



Frederick Charles Denison

A man in a hurry

1846 - 1896

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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. A focal point for the family history is St. John's Cemetery on the Humber located in Weston, Ontario.

The following story is about a young man born into a prominent Toronto family and interested in all things military.

Britain had finally defeated the French in Lower Canada but lost the thirteen colonies in America - all in the latter half of the eighteenth century. America was rapidly expanding and posing a threat to British interests in Canada to the point when all-out war broke out in 1812. That conflict resulted in a stalemate as Canadian militia, loyal Indian tribes and British regular troops managed to keep America from swallowing up what we now know as Canada.

But what was Canada then? A loose collection of maritime provinces, a sullen French speaking Lower Canada(Quebec), a loyal English speaking Upper Canada(Ontario) and thousands of unprotected miles of forest, streams, prairies, mountains, wildlife and untapped resources.

In the period between the 1812 conflict, and the dawn of the twentieth century, Canada struggled with rebellion in Ontario and the far west, the growing menace of American expansionism and the need to bind British North America together with a ribbon of steel.

Canada did not have a formal standing army, instead relying on part-time militia units. By way of comparison, the American union armies having won the US civil war in 1865 numbered a million battle hardened men, all on Canada's doorstep.

Into this perilous period of our history, Frederick was born twenty-one years before confederation and proved to be one of the most diverse and interesting characters of the "Fighting Denisons".

The following story will illustrate his burning desire to achieve social status in early Upper Canada taking on any challenge the military presented – all in the name of Queen and country. He died in 1896 (aged 49) of stomach cancer and is buried in St. John's Cemetery on the Humber.

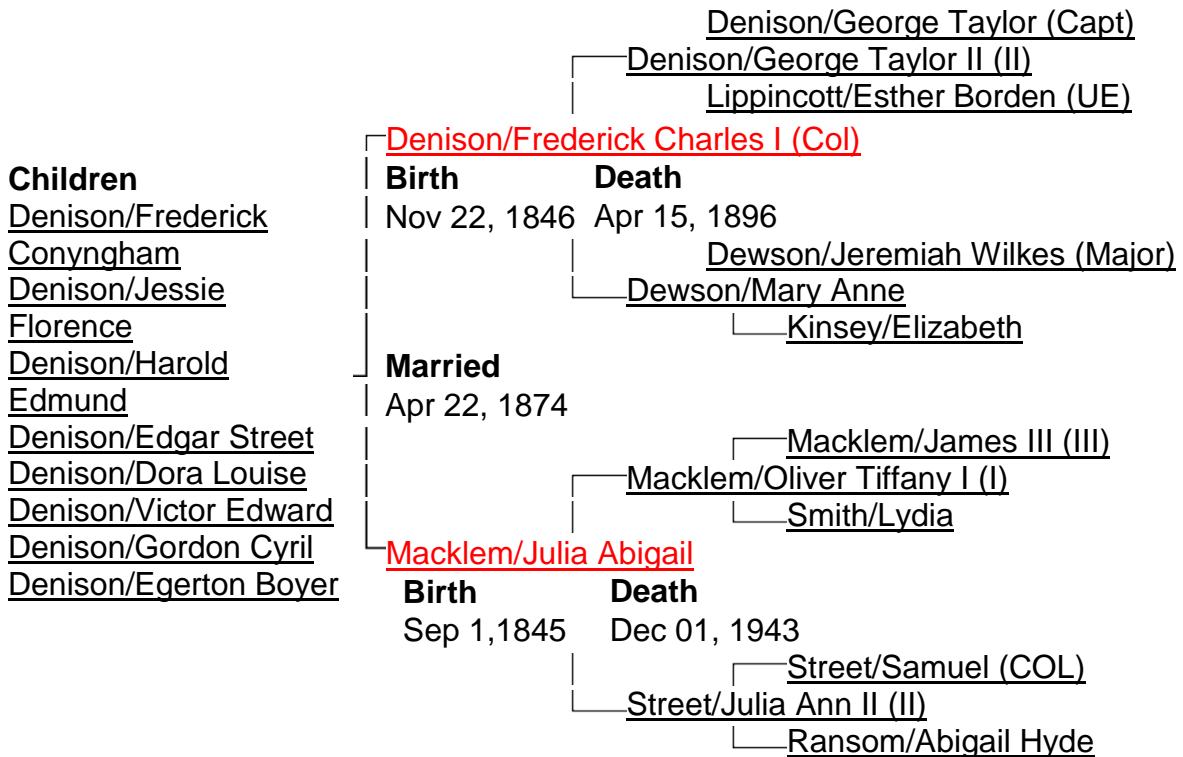
After reading this story, I would encourage you to reflect on his life and times and proudly share it with children and grand-children

Tim Martin

About Frederick Charles Denison

Born on November 22nd, 1846, Frederick Charles Denison was the son of George Taylor Denison II and Mary Anne Dewson. He was a brother of George Taylor Denison III, one-time police magistrate of the city of Toronto and winner of an award granted by the Czar of Russia for his book “A history of cavalry from the earliest times, with lessons for the future”.

