

## ***John Davidson Sr. and Helen Ogilvie***

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John Davidson Sr. was born around 1779 [1] probably in Perthshire, Scotland [10]. His parents are not known, but Sellar says of him that he “went as a poor boy to Dundee, where he was taken into the household of a Mr. Ogilvie, who owned a small factory, and who gave him work and whose daughter he subsequently married.” [10]

On 26 May 1802 [9], he married Helen Ogilvie, born 20 June 1779 at Dundee, Angus, Scotland, probably the daughter of Alexander Ogilvie (b. ca 1754 in Dundee, married 1778 in Dundee), a woolen manufacturer, and Susanna Black.[9]. After having at least one daughter, Elspeth, and two sons, Alex and James, John was drafted in the Army around 1810 and served “overseas”, but where and in what capacity is not known. He was discharged in 1817 and had another son, John Jr., about at that time, just before he left for Canada. He worked as a travelling merchant for about a year, before settling in 1819 in Dundee, Quebec, a settlement very near the point where the boundary between Quebec and New York State meets the St. Lawrence River. Fort Covington, NY is just across the border. Sellar writes:

“His log shanty, consisting of one room, was the nucleus of the village to which he gave the name of Dundee. The store was situated on the east bank of the Salmon river and behind it stretched a deep swamp, impossible to cross unless frozen, so that settlers could only get to it by going round by Fort Covington.”

In October 1821, he was granted by the Chiefs of the St. Regis Indians a renewable long-term lease to three large lots (lots B, C, and D) and one smaller one (lot N) [4], as shown in Figure 1. He had evidently been occupying at least some of these for some time, the large lots being used for lumbering and the small one for his house.

On 28 May 1820, his wife Helen, her children, and her brother Alexander Ogilvie arrived in Quebec City from Dundee on the *Psyche*. One of the other passengers was William Lyon Mackenzie, on his way to Upper Canada and later fame as the leader of the 1837 rebellion there[8].



Helen and Alexander Ogilvie are said to have been cheated out of their share of their inheritance from their father (Alexander Ogilvie Sr.) by their older brother John Ogilvie. Their father died intestate, but, on his deathbed, he confided his intentions to his oldest son and received the promise that they would be faithfully carried out. The young man took advantage of his position and appropriated the entire estate. John Davidson, having gone to settle in Canada, asked his family to come join him. Helen was afraid of sailing alone and convinced her brother Alexander to join her. [8]

John opened a store in Dundee and established himself as a leader of the community. He was appointed justice of the peace 25 November 1819 [7], was appointed officer in the local militia, and sent numerous petitions to the government for the opening of a road to connect Dundee with Châteauguay and Beauharnois. In an early petition, he alleged

“that the prosperity of the settlement... is much retarded from the want of a public road. In their present situation, many of the inhabitants are under the necessity of passing through a section of the U.S., in going to and returning from market (Dundee lines), and are consequently liable to pay heavy duties at the American custom-house. Under the circumstance we pray for aid to enable us to open a road on the British side of the lines.” [10]

The road matter was obviously politically very contentious. Dundee is in “the townships”, those parts of the territory of Quebec outside the seignories established along the St. Lawrence River during the French regime. After the Conquest, the government encouraged immigrants from “the old countries” to settle the townships, and at the same time made it very difficult for French-Canadians (or simply Canadians, as they were then known) to migrate there from the seignories, which were by then over-populated and poorly farmed. The Canadians controlled the Legislative Assembly, whose only real power was to approve the spending bills presented to it by the British Governor. Fearing religious and linguistic assimilation, by now the overt policy of the government, they systematically withheld approval of spending bills.

John Davidson’s road was also the target of another objection: why would anyone settling in a remote swamp expect the public to provide him with access? Not until 1831 did the surveyor of Lower Canada, Chaussegros de Lery, recommend the opening of a road. John Davidson was named its commissioner, and it was finally built around 1833. [7]

In the meantime, John rose in the ranks of the local militia. In 1831, upon the death of Samuel James Hingston, he became lieutenant-colonel of the militia of Beauharnois County. On 24 November 1837, upon the outbreak of the first Patriote rebellion, he was named lieutenant-colonel of the *Huntingdon Loyal Volunteers*, a regiment raised explicitly for the purpose of quelling the rebellion. This was a family affair: his sons Alexander, James and John were named captain of a company, paymaster and adjutant, respectively [5]. There were no battles in Huntingdon County during the 1837 rebellion. The Volunteers saw action only once in 1838, at St. Regis, but the particular role of John Sr.’s and his sons in that engagement is not clear.

