

## **CAPTAIN MICHAEL GRASS**

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While making a presentation to a history class entitled "History, they never taught you in school," the question of Michael's personality came up. At the time I stated that very little is known about the Captain's personality, but after some thought, I think many conclusions can be drawn.

Michael's headstone states that "Michael Grass died April 25, 1813 aged 78 years," which makes his birth year 1734 or 1735. He was of German extraction born in Strasbourg, which was under French control at the time, and little else is known of his personal background. Michael arrived in Philadelphia on Friday, September 22, 1752, debarking from a ship called the *Halifax* after sailing from Rotterdam stopping in Cowes on the Isle of Wight. Jacob Grass who was twelve later settled as a Loyalist in New Brunswick. Ludwig Grass also arrived on the same ship, but there is no other information concerning Ludwig except a Lewis Grass received a land grant in Kingston Township and my ancestor, Michael's grandson was named Lewis.

It has been suggested that Michael was escaping a military conscription, but in any event the three young men were adventurers heading to the New World at such young ages. We can also conclude that they were at least cousins. Jacob's ancestors have been verified, but no birth records have ever been found for Michael or Ludwig.

Shortly after his arrival, Michael married his first wife, Mary Anne who taught him to speak and write English. Many authors comment about his retention of his German characteristics and he retained a heavy German accent throughout his life.

He spent some time in Philadelphia learning his trade as a saddler before arriving in New York City before October 5, 1756 at which time his name appears in a communion record at The Lutheran Church. He married Margaret Swartz at the same church on July 20, 1760. The records show the baptism of his children Eva, July 7, 1763, John Michael, October 6, 1765 and Peter February 6, 1769.

### **Oswego**

Historian Larry Turner determined that Michael served in the 60th regiment during the Seven Years War, but his military service needs to be researched further. However, if he was to end up at Fort Frontenac between 1756 and 1757 he must have been captured by Louis-Joseph, Marquis de Montcalm in August of 1756 at Oswego, New York on the southern shore of Lake Ontario. Family history states that Michael and two other prisoners escaped from Fort Frontenac with an Indian guide, taking nine weeks to make their way through the forests to the British lines in the Mohawk Valley.

The Colonial Militia would have passed through the Mohawk Valley on its way to Oswego providing him with a knowledge of this area as well as Frontenac. Michael likely ended up with

his first farm along Canajoharie Creek (Bowman Creek) near Indian Superintendent Sir William Johnson's estate as a land grant for his service in the Seven Years War. He later served as an officer in the Tryon County Militia, first battalion, second company until August 1775 when Colonel Nicholas Herkimer of the Patriot Militia requested that he serve as Captain. By March of 1777, Michael was forced to leave for New York City leaving his wife and family behind on the farm.

He later served in the New York City Militia as a first Lieutenant appointed by Major Paterson in 1780 and was commissioned as a Captain by Sir Guy Carleton in July 1783 to lead the Associated Loyalists to Frontenac.

From his military service we can determine that with the onset of the war, the Palatine community of the Mohawk Valley was thrown into confusion and persecution. The Rebel Militia harassed and threatened the farmers resulting in sides being chosen. Michael felt a loyalty to the King whom he fought for earlier in his life and chose to lose everything for his political convictions.

Michael left Europe likely to avoid conscription, but spent most of his adult life defending his new King and the life style the Colony provided. He was a man of loyalty, commitment and strong personal values.

### **Exiled in New York City**

By early 1778, Michael's saddle-making tools were sold by his wife Margaret, but the Schenectady Committee of Safety demanded she pay the eleven guineas she received as a penalty. They also confiscated the farm and she was forced to depart for New York City.

Michael had agreed to be removed to New Brunswick, but something changed his mind. He actively promoted the settlement of Frontenac to Sir Guy Carleton and organized families willing to settle in the wilderness on the north shore of Lake Ontario. Michael was placed in charge of eight companies of Associated Loyalists with up to a thousand people leaving for Sorel, Quebec in the fall of 1783.

### **Frontenac**

He participated in many petitions to Carleton and Governor Frederick Haldimand making demands for his followers. His main purpose upon arriving at Sorel was to convince Haldimand that his group wanted to settle at Frontenac and he accompanied the Deputy Surveyor General John Collins to Frontenac to assist in the establishment of the new settlement.

Haldimand preferred to send the refugees to New Brunswick as he still worried about Indian relationships west of the Ottawa River after the 1763 Pontiac rebellion. The winter in Sorel led to numerous disagreements resulting in Haldimand threatening to send the Loyalists to New Brunswick. Michael apologized and was allowed to settle the first township west of the new village.

Many of the Loyalists deserted his company, choosing to settle in Quebec or work up and down the St. Lawrence. Michael emerged from the crisis with only about fifty families following him to Frontenac. His group was made up of Provincial Militia and tradesmen and I suggest that this was the best group to settle close to the village centre, since they had the skills required to establish the new community. The military units were given townships to the west of the village along the shore of Lake Ontario.

Michael took Lot 25, Concession 1 which is now Macdonald Park in downtown Kingston. He later sold this lot and moved to his larger holdings in Collins Bay.

### **The Hunger Years**

"There were years of near-starvation, times of grim fortitude, as they planted between stumps of forest clearings and struggled to raise the first crops. But after the 'hungry year' of 1789, the western settlers took firm root and began to flourish.... The Loyalists began to build a Canada that was not predominantly French. Modern English-speaking Canada really goes back to them, and to the Revolution that drove them out." (J.M.S. Careless, *Canada a Story of Challenge*, pp114-115).

"Captain Grass took a leading part at least during the first years of the settlement at Kingston. He was possessed of some education, and was a man of excellent character, with a strict sense of honour. Although opportunities presented themselves to accumulate property at the expense of others, he refused to avail himself of all such. He was appointed a magistrate at an early period, and as such performed many of the first marriages in Kingston. In religion, he was adherent to the Church of England. Probably he had been brought up a Lutheran..." (William Canniff, *History of the Settlement of Upper Canada*, 1869, p550).

Michael's description of the Loyalists' arrival was written in the *Kingston Gazette* December 10, 1811; "Seven and twenty years ago, scarce the vestige of a human habitation could be found in the whole extent of the Bay of Quinte! Not a settler had dared to penetrate the vast forests that skirted its shores - Even on this spot, now governed with stately edifices, were to be seen only the bark-thatched wigwam of the savage, or the newly erected tent of the hardy loyalist. ... I led the loyal band, I pointed out to them the site of their future metropolis, and gained for persecuted principles a sanctuary for myself and followers a home."

### **Conclusion**

Michael was a frontiersman, establishing two prosperous farms out of the wilderness. He also continually served his King in the local militias. He was a man of conviction and honour with a strong loyalty to the laws and way of life of the British homeland. He promoted the settlement of Frontenac and became a strong leader convincing Governor Haldimand to open the Indian territory to settlers.

He supported education and the church by demanding land be put aside in the new village. He may not have been a major leader of the new community, but we must remember he was well

into his 50s by this time. He had presented his proposal to Sir Guy Carleton, who was under tremendous pressure to settle thousands of Royalists. Carleton was so impressed as to demand that Governor Haldimand open Indian territory to the refugees.

I think I can safely say that Captain Michael Grass was instrumental in establishing the City of Kingston and is without doubt a Father of Upper Canada.