



John Richard Denison

Private
58th Battalion, CEF
1878 – 1916



Francis Turquand Denison

Private
27th Battalion, CEF
1876 – 1917
(photo unavailable)

Brothers who answered the call

Timothy R. Martin

Elizabeth Warner (grand daughter of John Richard Denison)

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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. Much has been written about the "Fighting Denisons" and their place in early Toronto military and social life. However, junior rank and file recruits for the Great War were also drawn from all walks of life and all corners of Canada.

This is a story of two Denison brothers who signed up for duty at a relatively old age. They were not famous, they were privates who experienced the loss of their father in 1906 and perhaps sought a way to escape their humdrum lives with what they perceived as a once in a life-time adventure.

They served in different battalions of the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) and while serving in France - never crossed paths.

They were not officers, were not accorded the usual attention and historical record keeping befitting senior ranks. They became swept up in the patriotic fervor of the day and volunteered for service – all in the name of defending King and Country - not knowing they were doomed to death on the killing fields of France.

A special thanks to Elizabeth Warner, grand daughter of John Richard Denison for her assistance and collection of family memorabilia passed down and stored away for years in a trunk.

I hope you find this story interesting and will share it with children and grandchildren - for these two brothers do not deserve to be forgotten.

Timothy R. Martin

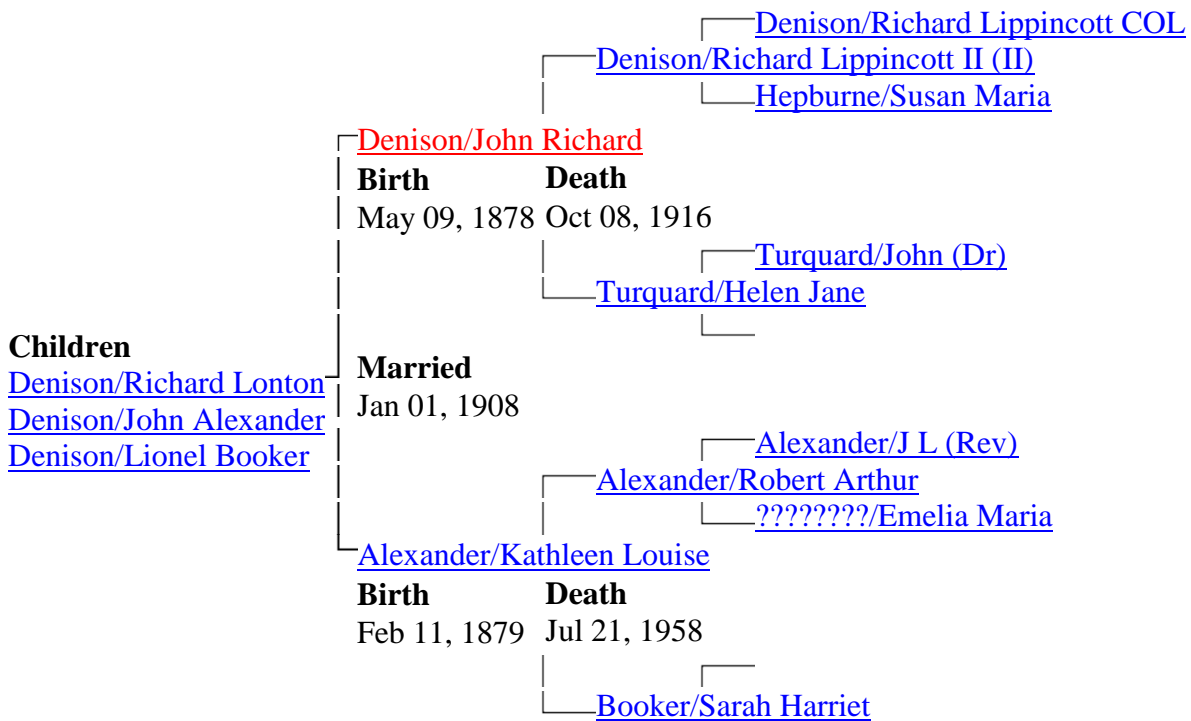
Midland, Ontario

About John Richard Denison

John was born on May 9th, 1878 at #7 Dovercourt Road, Toronto to Helen Jane Turquand and Richard Lippincott Denison II. Life must not have been easy for the family for they were recorded in the June 1911 Census of Canada as living in Grimsby (family fruit farm) as follows: John Denison, widowed mother Helen, wife Kathleen, son Richard. In addition, John's brother Francis and sister Louisa.

