached to the RCR and remained a close friend of many members of the royal family, maintaining his connections spending winters in London and Bermuda. Summers were spent on his beloved Beechgrove Island in Muskoka.

He died in Toronto on November 8, 1937 and was buried in the Denison family cemetery. He was joined by his wife, Minnie in 1949.



Acknowledgements

<https://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.item/?op=pdf&app=CEF&id=B2447-S051>

www.Beachgrove125.org

[Anglo Boer War - Royal Canadian Regiment of Infantry](#)

Upper Canada College War Book

Royal Military College Museum – Kingston, Ontario

Royal Canadian Regiment Museum - London, Ontario

“Who’s Who” in Canada – 1915

Donald Jones "Historical Toronto" article - Toronto Star, August 31, 1985

John Hamilton Martin Memoirs

Shelagh Kirkpatrick Bowden “Muskoka Recollections”

David Gagan “The Denison Family of Toronto”

Donald J. Bowman – Eleven letters from South Africa written by S.J.A. Denison

Lt. Col. George Taylor Denison III – “Soldiering in Canada”

Robert Main – Retired judge and genealogist

Wikipedia

Appendix – The Letters

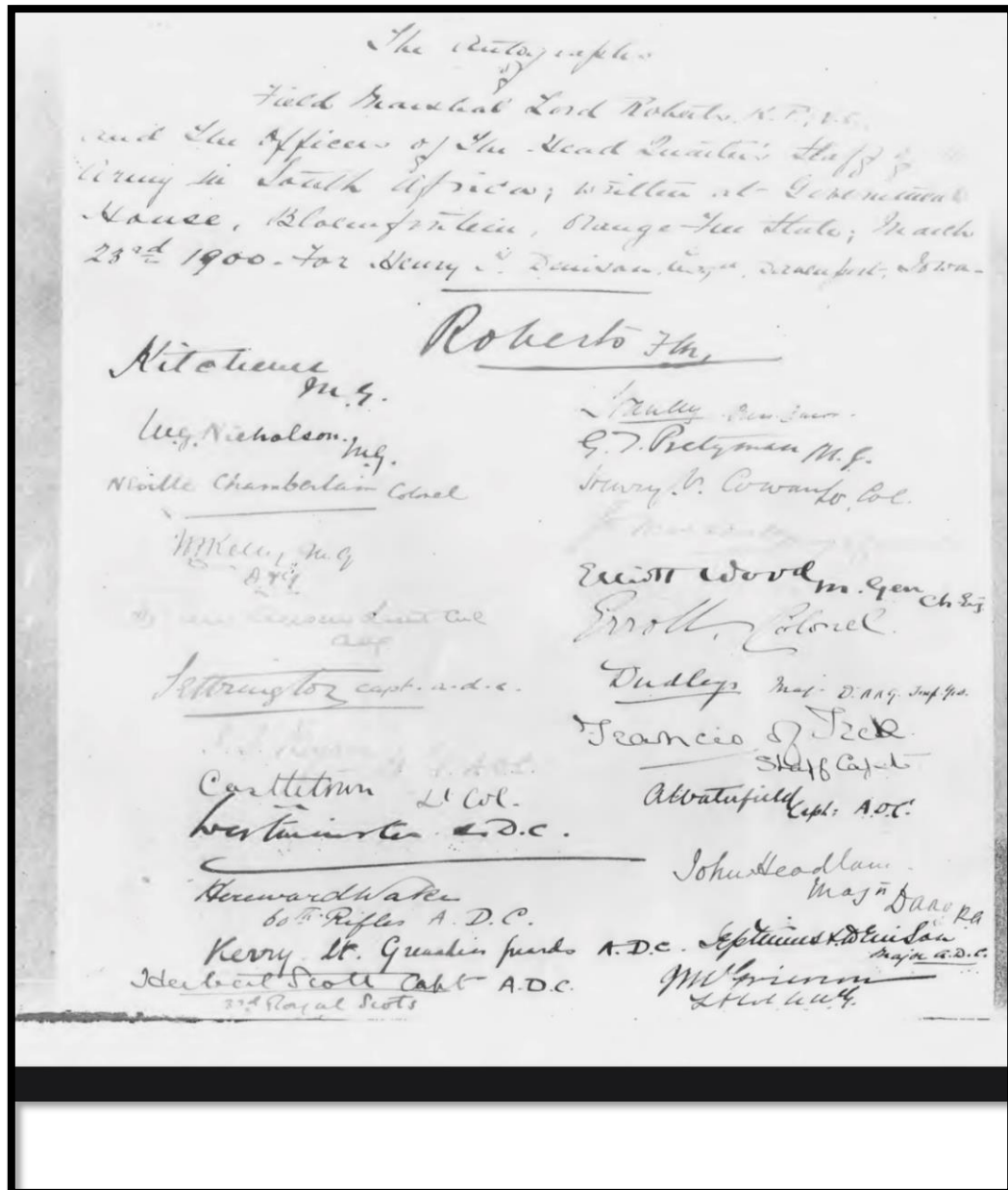


Sample letter sent to his brother Henry

While serving in South Africa, Septimus was a social-climbing prolific letter writer sending at least eleven letters to his brother Henry. They have been passed down through the generations and were owned by Donald Bowman (Great Grandson) who has donated them along with many of Septimus's badges, buckles and dress sword to the Royal Canadian Regiment's Museum in London, Ontario. The following is a quick synopsis of each letter.

