

George Playter – Family Story Attachment

The Playter family can trace their ancestry in England to the early 10th century. By the 15th century, the family was well established in the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk, as evidenced by many old deeds and records. One descendant, Sir Thomas Playters of Sotterley, was High Sheriff of Suffolk in 1605. He was Knighted at Newmarket by King James I on 19 October 1603, and created a Baronet on 13 August 1623, the last Baronet created during the King's reign. The family was exiled following the execution of Charles I by Parliament during the English Civil War. They suffered greatly during the English Civil War but lived to see the restoration of the monarchy under Charles II as well as the restoration their estates in 1661. One descendant, Lyonel Playters, was married to Elizabeth, daughter of Doctor Gould, and died at Sotterley in January 1752. The Playters family name became modified about this time when the "s" was dropped and thereafter they were known as Playter.



George Henry Playter, subject of this sketch, was born at Walton upon Thames in Surrey on 1738, the third son of Lyonel Playters and Elizabeth Gould above, and grandson of Sir Lyonel Playters, 6th Baronet of Sotterley. In 1755, he entered the Royal Navy as a Midshipman and served on His Majesty's Frigate Wager, a 24 gun sixth rate commanded by Captain Preston and stationed in Antigua in the Caribbean. Tasked with the destruction of Spanish vessels on the west coast, she was lost when she went aground off the coast of Chile during a storm in 1757 after transiting Cape Horn to the Pacific.

In 1758, George immigrated to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He subsequently entered the Army as an Ensign to participate in an expedition against the French on the frontier. He thus saw action during the *French & Indian War*. In 1763, George settled at the Draw Bridge that crossed the Crosswick River in West New Jersey. On 2 January 1766, he married Elizabeth, daughter of John Welding and Hannah Watson of Chesterfield, West New Jersey. Her family were members of the *Society of Friends* (Quakers) and George soon became associated with that religion as well. In October 1776, Sir William Howe came into the Crosswicks area, perusing General Washington during his withdrawal from New York after his defeat at White Plains. Rebel forces destroyed the bridge near the Playter home to prevent its use by the British Army and subsequently crossed the Delaware to set up defensive positions to protect Philadelphia. Classed as a shipwright and cabinet-maker, George was asked to repair this bridge and others at the request of General Howe. He completed the repairs. Accused of treason by some of his so-called friends in the rebel camp, his life was in jeopardy. At that point, his patriotic attachments proved much stronger than religious convictions and he shed his religion to rejoin the British Colours. He was with the army at the Battles of Trenton and Princeton.

Appointed a Lieutenant in the Guides & Pioneers, George was also recommended to the Commander in Chief as one who could render valuable service in the Secret Service. He infiltrated enemy lines and seized important information and documents for the British. As the safety of his family became a concern, in 1780 he was ordered home to relocate his family. All his property had been confiscated due to his actions and his family had been living in New York after being forced from their home. George was reunited with his family and they fled to Nova Scotia. Leaving his family in relative safety, George re-joined the army at New York in 1781. At the end of the war in 1783, he joined his family in Halifax and retired from the army. In 1789, after a lingering illness, George went to England seeking compensation for his losses in the United States. With recommendations of Sir William Howe, Sir Henry Clinton and Sir Guy Carlton, he was placed on a military allowance as a reduced Provincial

George Playter – Family Story Attachment

Captain on 25 March 1791. He subsequently returned briefly to Pennsylvania and New Jersey, likely in an attempt to recover what he could of his previous property. In May 1792, he returned to Nova Scotia and moved his family west to Kingston.

“To His Excellency John Greaves Simcoe Esq. Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, the petition of George Playter Esq., late of the County of Burlington, in the Province of West New Jersey, but now of Kingston in Upper Canada, humbly sheweth, that your petitioner is on half pay list as a reduced Captain – his services to the Crown in the late Rebellion, is fully known to his Excellency and many distinguished characters in the Province, he implores his Excellency therefore to grant him the quantity of land allowed to a reduced Captain and he will as in duty ever pray.”

His first petition dated 9 July 1793, was granted on 13 July, resulting in 1200 acres plus 100 acres for each of his eight children for a total of 2000 acres, an area of approximately eight square kilometres.

