

## DEATH AT BATOCHÉ

Alexander Walker Kippen (1857-1885)

The first Perth native to die in military action, Lieutenant Alexander Walker Kippen of the Dominion Land Surveyors' Intelligence Corps, was killed May 12, 1885 attacking the Métis rifle pits at the Battle of Batoché, Northwest Territories.

Kippen was born at Perth on August 1, 1857 the descendent of Scots immigrants Alexander Kippen Sr. and his son Duncan Kippen. Alexander Kippen Sr. (1803-1893) was born at Kenmore, Perthshire, Scotland and was married on February 29, 1829 at Kenmore, to Catherine Walker, (b.1808). Among their nine children was Duncan Kippen who arrived with his parents at Perth, aged one year, in 1832.

Alexander Kippen Sr. was a builder by trade and among his earliest jobs at Perth was completion of McMartin House<sup>1</sup>, now a listed National Historic Site. Perth Town Hall, constructed 1862-1863, was built by the contracting firm of Alexander Kippen and Son, as was the Bank of Montreal and several large Perth residences such as the St. Paul's United Church Manse. In 1850 Alexander Sr. founded the Perth Planeing Mill to manufacture widow sashes and doors and to dress custom lumber. Another of his grandsons, also named Alexander, would later run the planing mill, for a time in partnership with William Allen.

When Alexander Kippen died on December 15, 1893 at Perth, aged 90 years and nine months, his obituary reported he was, at the time, the oldest man in Perth. He was a "*member of the old Free Church since the disruption and before that of the Church of Scotland*" and was an elder of Knox Presbyterian Church at the time of his death. Catherine Walker-Kippen had predeceased her husband "*at her residence on Wilson Street*" on August 12, 1891.

Their son Duncan Kippen (1831-1926) was twice married, first to Helen/Eleanor Smith, daughter of Ralph Smith, and second (in 1904) to Elizabeth McIntyre (1853-1933) of Balderson.

Like his father, Duncan Kippen was a successful builder and contractor but also served as Postmaster at Perth for 16 years. In the federal election of 1887 he ran against Conservative Party candidate John Graham Haggart in the riding of Lanark South but was defeated by a margin of 1,762 to 880 votes. He had more political success in 1893 when he was elected Mayor of Perth, serving a single term, 1893-1894. In 1897 he was named to the Board of the Perth Public Library and in 1904 played a leading role in organizing the Perth Old Boys Reunion. Duncan Kippen was the father of six children, two sons and four daughters. He died at the age of 95 on March 3, 1926 at Perth.

Alexander Walker Kippen, eldest son of Duncan and Eleanor Kippen, was born at Perth on August 1, 1857. He graduated from Perth High School and then qualified as

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<sup>1</sup> Built for lawyer Daniel McMartin (1798-1869)

a Provincial Land Surveyor after studies under J.M.O. Cromwell of Perth. Shortly after passing his land survey examinations he was employed by government engineer George A. Simpson of the Dominion Land Survey in the Northwest Territories. The Government of Canada, having purchased what are now the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta from the Hudson Bay Company, was preparing to open the west to settlement. The associated land survey, on which Alexander Kippen was employed, would be the spark igniting Louis Riel's Métis rebellion of 1885.

After a number of years with the Dominion Land Survey Alexander Kippen worked for a time with the Hudson Bay Company and then, in 1884, returned to Ontario and enrolled for higher studies at the University of Toronto's School of Practical Science.

When the 1885 Northwest Rebellion broke out Militia Engineers were not called to arms but one group came forward as volunteers. At a meeting at the Russell House Hotel in Ottawa a group of Dominion Land Surveyors resolved to propose formation of a 'Surveyors Corps' to Sir Adolphe Caron, Minister of Militia. Caron consulted Militia Commander Major General Sir Frederick Middleton who, by telegram from the North West Territories, approved formation of the 'The Dominion Land Surveyors Intelligence Corps' on April 1, 1885. Having considerable on-the-ground experience of the area along the Saskatchewan River from Prince Albert to Edmonton, including the region encompassing Battleford, Fort Pitt and Duck Lake, Alexander Kippen broke off his university studies and volunteered for service with the Intelligence Corp.

