

## **Alexander Thom, Staff Surgeon, 41st regiment of Foot (1775-1845)**

Alexander Thom, born in Aberdeen, Scotland, on October 26, 1775, served in the War of 1812 with the 41st Regiment of Foot, of the British regular army. Following the war, he remained in Upper Canada, in the newly-created Perth Military Settlement, and made a substantial contribution to the development to this area. To quote one biographer, Alexander Thom 'was a force in assuring the survival and growth of the town (of Perth)'. He was also the founder of the major mill complex that evolved into Bolingbroke Hamlet, in early South Sherbrooke Township.

In 1795, after graduating from Aberdeen's King's College, Alexander joined the British army, in the 88th Connaught Rangers Regiment, and later, as Assistant Surgeon, with the 35th Dorsetshire Regiment of Foot. His postings included campaigns in Holland (1799), Minorca, Malta and Egypt (1800-1802). On May 17, 1803, Alexander was appointed Surgeon to the 41st Regiment on Foot, and left with his regiment for Canada, where he served through the 1812-15 hostilities.

Alexander's regiment served in Lower and Upper Canada, and, from 1806, at Fort George, where he was stationed at the outbreak of war, as principle medical officer. In May 1813, when Fort George fell to the Americans, Thom became a prisoner of war. On liberation, he was appointed medical officer in York, until the end of the war. In several situations during this period, Alexander stood out as a defender of the needy and disadvantaged: in one case, on behalf of wounded American prisoners; in another, in pressing obstinate higher authorities for the use of a local church for the care of wounded allied soldiers.

Following the war, when the British Government decided to open a new line of military settlements in the Rideau area, Alexander was recommended for the position of medical officer to the Perth settlement, in August 1815. He was one of four senior officers designated to provide superintendence of the new region to be established around Perth. Later that year, his sense of community came to the fore when he represented recently arrived Scottish immigrants in a petition seeking to change their settlement location to the Bay of Quinte area (petition refused).

In 1816, Alexander moved to Perth on half pay, with other demobilized officers, who would provide security and leadership for the new community – and incidentally the core of the settlement's commerce. As a retired officer, Alexander received land grants, including a one acre lot in the settlement and several hundred rural acres, which he would develop into successful businesses.

During the early settlement years, Dr. Thom was the primary source of medical care to the settlement area. However, he also noted the need, and opportunity, for industrial services in the new area. In 1817, he built the area's first grist mill (and perhaps a sawmill), and a dam to power them, on the Tay River beside centre Perth, which he ran until 1832. In later years, these grew into an industrial complex, comprising three more mills; in the 1890s, the dam became the newly electrified town's source of hydro power, and remains today as a tourist attraction.

Building on this success, in 1821, Alexander moved upstream on the Tay River into present-day South Sherbrooke, to a second property received as his veteran's grant. Where Bobs Lake now

flows into the Tay River he constructed the first dam and grist mill – the beginning of Bolingbroke Hamlet. Alexander ran this until 1841; in 1848, John Korry purchased the property from the Thom estate, and built it into the most important timber and grain business in the area, and a major economic centre. In 1870, following several drought years in the region, the Government of Canada purchased the dam and developed Bobs and Crow Lakes into a major water reservoir, which now provides up to 50% of the reservoir capacity of the Rideau Canal system.

Alexander also had received and developed a property of Lot One, in Drummond Township, located on the south west corner of the Perth military settlement. Around 1850, it was incorporated into the Town of Perth, and constitutes almost one quarter of the modern town. Alexander named the development ‘Caroline (aka Carolina) Village’, after a daughter. Following his 1845 death, his children carried the development further, and the name Caroline/Carolina and the family name were written into Perth history.

Dr. Thom remained the area’s army doctor until 1822, when military rule ceased, but his impact on the community was even wider than medical and business. He was a Perth Commissioner for the Peace, magistrate, district court judge, politician, and a leader in a variety of community causes, including promoting medical facilities. He helped establish education facilities in Perth, including the first Roman Catholic school; in 1822, he was appointed to the settlement’s first Education Board. In 1824, he was one of three magistrates appointed to accompany an armed force to quell a nearby riot (known as the Ballygibblins). In 1836, he held a seat for three months in Upper Canada’s Legislative Assembly (losing it in a subsequent election). In the early 1840s, Alexander, an Anglican, donated land from his property adjoining Perth for the construction of the St. John the Baptist Catholic Church.

Alexander Thom was established a large family that became influential in their own right - son, Alexander jr. and four daughters, Eliza, Caroline, Catherine and Harriet. Alexander jr. (who died young) and Caroline carried on their father’s work developing Perth’s Caroline Village and area properties after his death. The four daughters all moved, and provided major contributions, to the burgeoning town of Toronto, with husbands Charles Gamsby (civil engineer), James Boulton (Perth’s first lawyer, then lawyer in York), Larratt Smith (lawyer, Senator, astronomer), and Godfrey Spragge (lawyer & jurist).

Alexander died in Perth September 26, 1845, and was buried in the Old Burying Ground, on Craig Street in Perth.

Sources:

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