



## George Taylor Denison II

1816 - 1873

*Snow balls and snake whips*

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Midland, Ontario  
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## Foreword

*Early Toronto was small and was the principle city of what was known as Canada West then Upper Canada and finally Ontario. The nineteenth century was the perfect time for entrepreneurial-spirited nation builders. Early leaders in Toronto - known as “The Family Compact” - helped establish her social, economic and military prominence in this young country known as Canada.*

*The Denisons - while not officially members of the family compact - were multi-generational key influencers known as “The Fighting Denisons”. In addition to their military pursuits, they helped settle and build out early Toronto, built a church and served in local governments. Today there are many streets, parks and an armoury named after them.*

*It is entirely possible that without the military leadership of the Denisons – often at their own expense – through troubling times of internal unrest and threats from American expansionism, Canada as we know it today would not exist as a sovereign nation.*



GTD II and Family at Rusholme

*The story of the early Denison family is well documented and the following includes an excellent biography of George Taylor Denison II prepared by the late historian, David Gagan.*

# About George Taylor Denison II

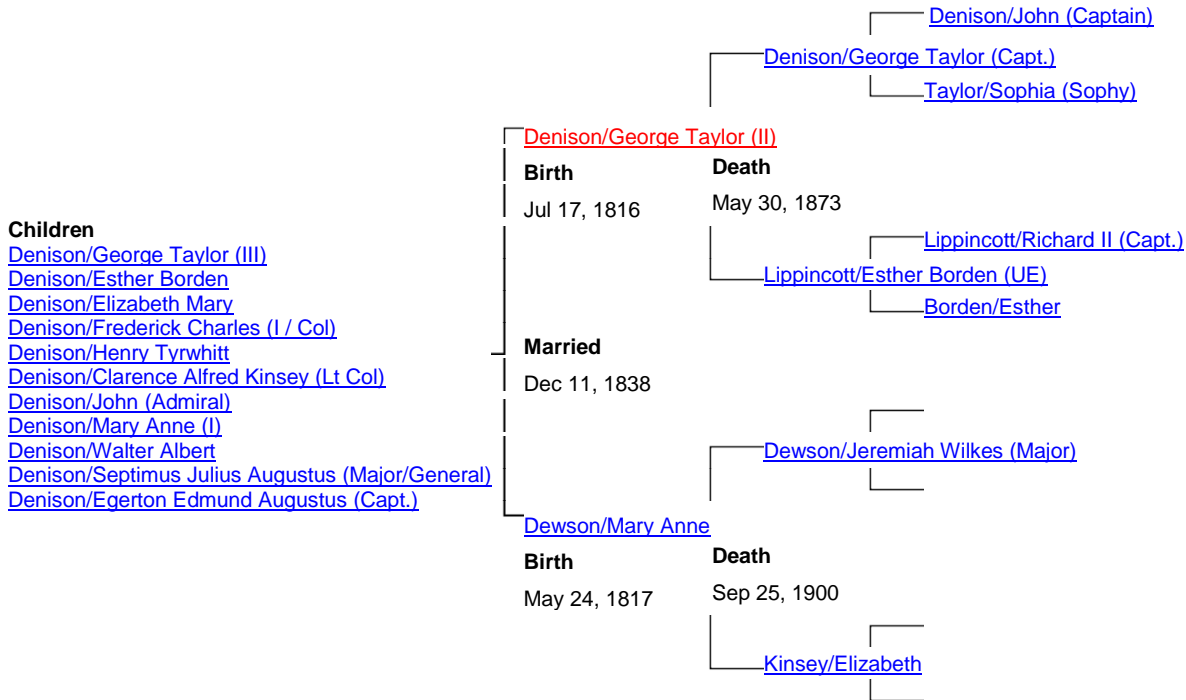
George Taylor Denison (we shall refer to him as GTDII) was a third generation descendant of Captain John Denison who arrived in Canada in 1792. His father, also named George Taylor Denison (of Bellevue) died in 1853, as one of the wealthiest private landholders in Canada West at that time.