The Denisons were a prominent family for many years in Toronto and many are buried in St John’s Cemetery on the Humber in Weston – an early village, now part of Toronto



As I was growing up, I was taught about Louis Riel and the North West Rebellions. The older generations around me viewed these events as treason and were glad that the rebellion was defeated twice. What I didn’t know was that one of our ancestors, Frederick Charles Denison played a part in its defeat. But this was not his only adventure as we shall soon discuss.

Frederick Charles Denison was born on November 22nd, 1846 at the Denison estate “Rusholme” near Toronto. He had three siblings and later married Julia Abigail Macklem in 1874 and begat six sons and two daughters. He died at “Rusholme in 1896 only 49 years old.

There are many military and civil records available for research about Frederick, so I will not repeat them here, rather I will touch on the more interesting events for family consumption.

The Early Years

He was privately educated and later attended Upper Canada College in 1858. In 1864 he became a law student at Osgood Hall and was called to the Bar in 1870 and entered law practice with his elder brother, George.

Throughout all this Frederick maintained a keen interest in all things military. In 1865 he saw active service with the 2nd Central Administrative Battalion patrolling the Niagara frontier at the end of the American civil war. The Canadian government was wary of the strong American military and proceeded to re-organize the militia units of the day. In 1866 the Governor General's Body Guard (GGBG) was formed and commanded by Frederick's brother George.



Frederick saw action with the GGBG during the Fenian raids which were carried out by the Fenian Brotherhood (an Irish Republican organization based in the United States bent on pressuring the British government to leave Ireland) in 1866 at Ridgeway (Fort Erie) and later commanded a Cavalry outpost at Thorold, Ontario.

It was probably at Thorold that Frederick met **Colonel Garnet Wolseley** (pictured left), a promising British officer who would become a lifelong friend and mentor.

In 1867, Canada became a formal nation but its troubles were not over. Westward expansion of Protestant settlers from Ontario put pressure on the government of the day to deal with the festering resentment of the local indigenous tribes as well as the Metis who traced their origins to First Nations and European settlers - primarily the French fur traders who happened to be mostly Catholic.

Under the leadership of Louis Riel, the Metis set up their own provisional government in the Red River district. Anti-government civil unrest forced the federal government to send a combined British and Canadian military expedition to Red River under Colonel Garnet Wolseley in the summer of 1870 to maintain order. That was easier said than done! There were no roads or rail links to Manitoba.

Frederick Denison leapt at the chance to take part in this latest adventure and was appointed orderly officer to General Wolseley. Through heat, rugged terrain and mosquitos, Frederick and his men built forty miles of road west from Prince Arthur's landing (now Thunder Bay), then navigated waterways and portages with

cumbersome boats and supplies to finally arrive at Upper Fort Garry (now Winnipeg) only to find the fort had been abandoned. The Metis perceived that the expedition was out to lynch Riel and he fled to the United States. Wolseley's British troops returned back east and Frederick remained in Manitoba for about a year.

For the next fourteen years Frederick divided his time between the GGBG and various elected civic positions in Toronto. His efforts to advance his career in the peacetime military were thwarted several times but he found time to marry, start raising a large family and write the *Historical record of the Governor-General's Body Guard*. In 1881 he took his wife on an extended European tour including being presented at court in England.

In 1883, he was acclaimed as an alderman in Toronto and was active in the expansion of the city westward co-incidentally to include better access to family lands.

The Sudan Campaign

At last, 1884 brought new opportunities for the ambitious young officer. The British government found themselves embroiled in a war supporting the Egyptians against a Muslim insurrection in the Soudan and Major General Charles Gordon's army was besieged in Khartoum.

Remember Colonel Garnet Wolseley? After his successful exploits in Canada, he was now General Lord Wolseley and was put in command of the relief effort to rescue Gordon and his army. Wolseley decided that the best way of reaching Khartoum would be to ascend the Nile River which at that time was a wild, uncontrolled waterway with many sets of rapids, so specially constructed flat-bottomed whale boats were hastily constructed to carry the troops.

Wolseley asked the Governor General of Canada, the Marquess of Lansdowne, if it would be possible to recruit a contingent of Canadian voyageurs to help him navigate the Nile. He also requested that they be commanded by guess who? Our very own 37 year old lawyer, politician and family man: Lieutenant-Colonel Frederick C. Denison!

The Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John A. Macdonald approved the request and Frederick travelled to Ottawa to co-ordinate the recruitment. On September 15, 1884 Frederick set sail for Egypt with 386 volunteer voyageurs – 86 of whom were members of the Mohawk and Ojibwa first nations.



The Canadian Voyageurs in front of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa

On October 7th 1884, the Canadian Voyageurs reached Alexandria and headed south by a combination of shallow draft steam launch and train. On October 26th 1884, the Canadians met Wolseley and his force of 5,400 soldiers at Wadi Halfa.

The expedition struggled up the river while Frederick directing efforts from a canoe had to deal with poor discipline, hard work and oppressive heat. The



expedition progressed so slowly that it became obvious the campaign would stretch beyond the six-month voyageurs' contract. Only 89 resigned and the remainder turned around and returned to Canada.

