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Samuel Holland, Canada's First Surveyor General

In this year, when we celebrate Canada's 125th birthday, one tends to ask oneself what one's own ethnic group has contributed to our multicultural country. What sort of Dutch people have influenced the course of Canadian history?

Samuel Holland is one such person. He was born and bred in the Netherlands, settled in Canada, and rose to national prominence. His working methods in his field, namely surveying, still form the basis of much of the work done today. In view of these accomplishments, it is remarkable that most Dutch Canadians do not even know about him. Indeed, Canadians in general - except for some Prince Edward Islanders, geographers and military engineers - respond to his name with a blank stare. And yet he influenced land development from PEI to Ontario and from the St. Lawrence to Pennsylvania, and in his time he was an exceedingly important force in the fields of science and engineering. Boylan compares him to Samuel de Champlain: both were skilled cartographers, trained soldiers and military engineers, and both were passionate about establishing permanent and thriving settlements in the New World.

Perhaps the general public does not know about Samuel Holland because he was competent rather than colourful and "a good and faithful servant of the Crown" as John Graves Simcoe put it (Thorpe p.428) rather than a revolutionary. But he was honoured by those who knew his accomplishments. They gave his name to Holland Marsh in Ontario, Holland Avenue in Quebec City, and Holland College in the city which he named Charlottetown and where nearby Holland Cove reminds us that he once lived on the island.

This paper is not based on significant original research but is rather a review of biographical material, limited as that may be. I shall draw heavily on Chipman who did excellent work on Samuel Holland in the early 1920's. Nobody has bested him since, although Thorpe (in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography) tried hard to fill in the gaps left by Chipman. Particularly the Dutch period of Holland's life is rather vague. Perhaps more information will be contained in the Holland biography currently being prepared by Thorpe et al.

Samuel Johannes Holland was born in or near Nijmegen in 1728. Chipman alludes to the possibility that he was descended from a Cornelius Holland, a British dissenter who settled in Holland in 1660. Samuel joined the Dutch artillery in 1745 and served in it for nine years. In 1747 he fought off the French at the siege of Hulst, was promoted to lieutenant at the siege of Bergen op Zoom (he was nineteen at the time), and prepared plans of Nijmegen and Den Bosch and their environs. This was an auspicious beginning to his military career.

On August 31, 1749, he married Geertruy Hasse, the sister of two officers in his corps. The next year a daughter, Johanna Christina, was born, but that is the last we hear of the child, a fact which suggests that she died in infancy. There is no record of any other children being born of this union. Holland left his wife in 1754 - amicably, we are told - when he left his country.

Lack of information about what must have been an important training period in the life of young Holland leaves us without a clue as to why he might have left. Judging by what is known of him in later life, he was well-educated and quite talented. He spoke and read several languages and the books he owned were written in Dutch, French, English, and Latin. He was a skilled engineer and a talented mathematician. Interpersonal skills and/or his social class made it possible for him to come in contact with influential people. And he certainly did not lack ambition. Was his native country too confining? Did his marriage not bring him satisfaction? We do not know.

The fact is that Samuel Holland left his country for Britain, where he knew the Duke of Richmond from earlier contact with him in the Netherlands. The Duke helped him obtain a commission about two years later, as lieutenant in the newly formed Royal American Regiment of Foot. While the Duke's help was invaluable, his own credentials and the impressive plans he had prepared during the previous war in Holland no doubt had a great bearing on his winning one of the fifty commissions reserved for foreign Protestants in the Royal Americans. In later petitions he never failed to mention the ten years he spent in the Dutch army fighting the enemies of Britain.

These were uneasy times in North America, with dozens of ships, hundreds of cannon, and thousands of troops on both the French and British sides ready to face each other. The harsh climate, forbidding terrain and immense distances, and sometimes human ineptitude, exacted their toll, but also provided plenty of opportunity to show courage and competency. Samuel Holland possessed both and was rapidly promoted to a captain-lieutenancy.

During these early years in North America, Holland's role appeared to be to make the surveys and maps necessary for troops to advance on their enemies. Hence, we find him making surveys, preparing plans and taking soundings during the siege and subsequent attack of Louisbourg by Brigadier General James Wolfe, and again charting the Gulf and the St. Lawrence River prior to the attack on Quebec. The latter plans were prepared with the assistance of Captain James Cook who had shown great interest in the plane-table, an instrument he was unfamiliar with but anxious to learn about. These plans were taken to England by Wolfe and presented to Lord Chatham. More such presentations in future years would lead to Holland's career as Surveyor General.