GTDII was educated at Upper Canada College, went on to practice law, served as an alderman for ten years and continued to build the family fortunes through land acquisitions and sales.

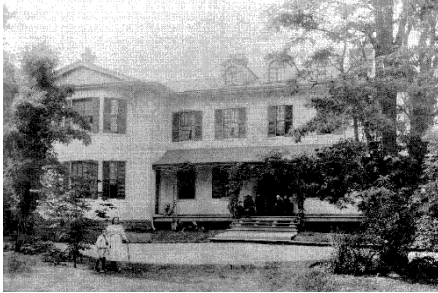


He was active in early militias and saw action against William Lyon Mackenzie's rebels in the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837-1838 and against the American Fenians in 1866.

He married Mary Anne Dewson of West Gwillimbury Township, Ontario in 1838. They produced eleven children. Many carried on the Denison legacy, however two of his children (Mary and Walter) died before reaching their tenth year. Mary Anne survived her husband and died in 1900 at Toronto.



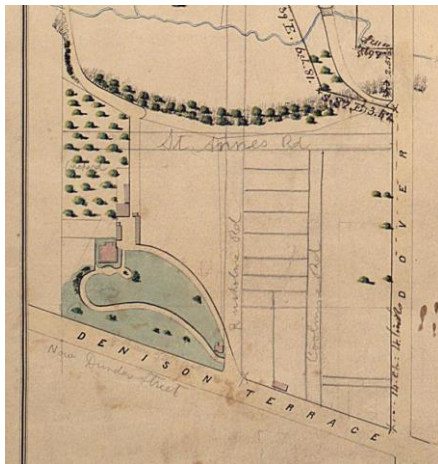
In 1839 just after his marriage, GTDII built Rusholme - a large mansion in West Toronto with white gates and a gabled gatekeeper's cottage marking the entrance to a curving carriage drive from the corner of Denison Terrace (now modern day Dundas) and Rusholme Road. He named it after an estate near Manchester, England then owned by his wife's uncle.



Rusholme

drive from the corner of Denison Terrace (now modern day Dundas) and Rusholme Road. He named it after an estate near Manchester, England then owned by his wife's uncle.

On grounds given to him by his father, the mansion had twenty two rooms, gas lighting and was one of the last homes in Toronto to be electrified. The map on the left clearly shows the location of the estate, the long carriageway, the mansion and the orchards.



Estate Location, Toronto

It was the centre of Toronto's social scene and on special occasions the Denison coach could be seen sweeping out of the estate complete with liveried coachmen and the family crest on the side for all to see.

It was where he raised his family, entertained royalty, politicians, business and military leaders including General Robert E. Lee. GTDII sympathized with the Confederate

cause as Mary Anne's brother, George Dewson was a colonel in the Confederate Army and the Confederacy was tacitly supported by Great Britain which needed southern cotton.

In his book *"The history of the Denison Family in Canada"* dated 1910, Robert Evelyn Denison described GTD II, and wrote about a humorous incident - while not acceptable today – on the ice of Toronto's frozen bay:

*"A very smart active man, all his life, with a splendid seat on horseback and military carriage. He was also an expert skater, and used to be annoyed when driving on the bay, by toughs snow-balling them, and then skating safely away. One day George fastened on his skates, and hid a heavy black snake whip in the sleigh. The snow-balling began, when out jumped George, and created consternation among the boys, as the fleetest of them, were unable to escape the heavy whip, which the unexpected skater plied with much vigor."*

*"Col. G. T. Denison died in the summer of 1873, and was buried with Military honors suitable to his rank as full Colonel, in St. John's Cemetery, on the Humber, and the sombre woods rang with the fire of big guns as well as small arms when the last volleys were fired."*

## David Gagan's biography of GTDII

**DENISON, GEORGE TAYLOR** (sometimes designated as **George T. Denison Jr, George T. Denison II, or George T. Denison of Rusholme**, to avoid confusion with his father and eldest son), lawyer, landowner, farmer, and militia officer; b. 17 July 1816 at York (Toronto), U.C., second son of George Taylor Denison and Esther Borden Lippincott, loyalist; m. Mary Anne Dewson of West Gwillimbury Township and had nine children, the eldest being George Taylor [Denison\\*](#) of Heydon Villa; d. 30 May 1873 at Toronto, Ont., and was buried with military honours in the family's private cemetery, St John's-on-the-Humber, Weston, Ont.

