

Alexander Joseph Wolff
By Robert Walter Hicks
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This is an attempt to organize my thoughts and research on Alexander Joseph Wolff. I have been looking for years for new information about him with little success. Things changed in 2021 when I found out that a regimental history had been published in 2019 about the 5th battalion of the 60th rifles, the regiment that Wolff was enlisted in during the Peninsular wars. They did not make it to Waterloo but fought in most of the other battles throughout Portugal, Spain and into France. I contacted the author of the book; Robert Griffith, and we exchanged several texts and emails, and he gave me some information from army files that he had access to. The book is called *Riflemen: The History of the 5th Battalion, 60th (Royal American) Regiment - 1797-1818 (From Reason to Revolution)*. The term "Royal American" was applied as the regiment was originally supposed to serve in North America.

In my exchange with Griffith, I gave him a link to my family history, and he ended up writing a blog, a combination of what he could find in the files and the family history. Click here to see the blog: <https://daringdutycunningplans.wordpress.com>. His book is detailed and gives the reader a good idea what army life was like at the time. Wolff is mentioned a couple of times in the book, but Griffith told me he did not know anything about his later life when writing. Perhaps if I had got to him before publication, more of Wolff's path might have been shared. Regardless, I got a lot of information from reading the book.

Wolff's early life is filled with mystery, and it has been frustrating and confusing to try and sort everything out. Most family history records list his date of birth as 1787 or 1788. I have been unable to find any month or day that he was born. In a memorandum of 1848 Wolff says that he was born in 1782. However, the copy of the memorandum that I have is not signed. The 1851 Quebec census gives his age as 67 at that time. He died in 1863 so if we accept the memorandum and census to be correct he lived to around 80 years of age and his date of birth was 1782. I am going to go with that until someone has information to prove me wrong. The 1851 census lists his wife's age at that time as 62 years of age.

Most family history records list his place of birth as either Vienna or Baden, Austria. In an 1806 return of services form when he was a private during the Peninsular war, he gives his place of origin as Dubienka which was a part of Poland at the time. In 1792, the Village of Dubienka was overrun by the Russians and became part of Austria or Russia. Today, Dubienka still exists, and after the First World War became part of Poland again. Dubienka is a long way from Vienna or Baden. Dubienka is and was a town of about 1,000 people. It had a significant Jewish population until the Second World War and Hitler's invasion of Poland. At that time, almost all the Jewish population was sent to concentration camps.

The first record that I am aware of is when Wolff was sent to Egypt in 1801 as a bugle man with the Lowestein Jagers. The Lowestein Jagers were raised by Prince Lowestein Wertheim of the Holy Roman Empire in 1800. The outfit was composed of Poles, Germans and other nationalities and spoke mainly German. They went to Egypt with the British Army and when they returned in 1802, were disbanded and most of the men joined the 5th Battalion of the 60th and were sent to Halifax. Wolff would have been about 19 years old. I know that he was in the British service in 1800 but prior to this I have been unable to find any records. According to Griffith, the records of the Lowenstein Jagers do not exist any longer. Family history lore is that he entered British service at 13 years of age, and he wrote on an army form that he entered at 10 years of age. I think it was probably 18 years of age.

Recently there has been talk within the family that Wolff was an illegitimate son of Joseph II who was the Holy Roman Emperor and ruled Austria from 1765 until his death in 1790. My brother, through DNA, is presently trying to connect Wolff to Joseph II. This would make sense to me. Family history makes no mention of a mother (and I think he had to have one) and identifies a father who was killed in battle with no mention of a name. DNA does not lie, so we will see what comes of this.

Some people have suggested that Wolff was either adopted by a family, or a soldier in the British Army at a young age. I think it is more likely that he adopted the British Army after the Jagers were disbanded in 1802 as he says in the 1848 memorandum "I adopted England for my home". I think this memorandum was prepared when he applied for his medals. It seems that a soldier had to apply for his medals, and they were granted long after the fact. Again, I say the copy I have is not signed.

Some people have suggested that he might have been adopted by a Fitzgerald family, but I cannot find any proof of this. The Fitzgeralds were a rich Scottish family who bought a commission for their son, John Forster Fitzgerald in 1793. Wolff and Fitzgerald were approximately the same age, but their military paths were very different. Fitzgerald was commissioned in the 79th Highlanders in 1793. Their careers do not seem to cross until 1809 when Fitzgerald joined the 5th in the Peninsular.

After they got together, I can understand how they would become very close as they were both officers in the same battalion. As Wolff was non-commissioned, it is unlikely he was adopted by a rich family. It has been suggested by Griffith that a friendship might have existed between Wolff and James Schoedde, an officer about the same age, who was with Wolff during his entire career. The father of James Schoedde led the Jagers in Egypt in 1801, with both his son and Wolff along with them.

When the 5th was posted to Quebec in 1818, it consisted of about 500 soldiers that were led by Fitzgerald and Schoedde. At the time, because of huge debts and the defeat of Napoleon in Europe, the British were defunding the military and foreign officers including Wolff were let go. He was let go in 1824 after being commissioned in 1821 and appointed Adjutant. Fitzgerald and Schoedde both survived the cuts.