From this time stems Holland's close friendship with General Wolfe, only one year his senior, who admired the Dutchman's engineering skills. Wolfe presented his friend with an inscribed pistol which, tragically, later was used by Holland's son Samuel Lester, in a duel in which he was killed.

Samuel Holland was very much involved with the battle of the Plains of Abraham. In August 1759 he had been promoted to a captaincy by Wolfe, and during the battle he took part in dangerous engineering operations. Many years later Holland wrote of the death of Wolfe:

> "In the battle on the 13th of Sept. your memorialist lost his protector while holding his wounded hand at the time he expired..." (Chipman p.20)

Chipman is convinced of the correctness of this statement, even though existing paintings of the scene do not show Holland to be present.

But the loss of his protector did not slow Samuel Holland's career advancement. In the years following the Conquest he surveyed the settled parts of the province. He lived in Quebec City at the time, and that is where he met the woman who was to become the mother of ten children by him. Possibly he began living with her as early as 1762, when he was 34 years old and she was only 21. She was Marie-Josephte Rollette, youngest daughter of François Rollette and Thérèse Grenet. She eloped with the man who had fought against her people on the Plains of Abraham. We know that they did get married eventually, in spite of the existence overseas of another Mrs. Holland, who continued to receive an annual stipend from her estranged husband until 1780. It seems that a favourable legal opinion by judges and the Attorney General in New Hampshire led to their marriage in 1772 or 1773, when they already had three boys and four girls.

In September 1762 Holland was sent to Britain with his plans of Quebec. Early in 1764 certain proposals were finally accepted and two Surveyors General, accountable to the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations, were to be appointed, one for the Northern and one for the Southern District of North America.

On March 6, 1764, Captain Samuel Holland was appointed Surveyor-General of the Province of Quebec at a salary of £ 365 per annum, and an extensive budget was approved. A mammoth task lay before him. He was to survey all that part of North America north of the Potomac River and due west as far as the dominion extended. He was to start with Ile St. Jean (now PEI), the Iles de la Madeleine and Cape Breton, because of the importance of their fisheries.

Thorpe sums up Holland's work in PEI as follows:

> After appointing John Collins to direct surveying in the province [of Quebec] during his absence, Holland left for St. John's Island, where he arrived early October. Armed with a wide range of scientific instruments and assisted by the deputy surveyor, Thomas Wright, and a number of engineer officers, volunteer apprentices, non-commissioned officers, and privates, Holland conducted his survey of St. John's Island under harsh climatic conditions. He divided it into counties of approx. 500,000 acres, parishes of around 100,000 acres, and townships of about 20,000 acres, surveying them with precision by fixing latitudes and longitudes from astronomical observation; he also took careful soundings in coastal waters. On maps and accompanying reports he recorded the principal rivers and harbours, and established the sites of projected towns, including the capital, which he named Charlottetown. He analyzed possible land uses around these sites, providing a detailed account of forest resources, plant life, and

> the quality and extent of the soils, as well as an assessment of the climate, particularly for agriculture. By October 1765 he was able to send the first of his maps and reports to England, where they renewed an interest in land speculation that had manifested itself the previous year. (Thorpe p. 426)

As a reward for his efforts Holland received lot 28 situated on the Tryon River. His son John Frederick, and later his widow Marie-Josephte, settled there.

We understand from Thorpe's account that Holland and his team worked very hard and obtained admirable results, but what is left unsaid is the hardship which they endured. For example, he had hoped to find lodging in Fort Amherst on the west side of the entrance to Charlottetown harbour, but that proved unfeasible, so he had to build himself winter quarters at Observation Cove - later named Holland Cove - which, owing to lack of materials and bad weather, were ready for occupancy only on December 8. Misunderstandings, refusal of assistance, frostbite and even death among his party due to the severity of the weather were part of his experiences on the island. The loss by drowning of his principal assistant and good friend, Lieutenant Frederick Haldimand, a nephew of the future Governor of Canada, hit him especially hard.

There is also no mention of any form of family life, but in one of his letters to General Haldimand, Holland refers to his son John Frederick as "St. John's Jack". (Chipman p. 81) John Frederick was born on October 27, 1764. His father had returned from England only in August, after a two year absence. This means that a pregnant Marie-Josephte was on board for the two months' journey across a rough Atlantic, in the 200 ton vessel Canceaux which at one point barely escaped being smashed on rocks. And again, in the same vessel, she travelled to Ile St. Jean, arriving there on October 5, only 19 days before giving birth. The house would not be ready until December. And even more difficult and dangerous times were ahead.