George Taylor Denison of Rusholme was cast in the mould established by his father and grandfather. After receiving his formal education at Upper Canada College, he articulated under George Cartwright Strachan, son of John [Strachan\\*](#), and was admitted to the bar of Upper Canada in 1839. He was actively engaged in legal practice only until 1856, however, having amassed extensive landholdings which required all his energies. Rusholme, his estate in west Toronto, was itself a farm where Denison raised field crops and tobacco for export, cattle, swine, and thoroughbred horses. Surrounding Rusholme were the farms of Denison's tenants whose rents were partially commuted into labour on the estate. In addition, Denison leased land from the city of Toronto for development as residential sites, and as Toronto spread westward to the edge of his estates he subdivided much of his land into fashionable "park lots." These and other commercial ventures (such as contracts for the resurfacing of Toronto's major thoroughfares) provided Denison with a fortune of almost \$200,000 at middle age, and an income permitting him to accept the heavy social, political, and military responsibilities that were assumed by his family.

Denison represented Saint Patrick's ward as alderman from 1843 until 1853 when he led seven other councillors in resigning over the admitted complicity of Toronto's mayor, John G. [Bowes\\*](#), in Francis [Hincks\\*](#) "£10,000 job," which involved many public officials who profited privately from the Northern Railway scheme. A member of the Toronto Turf Club, Denison was among those men responsible for establishing the "Queen's Plate" racing classic. He was also a founder of the Upper Canadian (later Dominion) Rifle Association in 1861 and was an officer of the St George's Society. In every respect Denison was characteristic of the generation of vigorous young businessmen whose enthusiasm propelled Toronto into commercial and cultural rivalry with Montreal.

But it was Denison's commitment to his family's adopted function as soldiers dedicated to the survival of the loyalist ideal in North America that led to his most lasting contribution. First gazetted as an officer in the 1st Regiment of West York militia in 1834, Denison joined his father's cavalry troop in 1838. He rose to the rank of full colonel and commandant of the 5th and 10th military districts in 1860, and at his death was the senior militia officer in Ontario. He saw action at the battle of Gallows Hill in 1837 when William Lyon [Mackenzie\\*](#)'s rebels were

routed, and was later attached to Sir Allan [MacNab](#)\*'s force which pursued the insurgents in the London area and which laid siege to Navy Island in the Niagara River. During the Fenian invasions of 1866 Denison was in command of the Toronto garrison.

*His main contribution, however, was his activity on behalf of an indigenous Canadian military establishment during the critical period of responsible government in Canada when the institutions of nationhood were being forged. A viable native defensive force was one of the prerequisites of self-determination in British North America after 1846. Nevertheless, successive governments in the Province of Canada, especially during the troubled years between 1854 and 1866, consistently refused to provide adequately for local defence in spite of the dangers of open Anglo-American hostilities. The militia was in a state of stagnation, offset partially by the volunteers who maintained themselves in readiness. George Denison and his brothers Richard Lippincott and Robert Brittain set an early precedent in 1839 when the disbandment of the active force threatened the demise of the Queen's Light Dragoons (an honorary designation conferred on the York Dragoons during the campaigns of 1837–39); their equipment was to be returned to imperial stores. The Denisons purchased all of the necessary equipment themselves, renamed the troop "Denison's Horse," and continued to drill the men. When the Militia Act of 1846 failed to provide funds for the maintenance of troops of volunteer cavalry, considered by the Denisons to be the crucial element in local defence strategy, George Denison of Rusholme, now commanding officer of Denison's Horse, regazetted the troop as the 1st Toronto Independent Troop of Cavalry (it became the York Light Dragoons in 1853 and was designated the Governor-General's Body Guard in 1866) and thereafter maintained it out of his private fortune. In 1853 he also organized the first field battery to be integrated with the Mounted Force of the York militia (9th Field Battery), and he reorganized several independent infantry companies to create the 2nd battalion, Queen's Own Rifles. Meanwhile, Denison and his son, George Taylor, campaigned by pamphlet, letter, and personal pressure on senior officials and officers to promote more vigorous policies in support of the militia as the mainstay of provincial and, ultimately, national defence.*

