

Egmondville and Van Egmond House



The story of Col. Anthony Van Egmond is the story of a man who cared too much. It begins in a large war and ends in a rebellion that no military historian could take very seriously. Between and after these two events, the Colonel and his family built the Huron Road, cared for and encourage the pioneers of the Huron Tract, grew and

harvested the first wheat in Huron County and established a village that still bears their name.

Van Egmond was born in Holland in March 1778, and was christened Anthonius Jacobus Wilhelmus Gisbert Lamoral according to his birth certificate.

Although his early life is not well documented, he was apparently conscripted into Napoleon's army and would serve there until 1813. He next appears with the Dutch contingent of the British-led forces opposing Napoleon and eventually participated in the Battle of Waterloo. It was during this time that he is said to have met and befriended Sir John Colborne who, as Governor of Upper Canada, would figure in his later activities in Canada.



In 1808, Van Egmond married Maria Susanna Elizabeth Deitz, the daughter of a magistrate, and it is believed that his first son Constant was born in the same year. By the time he left Europe, he was the father of three.

In 1819, the Colonel and his family left Holland and settled in Pennsylvania. They remained there for eight years before making their final move to Upper Canada. In terms of the day, Van Egmond arrived relatively well-to-do. The next decade would see him acquire an immense amount more and then lose it all, along with his life, for one rash act.

After his arrival, the colonel stayed in Waterloo County while looking for suitable land to purchase. Here, he met and became friends with John Galt, the originator of the Canada Company. Galt had persuaded a group of British investors to purchase vast tracts of land in Upper Canada. One of those tracts was a pie-shaped piece that stretched from Guelph to Goderich, thereafter known as the Huron Tract.



On learning he had previous experience constructing pioneer roads, Galt quickly enlisted Van Egmond in his project, hiring him to build a long section of the road that Galt proposed as a means to hasten the opening of the Tract.

Van Egmond and his son Constant were contracted to build that portion of the road running from Wilmot in Wellington County to Goderich on the edge of Lake Huron. The 1827 contract stipulated that the Colonel had three years to complete the task which also included constructing three inns at intervals along the 40-mile route.

The task of driving a road through the dense bush of southwestern Ontario was completed in approximately a year. Van Egmond, who was to be paid one third in cash and the rest in land, became the largest private landowner in Huron, possessing over 13,000 acres of property. Unfortunately, the money was never paid and the government confiscated nearly all his land after he participated in the rebellion of 1837. And so the family which opened the Huron Tract was eventually left with nothing for their immense feat of construction.



While building the Huron Road, Van Egmond did not neglect his personal affairs. On his chosen homestead to the west of what is now Harpurhey in Tuckersmith Ward of Huron East, he cleared nearly one hundred acres, planted a crop of wheat and built a combination home and tavern.

Van Egmond's interest in opening up the area did not end with the road. It is recorded that in 1831 he had five hundred barrels of flour delivered to ensure settlers had supplies and that he maintained 20 four-horse wagon teams to assist arriving emigrants. These ventures may have been partially commercial in nature. However his letters appealing on behalf of settlers fallen on hard times and his many gifts and loans to those less fortunate, can have had no other purpose than to aid the new settlers in difficult times.

Within a few months of the signing of the road contract, John Galt had been recalled to England and been dismissed by the Canada Company. His successor, Thomas Mercer Jones, was a different sort of man and Colonel Van Egmond grew to dislike him.

In August 1829, Jones, 'Tiger' Dunlop, and a Major Strickland attended a dinner party given by the Van Egmond's. The occasion was the first wheat harvested in Huron, the reaping and gathering being performed by Mrs. Van Egmond.

By 1833 however, things were not as convivial. Van Egmond was suing the Canada Company because they refused to pay the one-third cash balance due on the road contract. He was also complaining bitterly about Jones' policy of evicting settlers for small arrears in their payments to the Company.

By 1835, Van Egmond had become president of The Huron Union Society, formed to seek the righting of wrongs against the settlers. Canada Company representatives refused to hear the complaints. That same year, Van Egmond became a member of the Reform Party and then contested the elections of 1835 and 1836. Both attempts were unsuccessful. Few of those Van Egmond championed had sufficient property to qualify to vote. At that time, property generally equated with support for the Tory party and the governor. As could be expected, 'Tiger' Dunlop's brother Graham, the Tory candidate, won both contests.