“To His Excellency John Greaves Simcoe Esq. Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada and Colonel commanding His Majesty’s Forces..... The petition of George Playter humbly sheweth, that as his Excellency the Governor in Council has given to your petitioner and his eight children TWO THOUSAND acres of land, Your petitioner humbly prays that the lots marked for himself and sons, in the second concession in the Township of York or those nearest adjoining with a Town lot may be granted and your petitioner as in Duty Bound will ever pray.”

In 1794, Governor Simcoe moved the colony’s capital from Newark (Niagara-on-the-lake) to York. George settled in York at the same time, becoming one of the founding fathers of the new town and capital of Upper Canada. That year he placed the first bridge across the Don River by felling a butternut tree near what is now the foot of Winchester Street. The bridge was likely constructed to facilitate movement between his home and those of his sons on the east side of the river. Elizabeth Simcoe, wife of Governor John Graves Simcoe, created a sketch and records her use of the bridge on 6 June 1796 in her diary, a document is available from the Ontario Provincial Archives.



The Playter Bridge

George Playter – Family Story Attachment

By 1796, with his grants and additional purchases, George had accumulated about 4000 acres, or some 16 square kilometres in what has become downtown Toronto. He built a large home named Drumsnab and a tavern directly across the river from the home of his son John who lived in an area that would become Rosedale in later years. The boundaries of his land holdings would be from the present corner of Bloor and Church Streets, across to Carlow and down to Queen in the city of Toronto. His estate was immediately south of Castle Frank, home of Lieutenant Governor Simcoe who was a close friend and possibly a distant relation by marriage. In 1797, George sold about 40 acres of his property in the area of Queen, Yonge, Bloor and Bond Streets for the sum of £56, an area that would eventually become downtown Toronto. From its founding as the capitol, the town was named York, as Simcoe disliked Toronto, the original Indian name for the area. The town was built on a swamp and it was many years before proper drainage was installed hence during the rainy season the streets became almost impassable. It was also known as Muddy York for almost 50 years. George Playter (Jr) ran the first stagecoach line between Newmarket and York along what would eventually become Yonge Street. It was called George Playter & Sons and was sold to William Weller of Cobourg in 1833. When York was attacked and occupied by American forces on 27 April 1813 during the War of 1812, they burned the Parliament buildings and much of the rest of the city. Many of the papers and archives of Upper Canada had been secreted away to the homes of George Playter and his sons to avoid their capture. Ely, one of his sons, wrote an interesting diary about the invasion of York, which has been preserved and is available from the Ontario Archives. In addition, the family was involved in the destruction of the Sir Isaac Brock, a warship under construction at York, to prevent the ship from falling into enemy hands.

George and Elizabeth Playter had 10 children all of whom lived to maturity. The descendant line to the Edmonton branch is through David McGregor Rogers' first wife, Sarah Playter. After Sarah died, David married her sister Elizabeth who had become a widow and was caring for Sarah's children after her sister's death. George Playter was appointed Colonel of the local militia and was a pew holder and regular attendant of St. James Cathedral on King Street. He died on 15 May 1822, at the age of 86 years, and laid to rest on his property along the Don River. Elizabeth died 14 May 1824 at the age of 79 years and laid to rest beside her husband.

Some 70 years later, in the summer of 1896, several skeletons were uncovered during excavations for a house at the corner of Castle Frank and McKenzie Avenue once a portion of the Playter property. This was recorded in The Toronto Star 31 July and 4 August 1896. Considering the times of death of family members and the tendency at the time of burying family members on their own property, these were likely the remains of George Playter and other family members. Established in July 1844, St. James cemetery was the first in the Toronto area. The remains probably belonged to Colonel George Playter (1822), his wife Elizabeth (1824), his son James (1809), Margaret Bolton (wife of his son James), Thomas Perry (1810 – first husband of his daughter Elizabeth), and his daughter Sarah (1810 - first wife of David McGregor Rogers). In 1837, Robert David Rogers, son of David McGregor Rogers, wrote a letter to his brother James in which he recounts visiting Uncle John's place in York and crossing the river "*to the Old Farm where our Grandfather, Grandmother and Mother were buried.*" On 19 May 1896, these remains were reinterred in St. James Cemetery in an unmarked grave, because at the time it was not known to whom the remains belonged. Research is continuing to ascertain their final resting place.