On January 26th, 1885 Khartoum fell to the Muslim Mahdist army of 50,000 men. At that time of year the Nile was shallow enough to cross by wading and the



Mahdists were able to breach the city's defences by attacking the poorly-defended approaches from the river. The entire garrison was slaughtered, including over 4000 civilians and General Gordon (pictured left). His head was cut off and delivered to the Mahdi as a war prize. Gordon's body was never found.

Two days later the relief expedition entered the city to find that they were too late. The expedition turned around and under constant attack, retreated north-ward down the Nile and reached Cairo on March 13th. Exhausted, Frederick contracted enteric fever and was hospitalized for six weeks.

Frederick recovered and travelled to London where he was hailed as a minor hero for his efforts and in true Victorian fashion was awarded a medal and decorated by Queen Victoria as a companion of *The Order of Saint Michael and Saint George* for his efforts despite the fact that the expedition was a failure and Gordon was killed.



Back to Canada

Upon his return to Toronto, Frederick was again disappointed that he was not allowed to participate in the North-West campaign against Riel and his Metis with the GGBG. Instead he ran for a seat in the House of Commons for Toronto West in 1887 and won a narrow victory. He was re-elected in the 1891 Conservative sweep but was passed over for Minister of Militia and Defence despite his military experience.

While serving in the House, he was embroiled in a controversy whereby he accused James Gibson Slater of being a drunkard while serving in the GGBG and ordered him to return his equipment and leave the regiment. Slater failed to comply and brought a civil suit against Frederick. The issue escalated to the House of Commons, the Governor General and the British Parliament. Frederick called him a cowardly blackguard and threatened to “Break his head”. In response, Slater threatened to shoot Frederick. The scandal eventually died away.

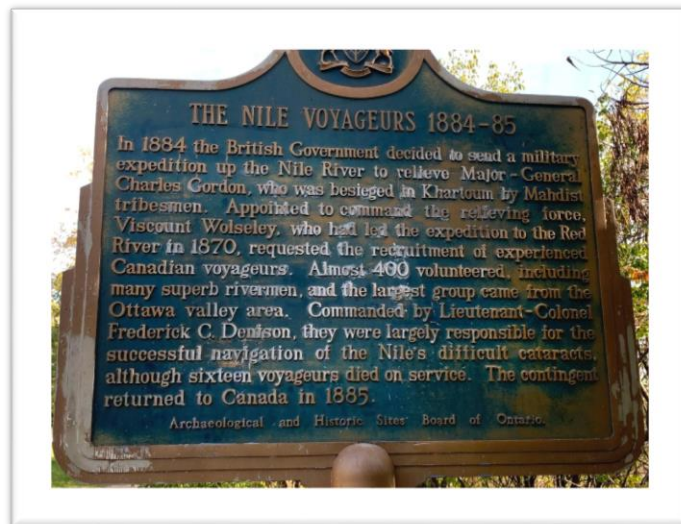
In 1896 Frederick died of stomach cancer at Rusholme, the family home. His funeral was like a state procession with eight pallbearers representing the military and conservative establishment of Toronto. In Ottawa, Sir Charles Tupper announced the death in the House of Commons and Sir Wilfred Laurier gave the eulogy.



Frederick Charles Denison, a charismatic, adventurous yet often frustrated man of his time is buried in St. John's Cemetery on the Humber in close proximity to many of the other “Fighting Denisons”.



Frederick Charles Denison, his family and maids at Rusholme in Toronto



Historic plaque honouring Frederic Charles Denison and the Nile expedition located along the Ottawa River Parkway.

Note that the text carefully avoided the fact that the whole expedition was a failure and that General Gordon, his men and all the civilians were murdered.

Epilogue

During Frederick's later years, Toronto continued to expand westward encompassing the Rusholme estate. Louis Riel was tried, convicted and hanged, and the Canadian west was tamed by the construction of a cross-country railway and the presence of the Northwest Mounted Police (later renamed the Royal Canadian Mounted Police).

The Rusholme estate fell victim to modern day development pressures and was demolished in 1953.

The British government had ordered General Gordon to abandon Khartoum, but he insisted on defending it. Gordon's defeat and death aroused controversy in Britain, concern by Queen Victoria and the defeat of Prime Minister Gladstone in the House of Commons. The story has continued to fascinate the public to this day and has been the subject of a number of films; the most recent being "Khartoum".

From Variety magazine, 1965:

"Khartoum, filmed in Egypt and Britain is an action-filled entertainment pic which contrasts personal nobility with political expediency. The colorful production builds in spectacular display, enhanced by Cinerama presentation, while Charlton Heston and Laurence Olivier propel towards inevitable tragedy the drama of two sincere opponents".

Acknowledgements

- Dictionary of Canadian Biography Vol 12, O.A. Cooke
- A history of the Denison family in Canada, 1792 to 1910 by Robert Evelyn Denison
- Chronicle of St. John's Cemetery on the Humber by John H. Martin
- www.findagrave.com