

Kenneth Cameron (1787-1872)

Acting Surveyor General for Upper Canada 1840-1841

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Between about 1835 and 1845 there was an important transition in the way survey activity was organized in this province. The regime of rough practicality, so characteristic of Upper Canada surveying techniques, gave way to the more precise, professional arrangements of subsequent practice. By the later 1840's the surveyor had become the pre-eminent engineering figure in the province. Much of the character of the modern Ontario surveying profession may be traced to the administrative practices which the provincial survey authorities established in the 1840's. While figures like Andrew Russell would certainly be prominent in any interpretation of what happened, there were also lesser and more obscure individuals who nevertheless made a contribution. This paper is about one of them, a little-known acting Surveyor General, Kenneth Cameron.

His Career in the Army (1805-1835)

Kenneth Cameron was born in Scotland in about 1787. Probably the younger son of a small landowner, he joined the British Army as an Ensign on April 22, 1805, at the age of 18. It was common, in those days, for the younger sons of the minor gentry to join the army or navy as a way of making a respectable (if not well-paid) career. His regiment was the 79th Highlanders, known also as the Cameron Highlanders.

In this period, promotion amongst the officer ranks was mainly by purchase. It became progressively slower and more expensive at the upper levels especially in times of peace. Fortunately for Cameron, the Napoleonic Wars ensured a sufficient casualty rate to hold out the prospect of relatively swift (and comparatively cheap) advancement. He became a Lieutenant on April 10, 1806.

In the following year he took part in the Bombardment of Copenhagen, with

Lord Cathcart's force in Denmark. In 1808 he was with Sir John Moore's Expedition against Sweden. The 79th was part of the Walcheren Expedition of 1809 and he fought at the siege of Flushing. The regiment then transferred to the Iberian Peninsula and fought at the siege of Cadiz and at La Coruna. He was present at the siege of Busaco in 1810. On February 21, 1811 he was promoted to Adjutant. He fought at the Battle of Fuentes d'Onoro on May 5, 1811. He continued to see considerable action through many battles of the Peninsula War. He fought at Salamanca (July 1812), at the siege of Burgos (September 1812-June 1813), in the Pyrenees (July 1813-November 1813), at the battle of Nivelle (November 10, 1813) on the Nive (November 1813) and at Tolouse (March-April 1814). He became a Captain on May 18, 1814. He does not seem to have fought at Waterloo, although members of his regiment did.

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Following the end of the Napoleonic wars, Cameron did what many British officers were accustomed to do in peace time; he went on half-pay. This system allowed officers the gentlemanly privilege of taking a leave of absence from their regiments in return for drawing only half their pay. They could be recalled if need arose. Cameron went on half-pay in February 1816 and returned to full-time duties in 1817. His short sojourn may reflect a lack of interests outside the army. He never married, and so his social life may have been limited outside the officer's mess.

There is little report of the next few

years of his career. The ending of the wars brought a great slow down of promotions. Only the wealthy could afford to obtain quick promotions by purchase. Cameron was clearly not a very wealthy man because it took him until 1834 before he managed to obtain the rank of Major. Between 1825 and 1837, the six service companies of the 79th Highlanders were posted to Canada. The force had about five hundred men. Captain Cameron's company was stationed at various places including Fort Henry, Kingston (July 1829), York [Toronto] (February 1833), and the Chateau St. Louis, Quebec City (July 1833-June 1835). These garrison duties were not particularly onerous, although Cameron, as the most long-serving officer in his regiment, was made paymaster and occasionally assumed command of the 79th when the Colonel was away.

In January 1835, the Colonel wrote to the authorities to ask for Cameron's "long gallant and distinguished service" to be recognized with a favourable retirement settlement. He asked for Cameron to be promoted to Major, for long service, under a Warrant of October 27, 1834. Cameron was said to have been at every action of the 79th during the Peninsula War "and was not one day absent from his regiment". Colonel Douglas declared him to be "one of the most valuable officers" he had served with.

Horse Guards refused to promote Cameron for long service, and instead he had to purchase his promotion to Major in early 1835. Shortly afterwards, he applied to sell his Commission and thereby retire from the Army. Horse Guards granted permission, and he retired on August 7, 1835.

Retirement and Militia Service (1835-1838)

Leaving the Army in Canada had the advantage of entitling Cameron to a land grant for military service, in addition to

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the proceeds from the sale of his Commission. Cameron soon obtained lands in the vicinity of Thorah, Eldon and Fenelon Townships, and settled at the hamlet of Milton (Beaverton) in 1835. He was an early settler in an area which particularly attracted the highland Scots, including many other Camerons.