It seems Wolff's two oldest children were born in Portugal or in Europe at least. On a Record of Service form, Wolff lists his children as Margaret born January 30, 1812; Charlotte born September 15, 181; James Fitzgerald in 1818 (I can't make out the month and day); Jacob born March 15, 1821; Caroline born June 9, 1825 or 1826; and Alex Arthur born September 11, 1827. The only birth date that might be disputed is that of Charlotte who in the 1861 census, after her husband, Montegue Sewell, had died, gives her age as 36 years old, which does not add up if she was born in 1814. In the 1881 census in Portneuf County, her age is listed as 50, which also does not add up. In the same census, her birthplace is entered as Ireland and her origin as German. This makes total sense to me as in 1814 the 5th was in Ireland. I believe she was born in 1814, but in more than one census she is logged as ten years younger. She had three children, Reginald, 24; Carl, 28; and Florence, 22 years old; logged in the 1881 Quebec census. In the 1891 census, still in Portneuf County, her age is stated to be 78, which is right on and adds evidence that she was born in 1814. Wolff had other children, I believe, who postdate this form. His place of marriage is listed as Azambuja, Portugal and that it occurred on January 13, 1811. He also lists when he was injured and his place of residence of the last three years as the "settlement at Valcartier".

It is hard to make out his writing, but on another Record of Service form he seems to be discussing his options after being let go. He decided to remain on half pay and remains with the hope that he will be called back as an Adjutant in the 2nd Battalion. Like a lot of the foreign soldiers, I do not think he was happy at being discharged. As far as I can find out, he did not sell his commission or did not receive a pension, suggesting his war injuries were not severe.

It would be interesting to know the exact relationship between Schoedde, Fitzgerald and Wolff. Both Schoedde and Fitzgerald went on to have long military careers and rose to top ranks. Schoedde died in 1861 with the rank of Lieutenant General. He was of German descent but was born into the regiment where his father served and therefore, was British. Fitzgerald became a Lieutenant General in 1841, was an MP in 1852, knighted in 1862, retired in France and died in his 90s. He was buried with full military honours. They and Wolff had seen the same horrors together and been in the same battalion and sometimes the same company. Later as Officers, they had to agree on plans. I think they would have been very close. James Fitzgerald Wolff, the first of the clan to be born in what would become Canada in 1818 was probably named after this pair. It would be nice to have all three together and be able to ask questions. Wolff was a Sergeant Major for a long period of the Peninsular war, the highest rank of any non-commissioned officer.

Family stories suggest that when Wolff settled in Valcartier many "of his men" were given land grants and settled with him. I cannot find any evidence to support this. I cannot find any early settlers that came from the 5th/60th. It will take further work to totally disprove this as apparently when foreign officers were let go by the British, many chose to remain in Canada. The foreign officers would most likely have Germanic names.

Another story says that Wolff landed in Halifax and came overland with "his men" in winter and that some of his men died along the way. This does not make sense to me as reportedly the ships that left Britain with the 5th/60th did stop at Halifax before they continued on to Quebec. It is possible that Wolff got off in Halifax, and then came overland to Quebec in winter but it was not considered a hardship in that era. In fact, it was much easier to come in winter. In summer, you would have to deal with swamps and lakes. Regardless, Wolff got to Quebec because the 5th/60th was posted there, not because he chose to come. He probably made several trips between Quebec and Halifax and would have made these trips in winter. The settlements were both British fortifications.

The 1851 census lists Wolff's wife as "Mrs. Wolff" and gives her birthplace as Prussia, and her age as 62. I find it odd that she is listed in a census as simply "Mrs. Wolff". Regardless, if her age is listed correctly, she would have been born in 1788 or 1789 and have been about 24 years of age when she got married in 1811. Alexander would have been about 30 years of age. On the document on which the date of marriage was given, children and birth dates are listed but no mention of his wife's name. A name is given in several other documents and the spelling varies between Hana Kasel Ehlert or Ellert to Anna Maria Wolff. In the 1881 census in Quebec, her name is entered as Hannah, aged 90, and birthplace Germany. At that time, she is still in Valcartier, living with her son, Arthur. It seems that she had her last child, Charles Stuart, in 1831 when she was about 43 years of age. I believe she died in 1883. The Kasel may refer to an area in Europe that she was from. Kasel is a city now in Germany and was part of a region in Prussia/Austria. The only Ellert that I can find, who served in the 5th Battalion, was a Lieutenant Lewis Ellert, who was discharged in 1803 for being drunk and unruly. I do not know if there would be any connection. Family lore says she spoke only German. Much of what I know about her cannot be backed up with documentation, but I believe she came from the same general area in Europe as he did. How they met, I do not know.

It is a bit difficult to follow Wolff's path through the Peninsular Wars as the 5th Battalion was divided into companies and were assigned to different battalions, when the British Army landed at Figueira da Foz in July 1808. The 5th and the 95th were involved in the advance push towards Lisbon and gaining control of that part of Portugal was aided by the Portuguese. The 5th was very good at what they did, and along with the 95th were experts at picking off enemy officers. When Wolff was promoted to Sergeant Major in 1812, his duties probably changed, and had more to do with logistics.

Much has been written about Wolff and it appears, some at least, is not true. He is still a puzzle with many missing pieces. Where did this old information come from? Why is there no mention of a mother or no name for his father who, is said, was killed when Wolff was young? Did he change his name when he joined the army? When and where did he get his education? What was he doing before he went to Egypt with the Lowestein Jagers? Most of these questions and others may never be answered.

It seems to me that he did not pass much information about his childhood years to his children. If he had, at least some would be known. I think he probably did not want his children to know about his early life as he was hiding something. If that is true, what was it? It is possible DNA may give some answers, but we may have to do some shovel work. Does anyone have a shovel? DNA has been used to identify the body of Richard III by tracing through his sister's line. Briefly, the female line was traced through his sister, Anne of York, to a living relative. The relative then supplied a DNA sample which identified the body through the male line. Interesting stuff, considering Richard III died in 1485. Anyone interested in Richard III can contact me. I think I know a lot about him.

My DNA is mostly from Scotland, Ireland, and England with 12% Germanic Europe, 8% Sweden and Denmark and 6% Jewish Peoples of Europe.

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