

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH SERVING WATERLOO, BELGIUM

Chausée de Charleroi 2 1420 Braine-l'Alleud, Belgium +32 2 384 7780

Sir William DeLancey: An American at Waterloo



Lady De Lancey



Sir William De Lancey

Colonel Sir William Howe DeLancey, KCB (1778 - 1815) was the heroic, capable and highly respected chief of staff and quartermaster-general of Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, at the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815. Arguably the Allies' most senior casualty, DeLancey's death one week after the battle, on the site where All Saints' Episcopal Church now stands, proved to be the greatest personal loss Lord Wellington would suffer at Waterloo.

Sir William was born in New York City, the only son of Stephen DeLancey (1748 – 1798) and Cornelia Barclay (1753 – 1817). His parents were married at Trinity (Episcopal) Church - Wall Street in Manhattan on June 16, 1773 by the Reverend Samuel Auchmuty.¹ Sir William was the grandson of Brigadier General Oliver DeLancey (1717-1785) and great grandson of

¹ The precise place and date of Sir William's baptism remains a mystery at present since many pre-Revolutionary parish records for Trinity – Wall Street were destroyed in a fire in the 1780's. Trinity's register lists the DeLancey-Barclay wedding and other ledgers attest to financial contributions to Trinity made by William's grandfather, Etienne.

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Etienne (later Stephen) DeLancey (1663-1741)², who was born in Caen, France, and among the more famous of the Huguenots exiled by revocation (1685) of the Edict of Nantes. He became one of Colonial New York City's most prominent and prosperous merchants, establishing the DeLancey family among New York City's most elite.

Family life and boyhood

During the War of Independence, most of New York's wealthier and most prominent families supported King George III, as did Stephen DeLancey, William's father. Stephen named his son "William Howe" in honor of the British general who had defeated George Washington at the Battle of Long Island.

Long-cherished myths have obscured the truth the American Revolution. The war was controversial, divisive, lengthy, bloody, costly and far from universally popular. No record of sympathy for the cause of independence or for the grievances voiced by neighbors by the DeLanceys exists, hardly remarkable nor reason to conclude their family was any less conflicted by turmoil of war as other Americans. If some viewed the revolution as treason, many Loyalists were motivated less by their allegiance as Englishmen than by practical self-interest. Manhattan's well-off were the well-educated and well-informed, engaged the lively political and philosophical discussions at parlors, pubs and meeting houses in the years before the war. But, however laudable the pursuit of democratic ideals were, in the end it was secondary to maintaining public order and the viability of an economic system which produced their fortunes. Moreover, from the secure vantage point of British-occupied Manhattan, the odds clearly favored the British Empire. The war's outcome a foregone conclusion, those like Stephen DeLancey cast their lot with what they assumed would be the "winning side."

And when the newly-independent United States and Great Britain signed the Treaty of Paris officially ending the war in 1783, the most-unthinkable event had happened and the tables were turned. All the DeLancey properties and holdings were sequestered and the family was

² After Louis XIV's revoked the Edict of Nantes on October 18, 1685, DeLancey along with some 200,000 Huguenots fled France to escape Catholic persecution. With the family jewels sewn into the lining of his clothing, Etienne headed first to Rotterdam, then England and finally to America, landing in New York City on June 7, 1686. In the summer of 1700, Etienne began construction of a house at 54 Pearl Street in Lower Manhattan on land given to his wife, Anne Van Cortlandt (b.1673) by her father as a wedding gift to the couple. In 1762 the house was sold by Etienne's heirs at auction to Samuel Fraunces, who converted it into the *Queen Charlotte Tavern*. The DeLancey house still stands today, but is now better known as *Fraunces Tavern*, the historic landmark where General George Washington delivered his farewell address to his officers. When New York City became the capital of the new nation, the former DeLancey home housed offices of the War Department, the Treasury and the predecessor of the State Department.

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dispersed.³ Some fled to Canada, some the West Indies, while others set sail for England, a land which many – including six-year-old William – had never seen.

