

Duluth Superior area has a 200 year old connection to Afghanistan

Researched and written by Mike Leahan
June, 2002

American troops in Afghanistan are fighting over the same territory and with the descendants of warriors who fought with another American almost 200 years ago; Alexander Gardner of Duluth Superior.

The Duluth Superior area was barely a wilderness outpost in North America around 1785 when Alexander Haughton Campbell Gardner was born on the shores of Lake Superior "nearest to the source of the Mississippi". He spent most of his adult life among the same rubble strewn caves and hills that we see on television today doing same the thing that a much later generation is now engaged in ...fighting with and against the tribes and armies of Afghanistan. The places are all the same; Lahore..Kabul..Peshawar and Kandahar . The people he knew framed the early British Empire in India. Maharajah Gulab Singh who along with Gardner set up the mighty Sikh army for destruction and saved India for the British. Generals Avitabile and Ventura. Scoundrels like the American surgeon and counterfeiter Dr. Harlan. The treacherous Dogra brothers and Sir Alexander Burnes who borrowed Gardner's memoirs only to have them destroyed when Kabul was overrun and Burnes murdered.

Alexander Gardner's father was a Scottish surgeon who participated in the War for Independence and was said to have known both Lafayette and Washington. His mother was of upper class Spanish descent. They had three sons and three daughters. After a time at least some of the family moved to Mexico near the Colorado river. It is not known if Alexander ever revisited the place of his birth.

Gardner was a wanderer at heart. No place was too remote or wild and only luck or providence saved his life as he traversed Asia on foot and horseback. During this journey of incredible hardship Gardner was given a young slave named Therbah "a faithful servant and good soldier". Gardner was captured and almost sold as a slave himself and nearly starved to death, surviving on a stolen ball of salt "perfectly round and polished from the many lickings it had received from the tongues of former owners" and a large rotted hyena "half raw". Gardner was educated for his time and witnessed tribesmen sink fleecy sheepskins into the river and then remove them to dry full of trapped gold. Tribes fought to death to possess the fleeces. Perhaps, he thought, the golden fleeces of myth.

Gardner first arrived in Kandahar in 1830 and then spent 2-1/2 years fighting as a soldier around "the very home of battle, murder and sudden death" Kabul, Afghanistan. In the process of attacking a caravan consisting of a huge treasure in gold and a traveling harem Gardner saw "the beautiful face of a young girl" and traded his share of the gold begging for the young princess whose relative gave Gardner the girl-along with a fort near Kabul which he named the "Castillo". Gardner was overjoyed when they became parents of "a noble boy" but his happiness didn't last long. While he was away fighting in the caves and hills around Kabul (he lost 51 out of 90 men and was shot in the knee) his Castillo

was overrun. His wife killed herself with a knife and Gardner's son was put to the sword. The defenders had all been killed. Gardner's chief, fearing capture, "saved by death from his own hands all of his females from dishonor" he personally killed all of his wives and female slaves.

A woman in Afghanistan dared not dishonor herself either. Gardner attended a wedding where the potential bride ran off with her mother. The enraged father, a chief, chased down and killed his daughter, his wife and eleven male bodyguards. All was made right when later in the day a lovely girl of fifteen was made the new wife with much celebration and drinking. Eventually Gardner moved to Kashmir. On the way he was locked in a dungeon for nine months. Was rescued by a party of 40 armed friends and made his way back to Kabul in hopes of joining the army. He was unsuccessful and headed for Lahore with mixed feelings as "there were too many Afghans whose fathers and brothers had met him in battle to make a residence in a country where blood feuds were a sacred duty". After moving to Lahore he was appointed a Colonel of artillery mainly because he could follow the English directions supplied with the Maharaja's two new cannon. Gardner once helped General Ventura build a paddle boat capable of moving "no more than 10 yards or so upstream" which they outfitted as a party barge to the delight of the same Maharaja.

In 1841 he saved Lahore for Maharaja Gulab Singh by personally reloading and firing his ten cannon as 300 "immortals" crushed through the gate. After the battle Gardner and Gulab Singh realized that they had been guarding the state treasure including the famous and very unlucky Koh-I-nur diamond which now resides with the crown jewels in London. Colonel Gardner never fought the British and was friends with many of those on the Indian frontier who were naturally intrigued by an American who passed for an Afghani with Anglo-Saxon sympathies. One who wore a copy of the Koran stuffed with his memoirs on a string around his neck.

In his late years Gardner had a daughter named Helena last known as Mrs. Botha who also had a daughter and a son named Alexander after his grandfather. Gardner spent his last years writing letters concerning the Russian threat to India specifically warning how Russia could use Afghanistan as the key to controlling India which the Russians attempted much to their regret in the 1980's. Gardner was described as having "a peculiar and striking appearance clothed from head to foot in tartan". He was said "to be wealthy, and the owner of many villages".

Gardner died peacefully in his bed at age 92 in January 1877 at Jammu, Kashmir and is buried in a nearby English military cemetery. He had suffered at least 14 wounds during his long life.

Naturally, interesting questions arise. Does anyone know the whereabouts of Gardner's birthplace on Lake Superior? Does anyone living know if he or his descendants ever revisited the Duluth Superior area or is there a record of such a visit?

What a strange homecoming it would be for a descendant of Colonel Gardner (perhaps a present day Afghan frontiersman) to visit his ancestors birthplace on what was once the Wisconsin/ Minnesota frontier. In 200 years the western Lake Superior area would have become unrecognizable to Gardner , but he would still be right at home in Afghanistan on horseback with a team of CIA men searching the caves he knew so well.

This article is a summary of Gardner's life taken from

Soldier and Traveler

Memoirs of Alexander Gardner

Edited by Major Hugh Pearse

William Blackwood and Sons London

MDCCCXCVIII

There are two copies in North America that I know of...One at the University of Chicago and the one I have from UW Madison soon to be returned to the rare book collection as time is not treating it well and it was in the stacks.