Affectionately known as "Jack" he married Kathleen Louise Alexander on January 1st, 1908 at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, Ontario two years after the death of his father Richard Lippincott Denison II.

John and Kathleen had three children. The middle child, John Alexander Denison was born in July of 1911 one month after the above census but lived only three months.



John and the war

The family farm in Grimsby was owned by John and his brother Francis. It was sold in 1912 and it is believed that John stayed on and actively farmed the property on behalf of the new owner. He also spent time serving with the local Welland Canal Force militia.

John answered the call and enlisted for service in Welland, Ontario on November 3rd 1915. His attestation papers indicate that he recorded his profession as "Fruit Grower". He was 5'9-1/4" tall, had blue eyes and auburn hair. He was assigned service number 210250 and to the 98th overseas battalion.

After training, on July 8, 1916 John and the 98th sailed from Halifax on the *SS Lapland* to England, arriving July 25th, 1916. He was transferred to the 58th Battalion of the 9th infantry brigade of the 3rd Canadian division and taken on strength at Otterpool near Shorncliffe on September 8th, 1916

At 38 years of age he left behind his widowed mother, a wife of only eight years and two sons: Richard Lonton Denison aged six years and Lionel Booker Denison aged six months.

Family records include six letters written by John to his wife advising her not to worry about such mundane issues as the neighbours, taxes and fences. In closing, he wrote "I will deal with that when I get home". However the war had a different fate in mind and on Sept 8th 1916 he was sent to France to join his battalion.

Exactly one month later, John participated in the **Battle of the Ancre Heights** which was a continuation of British attacks after the Battle of Thiepval Ridge from September 26-28 during the Battle of the Somme.

At 4:50 am on October 8th 1916, John and the 58th Battalion attacked a German trench named by the Canadians as the "Regina Trench". Unfortunately it was well defended by barb wire which had not been damaged by Canadian artillery bombardment.

The attacking troops were forced to funnel through several gaps in the wire making them easy targets for the German machine guns. While survivors managed to reach the trench and occupy it for a short while, they were forced to withdraw under fire running from shell hole to shell hole. Officers and men continued to suffer casualties, many lying wounded overnight in shell holes waiting for stretcher bearers. Approximately 941 officers and men including Private John Richard Denison were killed in what has been described as a "Fiasco". The Canadians were withdrawn and the trench was finally taken after multiple attacks by British forces.

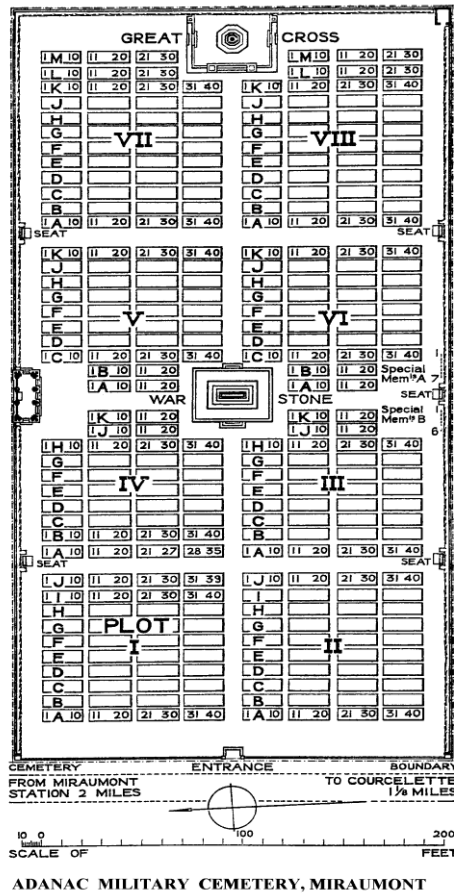
Battalion field reports the next few days initially listed John as "Missing" and then almost immediately were changed to "For official purposes presumed killed in action". The records are not clear but John's corpse was retrieved and there is no record of his exact cause of death. He was temporarily buried at the PYS village British Cemetery near the battlefield.

John Richard Denison died exactly 30 days after arriving In France.