Along with other relatives and friends, Stephen DeLancey's family moved to Beverley, England, where young William enrolled at Beverley Grammar School. In 1789, his father now dead, forcing William and his family to move to London. He attended The Harrow School from December 1789 to December 1791.

Early career

After leaving school, DeLancey decided to join the military, a logical option for those neither title nor inherited wealth. Once in the army, DeLancey came to be called “The American,” a name by which he was known his entire career. Though it may have been a fondly given “nickname” from comrades-in-arms, bemused by his “exotic” birthplace it may have also been snide condescension made by well-heeled, manor-born officers, sneering at DeLancey's absence of fortune or family connections.

On July 7, 1792, at the age of 15 he was made a cornet in the 16th Light Dragoons. Promoted to lieutenant on February 26, 1793, he soon transferred to the 80th Regiment of Foot (The Staffordshire Volunteers) seeking active army service. Numerous overseas assignments took him to the Netherlands, India, Ceylon, South Africa, Ireland and Sweden. Joining the 17th Light Dragoons in 1798, he soon made a bold move. Though a Captain, he applied for the newly formed Royal Military College (RMC) at High Wycombe. He was accepted, worked hard and became RMC's 53rd graduate in September 1802. He transferred from the line (infantry or cavalry) to become a staff officer in the newly-formed Quartermaster General's department and one of the first professional staff officers in the history of the British Army.

His subsequent distinguished service in the Peninsular Campaign (1809 – 1814) under Lord Wellington earned DeLancey promotions, a knighthood as well as Wellington's complete confidence in his abilities. DeLancey's experiences there led to the appointment in Belgium and the critical role he was to play in Napoleon Bonaparte's final defeat.

In 1814, with Napoleon exiled to Elba and hostilities over, the British Army posted DeLancey back to Scotland. There the handsome young colonel met and soon fell in love with the beautiful Lady Magdalen Hall, the 21 year old daughter of Sir James Hall of Dunglass, fourth baronet (1761–1832) a respected Scottish scientist and scholar, and Lady Helen Douglas

³ Like numerous other former Loyalists or those remaining neutral during the War, many DeLanceys stayed in the newly independent nation. Cousins of Sir William's achieved distinction in a variety of fields, including another William H. DeLancey: the Right Reverend William Heathcote DeLancey (1797-1865). This Yale graduate and Episcopal clergyman became the first Bishop of the Diocese of Western New York and the sixth Provost of the University of Pennsylvania. During an historic visit to England, DeLancey became the first American Bishop recognized as one of their own and an equal by the English House of Bishops.

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(1762–1837). Romance blossomed, and they were married in Edinburgh April 4, 1815, in what was certainly the social event of the year. Their joy was real, but sadly short-lived.

Waterloo

A mere ten days after his wedding to Magdalen, Sir William was summoned to Brussels by Lord Wellington, his former commander and “most intimate friend,” according to biographers. Wellington, on assuming command in the Southern Netherlands, could not abide the incumbent quartermaster-general, Sir Hudson Lowe, and acted promptly to have him posted elsewhere. Though privately expressing some disappointment at being only a deputy, DeLancey dutifully departed on May 9, 1815, and had arrived in Brussels by May 25.

On Thursday, June 15, DeLancey was dining with the Spanish ambassador to the Netherlands, General Miguel D’Alava, an old friend from the Peninsular Campaign, when an officer arrived with the news of Napoleon’s approach. Mounting the messenger’s own horse, DeLancey immediately rode off to inform Lord Wellington, who was then attending Lady Richmond’s Ball. After he received Wellington’s instructions, DeLancey was given the responsibility of positioning the allied forces to meet the French threat. Yet, his love for and devotion to Magdalene managed to trump Sir William’s devotion to duty; he delayed his departure briefly to reassure his bride, and arrange for her evacuation to Antwerp before he rode off at a full gallop to set in motion the chain of events that would determine the future of Europe –and his own demise.