This unit was the first in the British Empire to be designated an 'Intelligence Corps'. Mounted and armed with Winchester repeating rifles and colt revolvers, it was tasked with long range reconnaissance and light cavalry service.



*Camp of the Surveyors Intelligence Corps, Batoche 1885*<sup>2</sup>

Just 10 days after its authorization the Corps reached Winnipeg on April 11<sup>th</sup> having travelled by rail via Chicago and St. Paul. Having elected Captain J. S. Dennis to command, they were soon known as 'Dennis' Scouts'; although, among other troops

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<sup>2</sup> Saskatchewan Archives

deployed in the Northwest, the Survey Corps was described as “49 officers and one scout” because of its total enlistment of 53 men, 22 held commissions<sup>3</sup>.

At Winnipeg the new unit recruited additional surveyors to their ranks, and collected saddles and other equipment. Moving on to Qu’Appelle they drew horses from the Dominion Survey stables and, after practicing some basic drill, were ordered deployed on April 20th on picket duty and as dispatch riders across 130 miles between Swift Current Creek and Lone Lake. Ordered to action on May 3<sup>rd</sup> they assembled and rode 150 miles to join General Middleton’s column four days later. They arrived at Batoche on 10 May, the second day of that four-day action (May 9-12, 1885).

In March, on hearing rumors that 500 police were coming to arrest Louis Riel, the Metis had decided to act. They cut telegraph lines and raided local stores for arms, ammunition and other supplies. In the process they took about 10 storekeepers, clerks and government officials prisoner and locked them in St. Anthony’s Catholic Church at Batoche Crossing. By May the Metis had dug in, occupying a defensive ring of scattered rifle pits around the approaches to Batoche. Fighting at Batoche began with the arrival of Middleton’s army on May 9<sup>th</sup>.

About noon on May 12<sup>th</sup> Middleton ordered a partial advance but his troops, frustrated by their General’s ‘cautious’ leadership over the preceding weeks, exploited the order to stage a charge on the rifle pits; a charge which quickly developed into a full scale assault and the fall of Batoche.

As the initial charge set off, Lieutenant Alexander Kippen was killed by a Metis sniper. In a dispatch Middleton wrote; “*I regret to say that one of the Surveyors’ Scouts was killed, having been shot through the head while lying with the rest of his troop in a bluff on our left*”. Other accounts say he was killed in the skirmish line as the assault moved forward against the rifle pits. Immediately as he fell, Kippen was attended by a Dr. Rolston, assisted by his dresser a Mr. Kinlock, but he died almost instantly. He was 28 years of age and had been an active soldier for less than six weeks.

Kippen was the first of only eight men killed in the attack on Batoche and his loss deeply affected his fellow surveyors. The Corps’ reporter wrote;

*We are a hard and careless lot as a rule, we surveyors, rough associates, hard work, and lack of women’s society causes men to grow indifferent to the feelings of others, but I noticed that the troop was quiet and less joking carried on. The first gap had been made in our ranks and we could faintly imagine how Kippen would be missed in the little home circle in Eastern Canada ... His quaint sayings and cheerful laugh are gone from No. 1 tent. We cannot realize the sorrow of his parents when the first warning of their loss reaches them in a brief telegram, ‘A. W. Kippen, Surveyors’ Corps, killed’.*<sup>4</sup>

On May 19, 1885 the Regina Leader reported;

*Batoche, May 12 – Batoche taken at 4 p.m. today. The prisoners are released and the rebels are in full flight. This afternoon the troops made a rapid advance*

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<sup>3</sup> Many were junior officers from various Militia regiments not called up for action in the Northwest.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The Ontario Land Surveyor’ (Winter 1980); ‘Surveyors of the Past’ by Charles Fairhall, quoting excerpts from ‘Men & Meridians, Vol.2’ by Don Thomson.

*down into Batoche capturing rifle pits and ravine and driving the rebels before them. The fighting was desperate, many brave fellows biting the dust. With tremendous fire and élan our brave fellows at the word 'charge' dashed down on Batoche, capturing the houses ....*<sup>5</sup>

Among the casualties listed in the Regina Leader report was “Wm. Kippen, of Perth, Ontario, shot through the head, killed instantly, the ball entering his mouth”<sup>6</sup>. In his official dispatch to the Dominion Parliament, read into Hansard on May 13, 1885, General Middleton reported; “Our loss, I am afraid, is heavy, but not so heavy as might be expected. As yet I find it is five killed and 10 wounded. Killed ... A. W. Kippen, Surveyors Scouts ....”.