*It is impossible to assess with accuracy the impact of Denison's individual effort, but it is clear that, with others like him, he aided the development of a Canadian military tradition, especially the volunteering spirit, through difficult and trying times.*

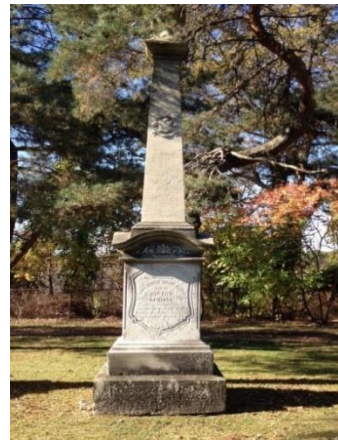
## Epilogue

Much of the Rusholme estate had been sold off by the time GTD II died in 1873. The mansion itself was left to his wife Mary Anne who subsequently left it to her son Frederick Charles Denison. After 115 years of Denison occupancy, it was finally demolished soon after the death of Frederick's son in 1953 to make way for apartment buildings. Part of the estate property was taken up by the Mondelez chocolate factory. The original plant started in 1904 and makes Cadbury products for Canada.

GTD II, his wife, children and some grandchildren are buried in the family Cemetery. His monument is one of the most impressive on the grounds.



Photo Circa 1890 – GTD II monument.



Present Day Monument

His monument is in section Sec. 3, Lots 2, 4. Due to the ravages of time and weather, the inscriptions are very difficult to read but were meant to leave a record of this important civic leader and his wife. Inscriptions are as follows:

*(east side) (coat of arms) In memory of Colonel George Taylor DENISON son of George Taylor & Esther Borden DENISON. Born at Toronto, on the 17th, July, 1816 died at Rusholme, Toronto on the 30th May 1873.*

*(south side) He served in the Volunteer Force of Canada for thirty eight years, including the Rebellion of 1837-8; he was for many years Commandant of the active force of the 5th and 10th Military Districts and at the time of his death was the Senior Volunteer Officer of the Province of Ontario. He was a Barrister at Law of Osgoode Hall, was Vice President of the York Pioneers, and for a long period represented the Ward of St. Patrick on the Council of the City of Toronto.*

*(north side) In memory of Mary Anne DENISON daughter of Jeremiah W. & Elizabeth DEWSON wife of Colonel George T. DENISON of Rusholme born 24th May 1817 died 25th Sept 1900.*

## Acknowledgements

- Dictionary of Canadian Biography
- [www.lostrivers.ca/content/points/Rusholme.html](http://www.lostrivers.ca/content/points/Rusholme.html)
- The Denison Family of Toronto 1792 to 1925  
(David Gagan)
- History of the Denison Family in Canada 1792 to 1910  
(Robert Evelyn Denison)
- Soldiering in Canada 1900  
(Lt. Col. George T. Denison III)
- Ontario Genealogical Society - Toronto Branch
- The Estates of Old Toronto 1997  
(Liz Lundell)
- A chronicle of St. John's Cemetery on the Humber - 1868  
(Col George Taylor Denison II)
- Library and Archives Canada – 1871 census