The election results appear to have convinced Van Egmond that reform was impossible and that only civil disobedience remained. On December 7, 1837, Van Egmond arrived at Montgomery's Tavern, now part of Islington in the west part of Toronto, to take command of the rag-tag rebel forces that had been assembled by then fire-brand William Lyon Mackenzie, the most militant of Upper Canada's reform advocates. By the early afternoon, the rebels were dispersed and the leaders on the run.



Although Mackenzie escaped, Van Egmond was captured almost immediately and incarcerated in Toronto's Don Jail. There he became seriously ill, probably with pneumonia. He died in a Toronto hospital on January 5, 1838. The government confiscated all his property except the farm on which his wife still lived. None was ever returned despite the official pardon issued posthumously by the

British government many years later. Such a tragedy might have crushed some families but the Van Egmonds, under the leadership of the Colonel's redoubtable wife Susanna recovered and prospered. In this, they were aided by the fact that Madam Van Egmond and the five sons, Constant, Edouard, Leopold, William and August held property in their own right.

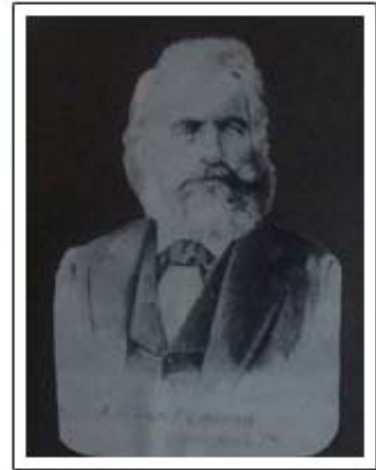
The three daughters all married. Susan and Louise married local farmers Thomas Govenlock and Richard Thwaites. Mary was wed to Andrew Helmer who operated one of the hotels on the Huron Road.



The boys, under the reportedly forceful direction of their mother, became leaders in the industrial revolution sweeping the area as well as leaders in the community. After her husband's death Susanna, or Madam as she came to be known, moved to the small brick residence owned by Constant. A few years after his marriage to Anne Johnston, he built another home now known as the Van Egmond House across the road. Here the three lived until their deaths. The house is now operated as a heritage museum and is open to the public in the summer months.

Constant established the village of Egmondville and became a Justice of the Peace. He established a grist mill and a flour mill on the shores of the Bayfield River which flowed beside his home. He was also to establish a distillery in the area.

Edouard, the second oldest of the boys, moved away from Egmondville after his marriage to Elizabeth Runciman of McKillop Township in 1839. He farmed and operated a sawmill on property near Clinton. Leopold was a gunsmith and two examples of his work can be seen above the fireplace in the Van Egmond house. He also owned a sawmill. As late as 1880, Leopold owned a large block of land in Egmondville. William owned and operated the American Hotel in Seaforth for many years.



The youngest son August started a woolen and carding mill in 1854. The business was so successful that he erected a steam-powered three-storey mill in 1866 at the north end of the village. This was destroyed by fire in 1883 but immediately reconstructed. He left the business to his sons when he retired in 1886.

The family's success attracted other businesses and for many years, Egmondville Pottery operated across the river from Constant's home. Remnants of the operation have been uncovered and identified archeologically. The village thrived with an active commercial life and manufacturers of everything from farm implements to soap and candles thrived. The location of the railway station in Seaforth north of Egmondville in 1858 began a slow decline in the commercial importance of Egmondville. Although the Van Egmonds' mills operated as

significant industrial establishments for many years, the heyday of the village as a commercial center wound down.

Madam Van Egmond lived on until 1874 and was buried beside her husband in the Egmondville Cemetery located immediately behind Constant's home. During the last 14 years of her life she had retired to her bed although no physical or mental impairment was ever suggested. From this location she continued to direct and advise her sons.



The centre of the settlers' home was the kitchen and Madam could, and apparently did, look out through the doorway of her ground-floor bedroom into the kitchen to ensure that all was to her satisfaction.

Despite the odd circumstances, there is no record of discord between Madam and her daughter-in-law, Anne Johnstone, or for that matter in any of her dealings with her sons - a rather remarkable tribute to a remarkable woman. Although reportedly strict with her immediate family, there are delightful tales of her grand-children hiding under her bed when they had committed some transgression, secure in the knowledge that Madam would become grandma and take their side.

It doesn't really matter whether the stories are true. The very fact that they exist provides an insight into why so forceful a person could have been as loved and respected, by both her family and Egmondville residents, as reports indicate she was. The Van Egmonds were, and continue to be, a truly remarkable family with a fascinating history intimately intertwined with the development and formation of the area and of Huron County.