With Batoche fallen and Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont on the run, fellow Survey Scout Lewis Redmond Ord recalled that; “In the afternoon we paid our last respects to Lt. Kippen, whose body, placed in a rough coffin, we followed down to the steamboat that had arrived the evening before. It was to be sent to his father’s home in Perth for burial”. Announcing Kippen’s death in its May 15, 1885 edition the Perth Courier reported;

*Amid the excitement of war news from Batoche on Wednesday morning one item of intelligence about 11:00 came like a knife thrust to the breast of our citizens with an effect as stunning as it was painful and distressing. This was the news that A. W. Kippen of Perth had been killed in the Batoche fight the day previous. The news caused us to realize the dreadful realities of the miserable war in the Northwest had at length come to our own doors and that one of our brightest and cleverest young men in town was the victim. It is hard to realize that the same hearty and jovial young man, brim full of life and energy, who had left here only a few weeks before, careless as he was hopeful of the consequences, was that day lying cold and still on the battlefield ... Arrangements have been made to preserve the body and bring it to Perth for burial.*

The following week<sup>7</sup> the Courier carried a notice reading, “The mayor suggests that during the time the remains of Mr. A. W. Kippen are being taken to the grave that the merchants close their doors out of respect to the deceased”. Lieutenant Alexander Walker Kippen of the Dominion Land Surveyors Intelligence Corps was buried in Elmwood Cemetery at Perth where a large memorial was placed in his honor. In its edition of June 10, 1887 the Perth Courier reported;

*The monument to A.W. Kippen was finally put up in its place last week and is the most conspicuous object in the Elmwood Cemetery. It consists of a plain massive pillar with sloping sides on a base which in turn is placed on a terraced platform. Both pillars and base are of Canadian grey granite. Standing upon the monument proper is a sculptured figure of a Canadian volunteer in white marble, a little under life size, keenly gazing toward a possible enemy. The rifle is upright at his side and a field glass is grasped in his left hand. On the granite podium appears the following inscription under the engraved coat of arms of Canada –*

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Riel was among the rebels in “full flight” and did not surrender until three days later. Riel was tried for treason and hung on November 16, 1885.

<sup>6</sup> The Leader misidentifies Lieutenant Kippen as William, perhaps a misreading of the Corps muster roll where he is listed as A.W. Kippen.

<sup>7</sup> Perth Courier edition of 22 May 22, 1885



*Lieut. Alexander W. Kippen  
Intelligence Corp  
Born at Perth Aug. 1, 1857  
Killed in action at Batoche, N.W.T. May 12, 1885  
Erected in his memory by his fellow citizens,  
Masonic brethren and comrades in arms*

Funding for the Kippen monument was raised by the local Masonic Lodge and public subscription with Perth bookseller John Semple Hart played a significant role in securing the necessary funds. Among the donors were at least three of Alexander Kippen's comrades in arms; Lieutenant J. J. Burrows, John McLatchie/McLatcher and Charles E. Wolff, of the Surveyors' Corps.

In 2009 the Kippen memorial was refurbished by Dr. Alan J. Drummond of Perth, a former Army Doctor, but of no relation to Lieutenant Kippen. *"I read a history of Perth which included a brief piece on the Kippen memorial by the late Larry Turner. I went to see it and was saddened by its state of disrepair and thought I'd like to fix it"*, Drummond told the Perth Courier<sup>8</sup>. *"It [now] looks beautiful and will be a testament to his memory for many years to come"*.<sup>9</sup>

*- Ron W. Shaw (2015)*

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<sup>8</sup> Perth Courier, August 27, 2009

<sup>9</sup> The Perth Courier article of August 27, 2009 on the refurbishment project incorrectly reports that Alexander Kippen was buried in Saskatchewan, but the 1885 reports in the same newspaper indicate that he is indeed buried in Elmwood Cemetery.