He constructed a two-storey log house on a "lovely spot" along the shores of Lake Simcoe, about one and a half miles north of the village of Milton. He established the first store in the village, and was active in the local congregation of the Church of Scotland. During the 1830's he acted as Constable in Thorah. He had sufficient influence with government to successfully obtain a post office for Milton, which was renamed Beaverton. Shortly thereafter Cameron became its Postmaster.

His strategy in acquiring land was to secure favourable lots which he could hold and sell later when prices rose. There was nothing particularly unusual about this. Similarly, his requests for land were treated as routine matters by the authorities. On November 5, 1835, for example, John Radenhurst issued Cameron a location ticket for 687 acres of land in Fenelon Township. The land was "an allowance according to his rank for upwards of thirty years service under the general order from the Horse Guards of 1 Augt 1831". He was required to occupy the land within six months and remain two years to obtain his patent.

In 1835 he also obtained three farm lots in Eldon township. During 1835-6 he tried to secure lands in Thorah Township, but had some difficulty in getting them from the Crown. Instead he acquired two small lots on the Portage Road in Eldon (in February 1837). Like many acquisitive landholders, he was also prepared to buy in the private market and in 1836 he purchased lands in Thorah township, just south of Beaverton (Concession VII, Lot 12 and Lot 13 north half). In 1841 he made an unsuccessful attempt to secure additional lands in Bexley & Eldon townships. The lands Cameron had selected, however, were of rather mixed quality, and some were flooded. On the other hand, his store prospered, mainly because of its favourable location in the contemporary road system.

Like many officer-settlers, Cameron

retained an involvement in the military, serving in the Upper Canada Militia. In December 1837, after the outbreak of MacKenzie's rebellion, it was one of the first acts of the Militia Department to post Cameron as a Militia officer on the Niagara Frontier. He was placed in command of the 5th Embodied Lincoln Militia, recruited from Grantham and Louth Townships. Sir Francis Bond Head, Lieutenant Governor, appointed him Assistant Adjutant General to command the militia on the Niagara frontier on December 15, 1837.

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The Niagara frontier was one of the most sensitive spots for the Colonial authorities, because of its closeness to the United States. Cameron was entrusted with this rather vital area, which had been a zone of major conflict in the war of 1812. He arrived at Niagara-on-the-Lake by steamboat with two volunteer companies under Captains Kingsmill and Warren on December 11, 1837.

His headquarters were initially at Niagara-on-the-Lake, but when Head learned that the Rebels had encamped on Navy Island, Cameron was ordered to move his troops to Chippewa. He commenced operations against the 'Patriots' by gathering intelligence and supporting the local magistracy in their efforts to round up MacKenzie's sympathizers.

He issued instructions that all boats and skiffs on the Niagara River should be secured and denied to the Rebels. Although Cameron's Militia were attempting to blockade Navy Island from the Upper Canada shore, American sympathizers continued to provide the Rebels with supplies and arms. An American steamship, the Caroline, used to ferry their munitions, was captured and sunk by the British (in U.S. waters) on December 29. This created an unpleasant international incident, but the crisis passed.

Several days after the Rebels abandoned Navy Island, under Militia General Orders of January 24, 1838, Cameron's force was renamed the Fron-

tier Light Infantry, one of six fancifully named, if poorly equipped, regiments of Incorporated Militia. He had a scratch force of slightly more than 420 men, generally lacking uniforms. By mid February his command had risen to 671 soldiers and 48 officers.

Cameron appears to have been a dependable militia commander whose record-keeping was careful and meticulous. His Militia Order Book and his own Letter Book have survived for this period, and are available on microfilm at the Metro Central Reference Library in Toronto. (The originals are apparently in the Canadian Military Archives.)

By the middle of March 1838, military tensions in the area were easing, but Cameron's health had broken down, and he asked to be relieved of his command. He resigned his appointment and on March 26, 1838 handed it over to the Honourable Colonel James Kerby. Cameron returned to Beaverton, and on April 23, 1838, in better health, he was listed as the Colonel of the 9th North York Militia. In November 1838 he was Colonel of the 2nd Incorporated Militia based at London.

He was as useful in the militia as he had been dependable in the regular army and eventually (in 1847) would receive the Military Service Medal with eight clasps in recognition of his service.

Cameron as Surveyor General (1839-1841)

On March 20, 1839, almost a year after he had resigned his Militia command in Niagara, Cameron succeeded one of his former militia subordinates, Alexander Hamilton, as Sheriff of the Niagara District. Cameron had already been appointed as one of the Commissioners of the Court of Requests in the Townships of Mara, Rama and Thorah in the same year. He held the post of Sheriff until he was replaced by his former militia subordinate, William Kingsmill, on July 23, 1840. A key figure in Cameron obtaining the post of Sheriff was Robert Baldwin Sullivan (a former mayor of Toronto and politician), who seems to have arranged Cameron's next public appointment: the office of Surveyor General.