After the armistice in 1918, his body was exhumed and moved to a more easily maintained, newly created cemetery called "Adanac" (Canada spelled backwards) near the village of Courcellette, France. His headstone is located in plot 11.F.13 among 21 other Canadian soldiers and a memorial to 33 men of the Seaforth Highlanders of Canada. There are a total of 1483 identified and 1709 unidentified graves maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC).



Layout of the Adanac Military Cemetery



John Richard Denison

210250

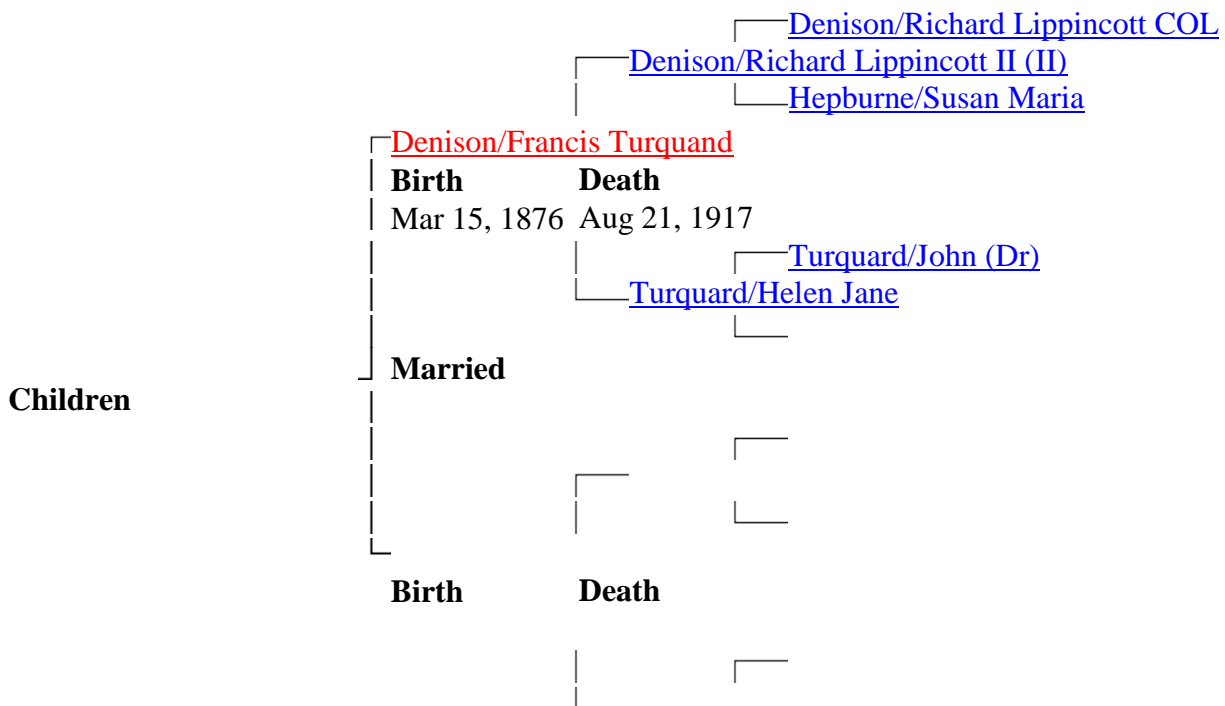
Plot 11.F.13

About Francis Turquand Denison

Brother Francis, known as “Frank” was born on March 15, 1876 in Woodstock. He was first educated at nearby schools and afterwards at Ridley College in Saint Catharines, Ontario. He followed farming most of his life with a short stint in the military. He was never married and left no children. Life must not have been easy for Francis and the family for they were recorded in the June 1911 Census of Canada as living in Grimsby (family fruit farm) as follows: John Denison, widowed mother Helen, wife Kathleen, son Richard. In addition, John’s brother Francis and sister Louisa.

In his book, “History of the Denison Family in Canada”, Robert Evelyn Denison described Frank as follows:

“He can ride and shoot well, and inherits his grandfather’s largeness of heart and unlimited hospitality. He, too, possesses to a large extent, the family sense of humour, and altogether is a jolly good fellow, and a splendid neighbor Frank has a number of family relics including the Lippincott Bible, a picture of Esther Bordon Lippincott (his great grandmother) and Col. G. T. Denison’s Sen., dining table; (the one that groaned). Frank Denison resides with his mother on his farm near Grimsby.”



