

DENOON (Dunoon), HUGH, merchant, office holder, jp, judge, and emigrant contractor; b. 18 Sept. 1762, probably in the parish of Killearnan, near Redcastle, Scotland, eldest child of David Denoon and Mary Inglis; m. Catherine Fraser, and they had at least one son; d. 24 March 1836 in Pictou, N.S.



Hugh Denoon had one of the original land grants here at Cape George. His parcel of land bordered what is now the Marsh Road. It is doubtful that he ever resided here or cleared the land. It wasn't too long after that David Ballantyne purchased the land from him.

Hugh Denoon was born into an established Highland family and should have followed in the paternal footsteps by attending university in Aberdeen and entering the Church of Scotland ministry. Instead, his younger brother went to Aberdeen and eventually succeeded his father, and Hugh went off to Halifax. After engaging in business there he went to the Pictou area, took up land on the East River as early as 1784, and later lived in Merigomish, where he acquired land rights from former members of the 82nd Foot. He subsequently moved to a house about one mile south of the town centre of Pictou, gradually acquiring a number of offices, including collector of customs, deputy registrar of deeds, justice of the peace, and judge of the Court of Common Pleas, and engaging in mercantile activity.

Most of Denoon's adult life was spent in respectable obscurity in Pictou, but at the beginning of the 19th century he acquired a certain notoriety in his native land as the first and most detested of the contractors transporting emigrants from Scotland to North America in the wave of emigration between 1801 and 1803. His undertakings were not only widely known and criticized in Scotland, but made a direct contribution to remedial parliamentary legislation, which ostensibly attempted to

prevent abuses of the sort Denoon was held to have perpetrated in 1801. Separating fact from fiction in Denoon's emigration ventures is no easy matter, for facts have always had a tendency to become embellished into mythology among Highlanders, and Hugh Denoon rapidly became a legendary villain for lairds and emigrants alike.

Denoon's emigrant contracting was first noticed in Scotland in early March 1801, when it was reported that he had come lately from America to recruit emigrants, and that he proposed to secure vessels to transport them in May. Opponents of emigration were unable to gain any support from the Customs Board to arrest the scheme, but a leading Inverness attorney advised an official at Fort William that Denoon's two ships could be inspected for proper accommodation and provisions and denied clearance if these were not adequate. When consulted, Scotland's lord advocate, Charles Hope, expressed the opinion that "there is no Law for keeping the People in the Country against their Will," although he was prepared to advise the board not to clear vessels until passenger lists were supplied and there was evidence that provisions were adequate for the voyage. Denoon duly handed in his lists, showing for the 350-ton *Sarah of Liverpool* 199 passengers over 16 and 151 children, and for the 186-ton *Dove of Aberdeen* 149 passengers over 16 and 60 children: a total of 559. Negotiations then ensued between Denoon and the board concerning a formula for converting the number of children under 16 into "full" passengers. The board, convinced by Denoon's arguments that his ships were carrying 428 full passengers, decided that the provisions, which the emigrants themselves had supplied, and the space were adequate, and cleared the vessels.

The ships set sail in June and almost everything that could possibly go wrong on the passage did so. The 13-week voyage was an exceptionally long one, and smallpox broke out among the passengers. According to one contemporary account, 39 children under ten died. Off the coast of Newfoundland one of the vessels was boarded by a press-gang from the Royal Navy and a number of young men were taken off; Denoon somehow persuaded the senior naval officer to release them. In Pictou, the arrivals were put in quarantine and, unable to work, they had to be relieved by a public subscription fund. They eventually settled satisfactorily into the community, however.

Denoon's venture raised enormous controversy. In its first report on emigration, issued in January 1802, the Highland Society of Edinburgh produced an allegation, never proved, that after customs officers had inspected Denoon's vessels and pronounced themselves satisfied with the two tiers of berths and the ten feet of exercise space between them, he removed a platform hiding a third tier for passengers who were to be collected after customs clearance. The society also produced a devastating critique of the method used to determine numbers aboard Denoon's vessels, comparing the results with the maximum number of passengers allowed by the slave trade legislation passed a few years earlier. By the least restrictive method, to which the society thought the Highlanders were

entitled, the *Sarah of Liverpool* and the *Dove of Aberdeen* would have been allowed only 355 passengers. The society insisted that it did not wish to compare fellow Scots with slaves, but its calculations were electrifying and the implications clear. This evidence was one of the principal arguments used by a parliamentary committee in 1803 in support of its regulatory legislation (43 Geo. III, c.56).

Denoon represented an increasing trend for emigrant contractors to view their passengers merely as cargo, and to exhibit no concern for their welfare once they had been transported to and disembarked in North America. Aggravating the problems facing passengers was the growing demand in Britain at this time for timber from British North America. Within only a few years of Denoon's venture most contractors were timber merchants filling vessels with human cargo rather than with ballast for the return journey. The legislation he helped provoke may have improved conditions on board ships, but at the same time it hampered emigration by enabling the government to harass contractors and by raising fares. After 1815 Britain no longer sought to limit emigration. In 1817 a new statute (57 Geo. III, c.10) was passed superseding the previous legislation.

Although Denoon's return to the Highlands for more passengers was often rumoured, he apparently had had enough, and there is no evidence he ever again engaged in the transatlantic emigrant trade. His venture contributed not only to the British regulation of 1803, but also to the substantial influx of Highlanders to the Pictou region in the early years of the 19th century. After his brief appearance in the public spotlight Denoon returned to his former commercial activities. When he died he left over £7,000 of uncollected small debts.

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J. M. Bumsted, "DENOON, HUGH," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 7, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed July 26, 2021, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/denoon_hugh_7E.html.