One of the administrative changes of

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1837 was the combining of the post of Surveyor General with that of the Commissioner of Crown Lands. It was expected that, with the rapid settling of the province, the work of the Surveyor General would decrease, and hence the two departments could be combined. Robert Baldwin Sullivan filled both these positions, but things became very disorganized under his administration, as he lost control of his officials and their work. In 1839, things were so chaotic in his department that no Crown surveys were completed in Upper Canada, and in the summer of 1840, two successive investigations reported corruption and mismanagement of Crown Lands. Two officials, Andrew Tod and John Radenurst, were dismissed following these investigations. The Lieutenant Governor, Sir George Arthur, eventually intervened and forced Sullivan to relinquish his duties as Surveyor General.

Sullivan was told that "... during the period to which the investigation principally related ... the office of Surveyor General has, to a great extent, been without your control and supervision as its head". To soften the blow, Sullivan was told that "His Excellency is most anxious that it should not be understood as implying any censure against you".

On August 15, 1840, perhaps in another move to console Baldwin, Arthur sounded out Kenneth Cameron as a potential Surveyor General. In a letter dated August 21, 1840, Sir George's secretary asked Cameron, formally, to accept the post. Because he accepted and his appointment took immediate effect, we should presume that he was in Toronto waiting to be called. His first official report for the Executive Council was filed on August 25, 1840, when he signed Himself 'Surveyor General'.

Cameron was entrusted with implementing the many administrative changes to Crown Surveys which the investigators had made. These recommendations included new procedures over the making of maps, a more careful system of making entries on maps, the preparation of 'copious' indices of office books, the presentation of field notes on surveys, and the reassignment of the various duties among the office staff. New procedures applied to the entry of

the disposition of all Crown Lands. He was also to use his own initiative to effect any other changes he could.

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It is difficult to tell whether Cameron implemented all of these changes, or if he instituted any new initiatives himself. On the other hand, under his administration, the Crown was able to restart and continue its surveys, and the Surveyor General's office was restored to something like its normal function. An important accomplishment after the damaging events of the later 1830's, it owed something to his meticulous methods and dependable character.

Most of the business he handled seems to have been mere routine. There are several entries in the minutes of the Executive Council and the Crown Lands Papers which indicate that Cameron handled matters which were quite ordinary for his office. He processed various land claims, advised on boundary disputes and other things.

On February 10, 1841, the Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada were united. F.H. Armstrong states that Cameron ceased to act as Surveyor General on this date. The truth is more complex. From the correspondence files of the Crown Lands Department (AO:RG 1 A-1-6) it is clear that Cameron actually carried on being the Surveyor General until the new legislature was established in Kingston. Government officials, such as the Attorney General for Upper Canada, continued to direct correspondence to Cameron in Toronto as Surveyor General until the end of May 1841. It was not until June 1841 that the new Surveyor General, Thomas Parke (MPP for Middlesex) assumed his responsibilities in Kingston.

Landowner, Businessman and
Municipal Politician (1841 - 1872)

Cameron left Toronto after his appointment ended. He returned to his lands in Thorah and spent his declining

years living in his cottages with his sister, Unagh. He was never really very prominent in county affairs, but he would certainly rank amongst the moderately important people of his district.

Like many landowners and businessmen, he participated in local politics and the magistracy. He was a J.P. and became the local representative to the Home District Council when it was formed in 1841. He used his position to secure several grants of money for the improvement of local roads. In January 1850, when the first Thorah town meeting was held, Cameron was elected Reeve. In 1851, he served on a seven-member committee which studied the proposed separation of Ontario County from York County. Although he retired as Reeve of Thorah in 1852, he continued to pursue local politics quite actively. In 1862, for example, he harshly criticized certain Council members who opposed the improvement of the Center Road in Thorah. He was also named as a Trustee of the proposed Beaverton Grammar School in 1864, an institution which never materialised.

Cameron's farm at Beaverton was comparatively prosperous and well-equipped, although it was not especially lavish. In the 1871 census he was listed as the owner of 358 acres, 2 carriages, 3 wagons, 3 ploughs, a reaper, a horse rake, 2 fanning mills, 27 cattle, 47 sheep and 13 swine.

Cameron died in 1872 at the age of eighty-five. Given his meticulous record-keeping as a soldier, and his advanced age, it is a little surprising that he had not made a will. After the appropriate legal formalities, his estate was inherited by his sister Unagh Bethune, who was now a widow and resided on an adjacent farm.

Cameron's significance to surveys in Ontario is relatively modest. His achievement was to return the Crown Lands Department to something like its normal operation, and to get the survey programme restarted. In doing so he helped create a basis for the work of Andrew Russell and the significant reforms of survey practice in the 1840's.