Francis and the war

While Francis was primarily engaged in farming he also spent about three years in militias with the Halifax Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment at the time when it was expected they would be ordered for active service in South Africa. He spent three months with the Queens Own Rifles and also served with his local corps - the 2nd Dragoons.

After the sale of the family farm in 1912, Francis (Frank) travelled out west to stay with relatives. Canada entered the war in September of 1914 and on January 21, 1916 he enlisted in the 151st overseas Battalion. His attestation took place in Edmonton where he was assigned the service number 624551 as a private.

The black haired 39 year old, 5'8" tall recruit weighing 164 lbs listed his profession as a Trapper. Being unmarried, he listed his mother Helen Jane Turquand as Next of Kin.

After initial training (presumably at Valcartier, Quebec) he departed Halifax on the SS *California* on September 23, 1916. On October 13th he disembarked at Liverpool and was immediately transferred to the 11th Reserve Battalion at Shorncliffe for more training. Shorncliffe was a large military camp in Kent. It served as a staging post for troops destined for the Western Front.

On February 14th he was then transferred to the 27th Battalion, 6th infantry brigade, 2nd Canadian Division, also known as the Manitoba Regiment. As a common private of the 27th Battalion, Francis would have earned between \$1.00 and \$1.10 a day, or around \$30 a month.

Frank landed in France on February 15th, 1917 and was taken on strength February 20th.

It is not clear if Frank participated in all the 27th's battles but we do know that he required first aid treatment for an injury to his left hand on June 5th, 1917 and was returned to his battalion on June 13th.

The Battalion was moved to the Somme region and **The Battle of Hill 70** took place between August 15 and 25, 1917. The Canadian Corps was pitted against four divisions of the German 6th Army on the outskirts of Lens in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region of France.

Hill 70 was Arthur Currie's first battle as commander of the Canadian Corps, and he wrote that it was "the hardest battle in which the Corps has participated," but also "a great and wonderful victory." As well, according to Currie, General Headquarters "regard it as one of the finest performances of the War."



General Arthur Currie

Against tough odds, the Corps captured the high ground and caused heavy casualties amongst the Germans as they counterattacked using Mustard Gas for the first time. The Canadians suffered 9,198 casualties. Six Canadian soldiers won the Victoria Cross during the ten days of fighting at Hill 70 and Lens. Currie's tactics would help the Canadian Corps become known as the "Shock Army of the British Empire" in the final year of the First World War.

However in the days following this success, the Canadians pushed their luck too far. Trying to take the town of Lens, which Hill 70 overlooked, thousands of men were needlessly sacrificed.

Frank was reported missing on August 21st, 1917 during the attack on Lens and was later reported as "for official purposes presumed killed in action". His body was never



VIMY Memorial

found. He was 41 years old and had been in France only 188 days.

Because his body was never found, he does not have a burial plot and headstone. His name is etched onto the base of the VIMY memorial along with 11,169 other missing Canadian servicemen. The memorial was built in 1936 and commissioned by King Edward VIII.

Epilogue

Both brothers wrote wills prior to leaving for England. John's will naturally left real estate and other assets to his wife Kathleen Louise Denison (nee Alexander). Kathleen struggled on a widow's pension raising her two surviving children but lived until 1958.

Because Francis was single, his will dated August 15, 1916 curiously left real estate to Mrs. S.S. Guerrant of Virginia, USA and other assets and belongings to his nephew Richard Lonton Denison of Grimsby, Ontario. Richard was the son of brother John. Francis did not mention his mother Helen Jane Turquand in the will.

Helen Turquand lived until 1923 and spent her remaining years visiting Mrs. Guerrant in Virginia and the Boyd family in Bobcaygeon, Ontario – all members of the Denison family. Deaths haunted her in her final years. In addition to the loss of her husband and infant son prior to the war, she lost two adult sons in the war. The Boyd's also lost two sons in the "war to end all wars".

Two sets of brothers - John, Francis, Henry Ormsby Boyd and his brother Mossom Richard Boyd are all memorialized on the Cenotaph in St. John's Cemetery on the Humber.

Acknowledgements

- Elizabeth Warner – Granddaughter of John Richard Denison
- Robert Evelyn Denison - History of the Denison Family in Canada 1792 to 1910
- Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)
- Canadian Great War project – 58th Battalion War Diary
- Matthew Walthert - Neglected Victory, The Canadian Corps at Hill 70
- Wikipedia - the free encyclopedia
- [Library and Archives Canada](http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca) - www.bac-lac.gc.ca