Holland's proposals to the authorities in England included the following about the future capital of PEI:

> The capital, to be called Charlottetown, is proposed to be built on the point of the harbour of Port la Joie, betwixt York and Hillsborough Rivers, as being one of the best and central parts of the island, and having the advantage of an immediate and easy communication with interior parts by means of the three fine rivers of Hillsborough, York and Elliott. The ground designated for the town and fortress is well situated upon a regular ascent from the water front. A fine rivulet will run through the town. A battery or two some distance advanced will entirely command the harbour so that an enemy attempting the town, cannot do so without great difficulty... As this side of the Island cannot have a fishery, it may probably be more expedient to indulge it with some particular privileges; and as all the judicial and civil, as well as a good part of the commercial business will be transacted here, it will make it at least equally flourishing with the other country towns. (Chipman p.31-2)

I have gone into some detail here in order to give some insight into Holland's way of thinking and working. He did not confine his comments to engineering aspects only, but took it upon himself to dispense sage advice regarding the future structure of society in PEI and elsewhere, and he built that into his plans, which were well received and generally accepted. This contributed to his influence on the development of this country.

The pattern of rigorous working methods and often harsh and dangerous living conditions would be repeated many times. This was particularly true during the American Revolution, when Holland lived with his family variously at Portsmouth, N.H. and at Perth Amboy, N.J. After the immense work of mapping the Atlantic coast, New Hampshire (he prepared the first useful map of that state) and other New England states, he found himself the owner of extensive acreage in N.H. and Vermont, but these ties with the land were not enough to make him accept an offer of a military command in the rebel army. His sympathies and interests lay with the British, and he was forced to flee to England in the fall of 1775, while his family was imprisoned until their liberation by the British in March 1776. In the process he lost his properties, but was later compensated to a degree. Cynics may consider it callous that Holland twice left a wife and children. These and other actions might indeed point to an opportunistic streak in his personality, although it is softened a great deal by his loyalty and dedication.

On January 4, 1776 he was commissioned a major in the army, and soon after he returned to North America as British aide-de-camp with the Commander of the Hessian troops. At the end of 1778, after apparently having seen some action near New York, he was recalled to Quebec by Governor Haldimand to resume his task as Surveyor General. With this, Samuel Holland entered

another phase in his life, one that was characterized by more political involvement in addition to his regular duties and, sadly, by declining health.

In 1779 Samuel Holland was appointed a member of the Legislative Council. In that capacity he appears to have voted mostly with the government of the day. Thorpe surmises generously that "he thereby probably acted in his own interests as an office holder". (427) That is a pattern repeated throughout his life. Audet points out that Holland consistently voted for the British and against the French. However, finding such behaviour logical for a British army officer, he prefers to dwell on Holland's great accomplishments which benefited all Canadians in the end. In 1780 he purchased a beautiful 200-acre estate a few miles from the gates of Quebec and close to the Plains of Abraham. According to Thorpe, this mansion was renowned for its grandeur. He entertained there generously and with much refinement.

By now, Samuel Holland was 56 years old and his constitution withstood the hardships of wilderness travel less well. In his letters references to exhaustion, poor health and pain begin to appear. He continued his work but confined himself mostly to his Quebec office, leaving the field work to his deputies including at least two of his sons, John and Henry. He had to reduce his workload after an attack of palsy, probably in 1790. A few years later, however, he was able to take another trip to Britain.

By 1791 Upper Canada had its own Surveyor General, but not until Major Holland had directed initial survey work from Gaspé to the Detroit River, including the Eastern Townships region of Quebec and the region between the St. Lawrence River and Lake Simcoe. Holland continued in office as Surveyor General until his death in 1801.

He was eventually succeeded by Colonel Joseph Bouchette, the son of his wife's half-brother. It was he who in 1815 published in London *A Topographical Description Of Lower Canada* for which Major Holland's work formed the basis. This important work can be seen as the crowning glory, albeit posthumous, of the achievements of a lifetime.

In his methods and his accomplishments Samuel Holland must be considered a true pioneer. As Chipman puts it: "No one could have been in closer touch with the early settlement of the two Provinces of Lower Canada and Upper Canada than the Surveyor General..." (90)

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