- **January 7/1900 From Belcourt** Arrival, Lt. Col Pitcher, preparations for relief of Douglas, prisoners taken, engagement at Sunnyside, fighting alongside Australians, working with war correspondent for Montreal star, march on Belmont, awaiting Lord Robert's arrival.
- **January 14/1900 From Belcourt** Lack of newspapers, details of his pay and draw, discussing Sunnyside, discusses secondment to the British army, sand storms, wretched conditions, looking forward to arrival of 2nd contingent of Canadians,
- **March 22&24/1900 From Bloemfontein** Congratulates his nephew Vivian for entering service, brags about all the officers he has befriended, attempts to get Bertram Denison sent to the front, talks about Cecil Rhodes, Paardeberg, Cronje and Lord Roberts. Bloemfontein, complains about his letter writing to officers going unanswered. Collecting autographs from officers
- **March 29/1900 From Bloemfontein** More talk of autographs, identifies each, talks about future value of the signatures document
- **April 19/1900 From Bloemfontein** Crows about being mentioned in dispatches from Lord Roberts, arrival of Lady Roberts and daughter, more talk of autographs, entertaining officers for lunches and dinners,
- **June 20/1900 From Pretoria** Glad to hear of arrival of autograph document despite the ship sinking, complaints of mail delays, Lord Baden Powell, talks of future economic well-being in Canada. Private note re telegram about Sam Hughes and Lord Roberts. (note – letter largely illegible)
- **July 5/1900 From Pretoria** More talk of the autograph document. Arrival of Lady Roberts and sixteen nurses by train, talks about getting Bertram Denison to the front and Admiral John's letter. Lord Roberts sending Sam Hughes home to Canada, plans of returning home via England
- **July 27/1900 From Pretoria** More talk of final stages of the war, trek to Middleberg, Lord Kitchener, Lord Roberts
- **August 9/1900 From Pretoria** Complains about not getting Canadian newspapers, getting weary of the war, capture of 3500 Boers, Queen Victoria's letter to Lord Roberts re: Prince Christian Victor
- **September 25/1900 From Pretoria** More discussion of returning to Canada via England. Talks about Bertram Denison in battle and possible return to the Navy. Dinner with Lord and Lady Roberts, references to brother George Taylor Denison III's book
- **October 4/1900 From Pretoria** Talks about autographs from Prince Christian Victor and Lord Baden Powell, more social dinners, upset about some Canadians returning home before war officially over. Talks of possibly sailing to England on October 31st.


Appendix – The Autographs



Septimus was obsessed with trying to obtain autographs of the British officers in the South Africa campaign - many of whom were members of the royal family and the British upper class - ostensibly for his brother Henry Tyrwhitt Denison.

The original 120 year old document is historically significant with many signatures of particular interest. For example: Prince Francis of Tech - brother of King George V's wife Queen Mary, Lord Roberts - Commander in Chief in South Africa, Lord Kitchener - famous for preparing the British army for WW1 and later drowning in 1916 when his ship struck a mine west of Scotland and of course – Septimus himself.

Appendix – Medical Discharge



F.A. Addressed to
THE SECRETARY,
MILITIA COUNCIL,
HEADQUARTERS,
OTTAWA, CAN.

C. 426.
And quote number, _____

DEPARTMENT OF MILITIA AND DEFENCE.

OTTAWA, 4th May, 1915.

From
The Adjutant-General,
Canadian Militia.

To
Colonel S.F.A. Deacon, C.M.G., A.D.C.,
Comdg: 4th Infantry Brigade,
C.E.F.,
Toronto, Ont.


Sir,

I have the honour, by direction,
to confirm herewith, my telegram to
you of the 3rd instant as follows:-

"You are authorized to proceed
to England in command of brigade. On
arrival there you will hand over same
to officer who will be selected for
permanent command. You will then please
return to Canada".

2. In forwarding this telegram I am
to express regret that the report of
the Medical Board rendered this action
necessary and have also to express the
regret of the Minister and the Members
of the Militia Council that your phy-
sical disability will prevent your
proceeding to the Front with the 4th
Brigade to which you were appointed.
They feel sure that you will recognize
the justice of the decision arrived at,
and it is hoped that, upon your return
to Canada, you will be able to continue
in the Militia service with which you
have been so long connected.

I have the honour to be,
Sir,
Your obedient servant,



Brigadier-General,
Actg. Adjutant-General.