DeLancey conducted the retreat from Quatre Bras June 17 and marked out the position the troops were to occupy at Waterloo on June 18. This was, apparently, not the ground originally chosen by the Duke. Recent scholarship conclusively reveals DeLancey alone chose the ground and thus deserves credit for the brilliant positioning vital to Napoleon’s defeat. DeLancey made this crucial decision with complete confidence because he was so secure in his relationship with Wellington. June 17, 1815, the night before the epic battle, Sir William DeLancey spent the night in the village of Waterloo at a small thatched cottage along the chaussée de Bruxelles.

On the afternoon of the battle, mounted on horseback and talking to Wellington, he was knocked from his horse when struck in the back by a spent cannon-ball, breaking eight ribs. While the battle still raged, Lieutenant Colonel DeLancey Barclay of the 1st Foot Guards, an assistant adjutant general and Sir William’s cousin, saw the event and ordered four soldiers to carry the wounded officer to the safety of a barn at Mont-St Jean. After the battle, Wellington announced DeLancey’s death in his dispatches, but later discovered his mistake, and went to barn in Mt. St. Jean where DeLancey was being tended. Wellington told DeLancey of his error and even joked with his old friend, “Why, DeLancey!...you will know what your friends said of you after you were dead,” to which Sir William bravely replied, “I hope I shall.” It

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was the last time they saw each other. Biographers report the stoic Duke was more deeply affected by DeLancey's death than any other. In his dispatch after the battle, Wellington described Sir William's death as, "a serious loss to His Majesty's Service and to me," the only mention of personal loss in his long military career.

Soon after Wellington's departure, Magdalene located her husband and had him moved to a nearby cottage. While no trace of the "hameau" remains, the intersection of the four chaussées where All Saints' Episcopal Church is located is fully consistent with Lady DeLancey's description. According to Lady DeLancey's biographer, historian David Miller, "The fact that '...the cottage was surrounded by roads,' tends to confirm that the cottage was immediately south of the junction of the Nivelles and Charleroi chaussées in the village of Mont St. Jean..."⁴ There on June 26, 1815, despite the earnest ministrations of his wife, Sir William died. He was buried on June 28 in a cemetery in St. Joose-ten-Noode, on the south side of the chaussée de Louvain. In 1889, by order of Queen Victoria, DeLancey's remains, and those of other officers who fell at Waterloo, were move to a massive monument in Evere, near the present headquarters of NATO.

In 1816, "Lady DeLancey's Narrative," an edited version of her diary, was published and stayed in print until 1906. The tragic tale of the beautiful, doomed newlyweds, set amidst the carnage of Waterloo, became one of the 19th century's most compelling and iconic love stories. Charles Dickens sobbed when he read Magdalen's story⁵, and Sir Walter Scott wrote not only an epic poem, "The Field of Waterloo," but is believed to have Lady Magdalen as his inspiration for the character, "Lucy Ashton" in his 1819 novel, *The Bride of Lammermoor*.⁶ The DeLancey story faded from public consciousness.

For nearly two centuries, many assumed the barn at Mont St. Jean (north side of N5) as the site of Sir William's death, due to its well-documented role as a British hospital during and after the battle. But doubts lingered and other details of DeLancey's last days were shrouded in mystery. In 1999, in a corner of an attic, Lady Magdalene's great, great, great grandson made a startling discovery. Inside a dust-covered trunk, he found the widowed bride's original diary, two portraits of young Magdalen and forty hand-signed letters.

⁴ p. 132, Miller, David, "Lady DeLancey at Waterloo" (Miller's footnotes #29)

⁵ p. 164 – 165 , ibid.

⁶ Donizetti's popular opera, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, is also based upon Scott's novel.

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12. A contemporary view of the hamlet of Mont St Jean. It was in one of these cottages that Magdalene nursed her badly wounded husband. From *A Week at Waterloo* by Major BR Ward.

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