

John Johnston's Royal Artillery Service 1807 – 1818

On 11th of November 1807 John Johnston enlisted in the Royal Artillery at Montrose. He had turned 17 only a few weeks before but gave his age as 18. It is impossible to tell whether he had gone into Montrose planning to become a soldier or whether the regiment just happened to be recruiting there that day and he took the Kings shilling on a sudden decision. Did he have time to go home and tell his family? We will never know.

He was probably sent immediately to regimental headquarters at Woolwich where he joined the newly formed 10th Battalion. The Company in which he served was first commanded by Captain Wall, then Captain Walsh and remained at Woolwich for almost 2 years.

By 14th November 1810 the Company was led by Captain Thornhill and it was under his command that on that date John Johnston with the rest of his Company embarked on Ordnance Transport Number 5, the "Britannia" bound for the Cape of Good Hope. The ship made calls at Deal and Dover and arrived at the Cape in March 1811. Their new home was the Castle of Good Hope, Cape Town. We can't begin to imagine how different this was from John's native land. Table Mountain towers above the castle and killer whales can sometimes be seen from the battlements. The Castle is a beautiful building. Some pictures appear on this family history site and it is also well worth visiting a search engine to read the fascinating history of the place. Today, having been restored, it looks very much as John would first have seen it.

Under Dutch rule the Castle had been a seat of local government and was used to support the work of the trading industry represented principally by the Dutch East India Company. Now that the British were back in charge the Castle became a military garrison. In fact they never had to defend the Castle against attack. However there was some local unrest and in October 1811 detachments of Captain Thornhill's Company were sent by sea to Algoa Bay for active service in the Kaffir War. (Oct 1811 to Feb 1812). The pay lists for that time show that John Johnston remained at the Castle.

By 1815 the Company was commanded by Captain Gilmour and a detachment was sent to St Helena to help guard Napoleon who was held captive there after his defeat at Waterloo. John Johnston again remained at the Cape. It is possible that he was unwell as records indicate several spells in hospital but there is no information on the nature of his illness.

Another fascinating piece of information is missing. When did John meet Philadelphia Hodges? We shall probably never know. Was she a member of a military family or were her family immigrants to the Cape? Her birthplace near St Katherine's by the Tower was part of a vast overpopulated area of slum dwellings. In modern times her family would have been moved out and given a new home or compensation but she was born in harsh times. Within only a few years of her birth thousands of people at St

Katherine's were evicted from their homes to make way for a big new dock and warehouses. They received no new accommodation or compensation. No doubt the Hodges were among the homeless.

We would never have known where John and Philadelphia were married had it not been for a very amazing occurrence. In 1979 a professional genealogist had gone to Cape Town to do some "on the spot" research for a client. He was working his way through the Castle baptism records when a loose piece of paper fell out of the back of the book and fluttered across the floor. Picking it up he examined it and realized it was a marriage document. Setting it aside to ensure it was put into its rightful place he was struck by the very unusual name of the bride, Philadelphia Hodges. Looking up his index file he discovered that another genealogist Noel Curren-Briggs was seeking this marriage document for a client. The researcher then went on to find Mary Ann's baptism in the Baptismal Records for the Castle. Noel Curren-Briggs phoned me in great excitement as all other searches for John and Philadelphia's marriage had failed. He later wrote, "My agent emphasizes that it (the marriage document) must have been missed by earlier researchers, as it definitely does not appear in any of the references or indexes of marriages in the early 19th century. So we have been extremely lucky. I am sure that you will agree." How amazing that the piece of paper should flutter across the floor when it did.

The marriage document tells us that John and Philadelphia were married on 23rd April 1816 by George Hough, Colonel and Acting Military Chaplain. Philadelphia is described as "of London". The witnesses were Mark and Mary Willetts. John has signed his name and Philadelphia made an X. Their first child Mary Ann was born at the Cape on 6th December 1816 and baptized on 4th February 1817. A few months later on August 9th, Captain Gilmour's Company of the 10th Battalion mustered at the Cape of Good Hope to board the Transport Ship "Maria" bound for home. Disembarkation took place at Woolwich on 3rd November 1817. Philadelphia in particular must have been glad to reach terra firma as she was expecting her second baby James William Johnston.

Shortly after arrival in Woolwich the 10th Company was disbanded and Gunner John Johnston was transferred to the 6th Battalion on 1st January 1818. He served three months in a detachment commanded by Adjutant W H Bent until 31st March.

During that time James William Johnston had been born on 26th January and baptized on 13th February at St Mary Magdalene Church in Woolwich. His parents' address is given as Red Lion Street, Woolwich. The church still stands and is a fine example of a place of worship built in the early 18th century. It was part of a group of churches built because of an Act of Parliament of 1711 which decreed that new churches must be designed and constructed to replace those lost in the Great Fire of London. Externally it is a glorious church standing in parkland. The interior of the church has greatly altered but it is still possible to imagine how things were in 1818.

But the days in Woolwich were drawing to a close. On April 1st 1818 John Johnston joined Captain Cockburn's Company of the 6th Battalion Royal Artillery for the

remaining six months of his service until he was put on pension on 31st October 1818. The reason for his army service ending is that his health was not good. He was showing early signs of suffering from consumption (TB). He was given a pension of one shilling a day for the rest of his life.

The family returned to St Cyrus. Had John written to his family while in the army? Did they know about his wife, the Londoner whose accent must have sounded very strange to them? At least Philadelphia had grown accustomed to John's Kincardineshire lilt so was perhaps not too bewildered by her new family and neighbours. What tales they must have had to tell of their time in the Cape. And so they settled down to raise a large family in St Cyrus at Bowstrips.

What else can we learn from John's time in the Royal Artillery? The best thing of all is that the British Army kept Description Books in which personal details were written in case of desertion. And so the 6th Battalion Description book contains this information which really helps breath life into him.

John Johnston. Age on enlistment 18. Height 5 foot 8 inches, enlisted 11.11.1807 at Montrose. Born Mearns, Ecclesgreig. (the old names for Kincardineshire, St Cyrus.) Labourer. Reads and writes. Fair complexion, dark hair, grey eyes. Good character.

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Documents used include:

**WO 97/1239 Summary of Discharge Certificates
Muster Rolls of 10th and 6th Battalions
WO 10/800, 816,856, 918,1228,1273, 1281
WO 120/67**