

Biographical Details of Norman W. DeWitt

Post by “Joshua” of July 23, 2023 at 2:47 PM

Introduction

I have had some success in tracing the early life of prof. Norman Wentworth Dewitt, born September 18, 1876 in the small hamlet of Tweedside, Ontario, on the Niagara Peninsula. An early ancestor was [Nicholas de Witt](#), born 1594 in East Frisia. Nicholas was a Doctor, and in that capacity is alleged to have accompanied Henry Hudson in his exploration of the Hudson River as Ship's Doctor on the *Half-Moon*.

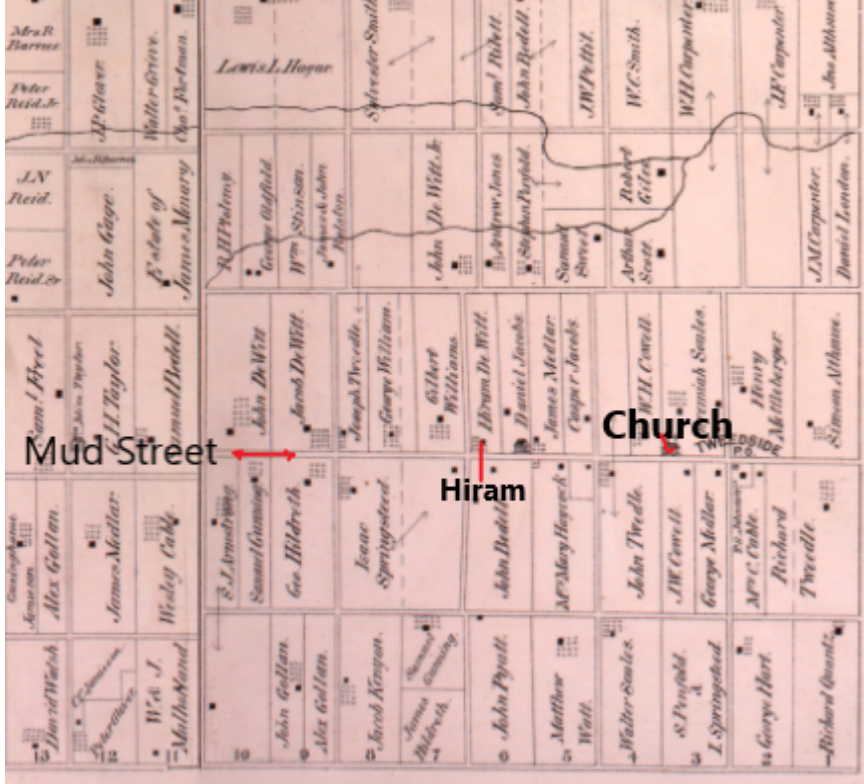
Nicholas de Witt had a son Tjerck Claeszen de Witt, who emigrated without his father to the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, on Manhattan, in what is now New York. There he died in 1700. I am on the point of confirming that his descendants were Loyalists during the American Revolution, and during or after the War they removed themselves to Upper Canada (so named because it lies around the upper reaches of the Saint Lawrence River which empties out of Lake Ontario and runs northeast to the sea).

According to the magisterial genealogy compiled by Vona Smith, née DeWitt, called *Tierck Clafsen DeWitt and Descendants of His Son Luycas DeWitt*, published 2004, Norman DeWitt's father Hiram was born into the 11th generation of that line in 1830 at Saltfleet, a Township in Hamilton, Ontario.

Hiram DeWitt, his father John, and his brothers John Jr. and Joseph owned contiguous or at least approximate farms in the area of Tweedside, as shown on this undated Township and Concession Map:

<https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas/Images/Maps/TownshipMaps/wen-m-saltfleet.jpg>

Tweedside appears in the southeast corner, and Hiram's farm--Norman DeWitt's boyhood home--was two blocks west of the Post Office and a block and a half west of the Methodist church, both of which fronted on Mud Street.



The Methodist Church in Tweedside was a simple red brick affair, first built in 1874 two years before Norman DeWitt was born, and then rebuilt in 1897. This rebuilt church was still standing in the first decade of the 21st century. I have a [here](#) a recommendation from 2002 either to lease the church, to renovate it, or to demolish the dilapidated structure. In any case the church was demolished, though I cannot determine precisely when this happened; the cemetery is still in use.



Today only the foundation remains;



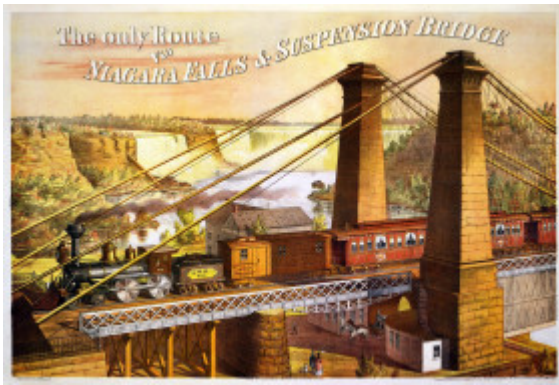
Our young scholar will, no doubt, have scaled those steps in his youth.

The land all around is farm country, and nothing else of old Tweedside remains. 4 miles (6km) to the north was the line of the [Great Western Railway](#) bisecting the coastal town of Winona along the south shore of Lake Ontario. The journey from Tweedside to Winona would require crossing the [Niagara Escarpment](#), a massive geological landform running in a great arc from New York state to Wisconsin. The road shown on the Saltfleet township map above contains two switchbacks.

40 miles (~60 km) to the east on the Great Western lay Niagara Falls, and the border crossing to the United States by way of the [Niagara Falls Suspension Bridge](#)--"the first working suspension railway bridge in history". This bridge was, to the credit of John Augustus Roebling, an incredible achievement.

Quote

American engineers regard the Suspension Bridge as a major achievement of efficiency. In a fledgling country where resources—material and financial—were limited, they had to make do with whatever was available. This goal was espoused by the American Society of Civil Engineers, which opined, "That is the best engineering, not which makes the most splendid, or even the most perfect work, but that which makes a work that answers the purpose well, at the least cost." Roebling had built a bridge that rivaled grander bridges of leading European nations at a much lower cost.



An advertisement for the bridge and the falls, dating to 1876, the year DeWitt was born. It's difficult to imagine now looking at a satellite view of Tweedside 40 miles west, but this was an energetic and industrious age for the two countries. Going west from the small town of Winona, the Great Western Railway followed the lake to the port city of Hamilton and the main railyard. From Hamilton, the line forked--west, deeper into the country before crossing the border again at Detroit--or northeast, and on to the great city of Toronto.

Of Norman DeWitt's early [education](#) I can give no account. His mother Margaret emigrated from Ireland and was orphaned at the age of 5. She was raised in the family of Tweedsider Thomas MulHolland, and was married to Hiram DeWitt in 1868. However it happened, it strikes me as likely that in the autumn of 1894, at the age of 17, Norman Wentworth Dewitt and his luggage must have boarded a passenger steam train on the Great Western Railway, bound for Victoria College at the University of Toronto.

More to come!