

**A Scottish
Borders
family from
1439**



Porteous Research Project

**Researching the history and migration of the
Porteous/Porteus family worldwide**

CAPTAIN JOHN PORTEOUS

The Porteous Research Project

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Captain John Porteous, British soldier, Captain of the City Guard of Edinburgh (ca. 1695-1736).

Early life

John Porteous was born at The Glen, Quair water, near Traquair, Peeblesshire, the son of Stephen Porteous, a tailor of the Canongate, Edinburgh. Little is known of his early life, except that he soon found he was not suited to his father's calling. Having served in the Scots Dutch regiment in Flanders, in 1716 he became drill master to the Edinburgh force in anticipation of a Jacobite rising, and two years later was appointed as ensign to the City Guard, and was promoted in 1726 to the rank of Captain. Porteous seems to have been an overbearing official, despised by the mob and the underclasses of Edinburgh society.

The Riot

On 14 April 1736 three convicted smugglers, Andrew Wilson, William Hall and George Robertson, were arrested, tried and condemned to death. Hall's sentence was commuted to transportation for life, while Wilson and Robertson awaited their fate. A few days before the execution George Robertson managed to escape by widening the space between the window-bars of his cell and, with the help of sympathetic supporters eventually made his way to Holland.

The remaining convict, Andrew Wilson, was taken to be publicly hanged in the Grassmarket, Edinburgh on 14 April 1736. The body of Wilson was cut down against the wishes of the mob, and the ensuing riot was such that the hangman had to be placed in protective custody. As the situation worsened, for fear of an attempt to rescue the victims, the Lord Provost of Edinburgh instructed Captain Porteous to call out the entire guard and to furnish them with powder and shot.

After the execution the mob became violent and began to stone the City Guard. Accounts of



After a short while he was dragged down and stripped of his nightgown and shirt, which was then wrapped around his head before he was hauled up again. However, the mob had not tied his hands and, as he struggled free, they broke his arm and shoulder, while another attempted to set light to his naked foot. He was taken down a further time and cruelly beaten before being hung up again, and died a short while later, just before midnight on 7 September 1736. He was buried in Greyfriars kirkyard, Edinburgh, the following day.

Aftermath

The events in Edinburgh heightened the sense of alarm in London, where the government was concerned about the threat to its management of Scotland. It was thought by Walpole, Queen Caroline and the Duke of Newcastle that Porteous had been unnecessarily sacrificed and there were even rumours that the conspiracy had involved the local city magistrates.

Various Opposition proposals to disband the city guard and debar the Lord Provost were put forward, and these were the subject of much debate - the Scottish MPs and the government strongly opposed these proposals for constitutional reasons and nothing was ever done.

It was variously thought that Porteous' murder was carried out by friends of those who had been shot and killed, revenge by the smugglers, a Jacobite plot, or even a conspiracy by Presbyterian extremists. However, the organisation of events seems to imply a degree of planning, thought to be the work of James Maxwell, an Edinburgh journeyman carpenter, together with a small group of city tradesmen and journeymen.

events are confused, but what is certain is that Captain Porteous instructed his men to fire above the heads of the crowd but, in so doing, they shot and wounded people in the windows of the high tenement buildings opposite. The crowd became increasingly violent and, as panic set in, Captain Porteous ordered the guard to shoot into the mob, which led to the deaths of six people in all.

The Trial and Appeal

Porteous was arrested the same afternoon and charged with murder. He was tried at the High Court of Justiciary on 5 July 1736, where a majority of witnesses testified that Porteous had personally fired into the crowd on 14 April, although sixteen others said they had not seen him do so.

Feelings were running high in Edinburgh and the jury unanimously found Porteous guilty of murder. He was sentenced to death, the execution was set to take place in the Grassmarket on 8 September 1736. Porteous was imprisoned in the Tolbooth, near St Giles church.

Events in Scotland alarmed the government in London, and Sir Robert Walpole attempted to influence events by asking his representative in Edinburgh to become involved. But he had miscalculated, underestimating the depth of feeling in Scotland. A formal appeal was petitioned and the execution was deferred.

Death

However, public resentment at a possible reprieve was such that a plot to murder Captain Porteous was hatched, and when the authorities heard of this it was decided to increase the guard at the Tolbooth prison. However, on the evening before this was due to happen, a large crowd of over four thousand gathered at Portsburgh, west of the city.

However, despite a reward of £200 being made available by the government for information, those responsible for the murder of Porteous were never brought to justice.

The events surrounding the Porteous Riots form part of the early chapters of the novel 'The Heart of Mid-Lothian' by Sir Walter Scott (1818), where they are recorded in graphic detail.

Porteous and golf

John Porteous had been an early exponent of the game of golf. It is recorded that in 1724 "A solemn match of golf" between the Hon. Alexander Elphinstone and John Porteous became the first match to be reported in a newspaper. Both players were said to have exhibited great skill, and such was the interest in the match that it was attended by James, Duke of Hamilton and George, Earl of Morton, as well as a large crowd of spectators. The wager was twenty guineas and Elphinstone was the winner of the match.

Trivia

The final resting place of John Porteous in Greyfriars kirkyard had for more than two hundred years been marked by a small square stone with the single letter 'P' and the date 1736. More recently, this has since been replaced with a headstone of Craigeleith stone, bearing the inscription 'John Porteous, a captain of the City Guard of Edinburgh, murdered September 7, 1736. All Passion Spent, 1973'.

The spot where Porteous died is today marked by a memorial plate in the Grassmarket. The site of the infamous Tolbooth Prison is marked by paving stones arranged in the form of a heart, 'The Heart of Midlothian'. Tour guides will assure you that, even today, passers-by will spit on the spot, a tradition originally intended to demonstrate their contempt for the hated Tolbooth.

References

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Photograph above by the author



Making their way across the Grassmarket to the Cowgate and up the High Street, the mob converged on the Tolbooth, where they were eventually able to overpower the guards. Porteous was dragged from his cell and up the Lawnmarket towards the West Bow and the Grassmarket, where he was lynched from a dyer's pole, using a rope taken from a local draper's shop.

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