

A NOTE ON THE DE WOLF FAMILY OF NOVA SCOTIA

by Esther Clark Wright

In the seventeenth century, two or three members of the De Wolf family came from the Low Countries to the colony of New Netherlands on the east coast of North America. When the English captured New Amsterdam, the capital, in 1664 and renamed it New York, all but one of the family apparently returned to Europe. Balthasar De Wolf remained and moved northward to Connecticut where he carried on, among other enterprises, the salt manufacturing traditionally associated with the family.

In the eighteenth century, three of Balthasar's descendants: Simeon from Lyme, Nathan from Saybrook, and Jehiel from Killingworth, followed the Connecticut families who had moved to Nova Scotia in 1760 to take over the lands from which the Acadians had been removed in 1755. The three De Wolf families, assigned 500 acres each at Grand Pre in the township of Horton on the north side of Cornwallis, kept only the best of these Grand Pre lands and moved westward along with several other families to a little creek which joined Cornwallis River near its mouth. Mud Creek, as it had been called since the time of the Micmac Indians, provided at high tide a channel for vessels to nose their way into a tiny harbor and land their cargoes of rum, molasses, oranges, and nuts from the West Indies and to load potatoes which the farmers hauled in carts from the nearby farms.

Mud Creek became a thriving village with prosperous farms, trade with the West Indies, shipbuilding along the creek, and stores and small manufactories. When Nathan De Wolf's second son Elisha married Margaret, daughter of Thomas Ratchford in 1779, he built a commodious house a mile or more west of Mud Creek. After he had entertained the Duke of Kent (later the father of Queen Victoria) on the occasion of the Duke's journey from Halifax to Annapolis in 1794, the house was known as Kent Lodge. The house still stands and new owners have had it restored to its eighteenth-century character.

It was two of Elisha's granddaughters who protested that they found it embarrassing at boarding school to say that they came from Mud Creek and demanded a more dignified name for the village. Whether it was Judge Elisha himself or his son Elisha, the postmaster, who suggested the name Wolfville is not known, but it was the postmaster who took the matter up with the Postmaster General of Nova Scotia and had the name Wolfville recognized in 1830. A boys' school had been started at the village; and in 1838, the Baptist Association founded Acadia College, now an independent university of 3,000 students.

Judge Elisha's eldest son, William, remained a farmer, but two of William's sons, John Starr and James Ratchford, entered into the shipping business, probably in Halifax under the aegis of their uncle Thomas Andrew Strange De Wolf and ultimately became large shipowners in Liverpool. Both married in Liverpool. James Ratchford De Wolf was the first Mayor of Birkenhead. His family apparently did not wish to carry on the shipping business, for his will, which I happened on last week, directed that all his ships should be sold. John Starr De Wolf founded the firm of J. S. De Wolf and Company, and it was his son Thomas Andrew De Wolf whose Pacific ventures are related. Thus it was that the grandson of a Wolfville farmer was associated with far away islands in the Pacific.

Tom De Wolf was only one of many Wolfville grandsons to venture into distant places. It is one of the interesting facets of life in this pleasant town on the hillside overlooking the Cornwallis River and Minas Basin, that sons and grandsons of Wolfville families are still venturing to far distant places and into varied enterprises. Their return to the home of their fathers keeps us in touch with the world beyond.

Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada