

The Background of Thomas Roy - Correspondence and Comments

Doubt remains about the family background of Thomas Roy. Was he originally from New Brunswick, as suggested by R.F. Legget in his article on Thomas Roy in the Canadian Geotechnical Journal (1988), or 'from Scotland', as stated in the Kerby letter from 1834 identified by S.A. Otto (independent historian) in the accompanying file 'Thomas Roy – Sources of Archival Records'?

Roy's writings show that he was knowledgeable about the geology of England and road-building there. He presented a paper on the surficial geology of Ontario to the Geological Society of London. He appeared to know important people in London, including the geologist Charles Lyell. Clearly he learned many of his surveying, geological and civil engineering skills in Britain. The possible links with the Scottish immigrant Roy family in northern New Brunswick remain unproven.. The surveyor of woods in New Brunswick may possibly be the surveyor of roads in England and later Ontario but documents to confirm this have not been found. Robert F. Legget felt it would be a large coincidence if there were two Thomas Roys in Canada at about the same time and both of them surveyors.

What is clear is an approximately twenty year gap between the surveyor Roy in New Brunswick and the surveyor/civil engineer Roy in Ontario. This could be a period spent in Britain learning about geology, drainage, and road-building. Most of this experience appears to have been in England. Why then did Kerby describe him as 'from Scotland'. Perhaps that describes his family roots. The widow of George Roy, who came to New Brunswick in 1786 and may be a relative, returned to Scotland after the death of her husband.

As David Cruden notes in the following paragraph, the accounts of Roy being 'from Scotland' and 'from New Brunswick' may not be incompatible. The evidence remains circumstantial.

J.Graham, 29 March 2010

Mike Chrimes, Head of Knowledge Transfer, Institution of Civil Engineers, London, England wrote to J.Graham, (March 2010)

I have re-checked my files here and I realise that while we considered an entry on Thomas Roy, (for the ICE Biographical Dictionary of Engineers project – jg), we could not find any clear lead on his origins, beyond what Legget had surmised. There are a host of Thomas Roy's born in Scotland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He does not feature in the Telford correspondence, or in the *Dictionary of Land Surveyors*. At that point I stopped looking.

Best wishes
Mike

David Cruden (University of Alberta) wrote to J.Graham (March 2010)

Despite Stephen Otto's remarks, I would be in no hurry to discard Legget's research in New Brunswick. I think the two accounts of Roy are compatible if Roy went to the U.K. from Canada (to his father's relatives) and spent some time as an articulated student with Macadam or Telford or a similar figure.

Stephen Otto (independent historian) wrote (March 2010)

I've looked over the materials I sent you in 2001 and think they reflect most of what I know about Thomas Roy. So post them on your website as you have proposed, by all means. Also our correspondence in whole or part. While I'd like to be given credit for the research I did to augment Dr. Legget's work I am not intending to publish anything on Roy, so if you'd like to

prepare a biographical piece on him I'm sure it will stand for a long while. The DCB has no intention of going back to pick up people it did not include in the first volumes, at least not until it has completed the big job of going forward to a point closer to the present. And then . . . Thank you for asking my consent; you have it.

Stephen Otto

J. Graham wrote to Stephen Otto (March 2010)

We exchanged messages in March 2001 about Thomas Roy, one of the first engineers in Upper Canada. At that time, I was a rather busy Director General (later Secretary General) of the Canadian Geotechnical Society. You were generous in alerting the Society to some errors of our understanding of the life of Thomas Roy, as described, for example by Robert F. Legget. You also provided a checklist of archival information that you had identified about Roy.

I've attached a re-formatted and slightly edited version of our correspondence.

I regret that your valuable letter got buried in my computer and was not acted upon. Please accept my apologies.

Now I have a little more time to spare and am currently working on recording some of our profession's early achievements. As the current Chair of the Society's Heritage Committee, and with a website that is easier to edit, I've been working on a 'virtual archives' collection. We recognize this is a much less rigorous approach than proper archiving, but as a relatively small society without a permanent headquarters and with only a small permanent staff, it's probably our only possible solution.

Stephen Otto wrote to J. Graham (March 2001)

My contact with the ICE came through Dr. Richard White here in Toronto. He told me a couple of years ago someone had asked him about Francis Hall, CE, and, as I have long had an interest in Hall, I wrote the ICE to know if they would still welcome input. The librarian, Mike Chrimes, wrote back to say yes; on their website, [ICEnet : The Institution of Civil Engineers Homepage](#) - The Library - Contacts, I see that they have a Biographical Dictionary of Engineers project.

Well, one thing led to another, and Chrimes expressed interest in Roy too. Dr. Robert Legget and I were in touch occasionally from the early 1980s until his death to share items related to Roy. But it was after Dr. Legget had gone that I came across two of the most significant letters Roy wrote. In any event, I shall attach below what I sent Rejean Couture and hope you find it helpful to a better understanding of one of the founders of your profession in Canada. I have not heard from Chrimes since I sent the same file off to him on Wednesday -- maybe it is school break there too. In my cover note I said it seemed to me, as a historian, if Roy were so able and experienced from the moment of his arrival here, there must be lots they knew about his previous career in Britain. Perhaps they had not realized their Roy was the same man as ours. We'll see what his reply is.

Sincerely,
Stephen Otto

J. Graham wrote to Stephen Otto (March 2001):

Thank you for communicating your information about the origins of Thomas Roy. I am very grateful. We have made some efforts toward developing a better handle on our heritage in geotechnical engineering, but so far, without great success.

As a former member of the Institution of Civil Engineers, I am curious about why they are interested in Thomas Roy. I'm not trying to argue against their interest, just curious about it.

Your message talks about a check list that may have gone to Rejean Couture. Unfortunately, I didn't receive it. Can I ask you to send me more information? (The checklist is the material at the beginning of this file. JG 14 March 2010)

I take your point, and also Rejean's, that we will need to update our information about Thomas Roy on our website. I had always thought that he might have had French or at least francophone connections, perhaps through New Brunswick. Of course, there may be something through the 'Auld alliance' between Scotland and France.

I shall certainly review our website after reviewing what you send me.

Regards

Jim Graham, Director General.

Réjean Couture wrote (March 2001) to Jim Graham, Corey Froese

Please find below a checklist of information that Mr. Stephen Otto has prepared for the Institution of Civil Engineers. Please take note that T. Roy was not from New Brunswick as stipulated by R.F. Legget but rather he was from Scotland and had travelled throughout USA before he came to Canada.

I thought the information collected by Mr. Otto could interest people in charge of the "Heritage committee" of CGS. Also, the section on the Thomas Roy Award in the CGS Manual should be modified accordingly to Mr. Otto's findings.

Regards,

Réjean Couture ing. Ph.D.

Division Representative-Canadian Geotechnical Society Executive

Stephen Otto wrote (March 2001) to Réjean Couture

Here is the checklist of information on Thomas Roy that I have prepared for the Institution of Civil Engineers. As I look it over, probably it should not go on your website in this form, but might form the basis instead for correcting and expanding the information about Roy on the website already. I refer, of course, to the reference to New Brunswick. (This information appears in the accompanying file "Thomas Roy – archival records - jg")