John and his family are known to have been still living in Dundee in 1842. By 1852, he was Collector of Customs at Russeltown, a few miles away.

Helen Ogilvie died in Russeltown on 3 August 1854 [11]. John followed her on 13 April 1856 [6]. They were buried at Laguerre, just north of Huntingdon. Their gravestones still stand, although the church itself is in ruins.

They are known to have had three children.

1. Susan Davidson, b. ca. 1803 in Scotland, married ca. 1820 in Dundee, Quebec to Alexander McBain, from Inverness, Scotland, one of the original settlers of the area [10]. They had 7 children [1] before McBain's death in 1830 of a bolt of lightning [10]. Around 1832, she married John MacDonald, also from Inverness, a lumberman and potash maker, who was a business associate of John Davidson Sr. [10]. They had 5 children [2]. She died 21 February 1875 at Laguerre, Quebec. There exists a baptism record from Dundee, Scotland, dated 1 January 1805 in the name of Elspeth Davidson, daughter of John Davidson and Helen Ogilvie [9]. I know of no other report of any child of John and Helen's of that name in Canada. She may be the same person as Susan, for whom no birth record has been found, or have died young.
2. James Davidson, b. 21 September 1808 at Dundee, Angus, Scotland [9] m. 1833 at Dundee, Quebec to Sarah Hingston, d. 6 January 1860. James settled in DeWittville, Quebec, where he was a merchant and postmaster. Sarah Hingston was the daughter of Samuel James Hingston and his first wife Winifred Cavendish, and the half-sister of Margaret Hingston, John Davidson Jr.'s wife.
3. Capt. Alexander Davidson, b. 16 October 1810 at Dundee, Angus, Scotland [9], m. Marian Peers, 8 January 1839 at Ormstown, Quebec, d. 29 July 1886 at Montreal, Quebec. His obit says:

“The deceased took part in the march of a large force down the valley of the Châteauguay under the late General Campbell, led the infantry detailed to charge upon the entrenchment at Baker's Hill, an affair in which several were killed and wounded and was present when these local forces strengthened by Glengarry battalions effected a junction with a force of regulars under Sir John Colborne at St. Remi. Upon the disbandment of the force Capt. Davidson was detailed to the command of a detachment embodied for permanent service at Huntingdon and there remained on duty about five years, ultimately retiring with the rank of Major. Subsequently and after a number of vicissitudes of fortune Capt. Davidson became connected with the British America Assurance Company and was regarded as an authority on technical questions of insurance law.”[5]

Capt. Davidson was apparently a bit of a martinet. There appeared in the Huntingdon Gleaner some time after the Rebellions of 1837-38 an article on “The Sash Mutiny of 1837-1838”. The loyalist volunteers had been issued overcoats “of grey colour and miserable cloth”, which were “loose made and went flapping about our legs”. One of the men got a number of red cotton sashes which were then used to tie the coats. The officers took offence at this and announced that they were to be taken off, which the men were reluctant to do. The story continues:

“Sandy Davidson was walking up and down on their gallery, and on seeing us come across with our sashes on exclaimed, “By Christ, we will see who is the master.” He was a proud beggar, and McLachlan well nicknamed him Capt. Swagger. ... The officers reported the matter to Gen. Colborne, who said to drop the matter, and advised the officers to wear their sashes shoulder fashion to distinguish them from the men.”[3]

Alexander Davidson and Marian Peers had 7 children, including Sir Charles Peers Davidson.

4. John Davidson Jr., b. 1817/8 in Scotland, who is reported on in a separate article.

## SOURCES

- [1] *Canada Census, 1825*
- [2] *Canada Census, 1851*
- [3] David Elder, *The Sash Mutiny of the Winter of 1837-1838*, The Gleaner, Huntingdon, Quebec, reprinted July 17, 1957.
- [4] Land Grant from St. Regis Indians to John Davidson, 18 October 1821.
- [5] *Obituary of Alexander Davidson*, Montreal Star, 2 July 1886.
- [6] *Obituary of John Davidson, Sr.*, Montreal Gazette, 21 April 1856
- [7] Letter to Sir Charles Peers Davidson from National Archives of Canada, 21 February 1907
- [8] *Obituary of Alexander Ogilvie*, Huntingdon Gleaner, 16 July 1885
- [9] Scotland, Births and Baptisms, 1564-1950, familysearch.org
- [10] Robert Sellar, *The history of the county of Huntingdon and of the seignories of Châteauguay and Beauharnois*, Huntingdon: Gleaner Press, 1888.
- [11] Register of Church of Scotland, Huntingdon