

CAPTAIN MICHAEL GRASS

by Glen V. Grass

Additional Information related to Captain Michael Grass - His Life before Kingston - by Glen V Grass, Cambridge, ON - revised 22 June 2015. If individuals or organizations wish to use this material, kindly reference this document.

The story of Captain Michael Grass has been told before. He was one of the Loyalists who, in 1783, was forced to flee the newly-created United States of America after the American Revolution. The establishment of communities by these Loyalists, in Upper Canada, along the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario heralded the beginning of the creation of the Province of Ontario. Captain Grass led his group to Cataraqui, present day Kingston, in the spring of 1784, after a reconnaissance visit with a survey crew in 1783.

In the past, little was known of Captain Grass' life before Kingston. He had said that he was born in 1735 in Strasbourg, which is in the Alsace Region of France. The Alsace had been, for centuries, part of the German States, but Louis XIV of France had swept through that area in the mid 1600s and subjugated its population, re-establishing the Catholic Church's dominance and diminishing the influence of Protestantism and the German language. In the late 1600s and well into the 1700s, waves of German Palatine immigrants from the Alsace and areas north of there in the German States had fled their homeland for a better life in British America, the Thirteen Colonies. They took the perilous journey from ports like Rotterdam to New York or Philadelphia with the promise of land in the British Provinces like Pennsylvania, New York, Virginia, and others.

Michael Grass was born Johann Michael Gress on 11 Feb 1735 in Roppenheim, Alsace, France, the son of Johann Michael Gress, Sr, and Anna Maria Kramer. He was christened at the Lutheran Church in Roppenheim the next day. There were quite a few Gress/Kress families in Roppenheim and nearby communities of Forstfeld, Kaufenheim, and Lautenheim, and some were Lutheran and others Catholic. The surname Gress was sometimes written as Kress by people in the same family. Captain Michael used Gress when he married in New York, his brothers used Cress or Kress in America. It's easy to confuse the two names, when they're written in the German from that era, as the 'script G' and the 'script K' looked very similar.

Michael was the third child of six boys, all of them born in Roppenheim, and christened at the Lutheran Church there. Of his other brothers, two were older: Johann George Gress, baptised 15 August 1730, and Johann Ludwig Gress, baptised 05 September 1732, and three younger: Samuel Balthasar Gress (16 Dec 1736), Johann Peter Gress (03 Sept 1741) and George Jacob Gress (26 Aug 1748). Samuel Balthasar Gress died, at the age of 4, on 1 September 1741, just 2 days before his brother Johann Peter Gress was born. The cause of his death was not mentioned, but the survival rate for babies and young children in that era was not good, and this family fared better than most.

Michael Grass' father, Johann Michael Gress, Sr, was born in Roppenheim on 12 May 1699, the son of Johann George Gress (b 29 Nov 1647) and Elizabeth Meder (b 12 Oct 1646). Michael Grass' parents were married in Roppenheim on 13 September 1729 at the Lutheran Church,

which still stands and operates today as a Lutheran Church. It's not known whether Anna Maria Kramer was a Roppenheim girl, but there were other Kramers in town and the birth records for the years 1704-8 in Roppenheim are missing or were not taken. The Kramer name was sometimes written as Kraemer or Krämer with an umlaut on the 'a'.

A notation in a church document says that the Gress father left his Regiment, and apparently Roppenheim, about 1748. That would be the same year that youngest child, George Jacob, was born. The whole family probably left Roppenheim and came to America together. No death/marriage record for any of them appear in Roppenheim after that. A Johann Nickel Gress took the Oath of Allegiance in Philadelphia on 24 August 1750 after disembarking from the ship *Two Brothers*, which had sailed from Rotterdam some 6 or so weeks earlier. The middle name Nickel, I suspect, was Michael. On the same ship was a Johann Peter Kramer (and possibly his family). A person of that name had lived in Roppenheim, and may have been a brother of Anna Maria Kramer. Previous Grass family researchers had put Michael, Ludwig and Jacob (last name Gross) aboard the ship *Halifax* in 1752, but Jacob would not have been recorded if he was only 4 years of age. I believe these people are not part of the Michael Gress family.

Having reached Philadelphia in 1750 (or so), the Gress family probably stayed together for a while in order to better acquaint themselves with the English language and British customs, getting established and developing skills for finding work. Assuming 1750 as the year they arrived, father Michael Kress would have been 51, mother Anna Maria 40 something, oldest sons George, Ludwig and Michael 20, 18 and 15, and youngest sons Peter and Jacob 9 and 2. Compulsory service in the militia was required for all males 15 to 55, so father Michael and the three oldest sons including Michael would have had to enlist.

Because schools in America were rare, at least for the less affluent, before the American Revolution, the children would have been taught at home. Mother Anna Maria would have wanted her family to learn English and the youngest children would have learned it from her. In fact, Peter and especially Jacob would be English-speaking almost entirely, Michael and the oldest boys less so, having retained a strong German accent throughout their lives. Because the Alsace had been under French rule, and although spoken German was still strong there during the time the Gress family lived in Roppenheim (except for dealing with French authorities, like the government or the military), the oldest Gress family members would know some French. It is known that Michael and Peter learned skills with saddlery, possibly from their father, and both of them worked in that trade.

The story about Michael being acquainted with a Mary Ann Schultz and learning English from her could be true, for it may be that this girl was a friend/neighbour of the family and helped them to get established in Philadelphia. Whether she married Michael has not been verified. I'm guessing not – all the children attributed to Michael have been accounted for with his marriage to Margaret Schwartz. A Schultz family was on the *Two Brothers* ship that came in 1750 with the Gress family.

Compulsory militia service would have given the Gress children, once they were old enough, good training in life skills. Their superior officers would expect them to use English. Unless

there were occasions when policing or emergency service was required, the militia men only needed to take part in regular training sessions. They were not paid, so the men had to have some means to earn money. Militia service was generally restricted to each Province of British America; only regular soldiers could be sent anywhere and they were on the payroll. If a male of militia age moved, they would have to enlist in the new area.

Of the Gress children, it is known that Michael moved to the Province of New York, possibly about 1754-5. He would be 19 or 20 then. He married his wife Margaret Schwartz there in 1760. He needed to have had time to get to know her for some time before that marriage. He had to serve in the New York militia. He would have been unfamiliar with New York, being new to the province.

The story about him and two others being in the militia and being captured by the French sometime in the period 1755-8 in the northern part of the Province of New York could be true. The northern frontier of New York was not firmly controlled by either the British or the French. Frequent raids from both sides occurred, but in many cases, those caught were killed. If Michael had been caught as stated, it may be that his knowledge of French may have saved the three of them. Apparently the three captives were sent to Fort Frontenac where they were held for several months. They escaped on the second attempt, after getting help from some Indians whom they had befriended, with sufficient provisions to withstand a long trek through the bush back to a British-controlled area. The British were strengthening their position and the French had just about abandoned Fort Frontenac when Michael and his comrades were captured. It may have been easier to get away and not be pursued under these conditions. It was quite a story if it were not true. Some have discounted this story as fabricated by Michael Grass' son John, who was thought to have glorified his father's life. But, it seems that the other claims that son John had made were later deemed to be true. He was just recounting the stories that his father Michael had told him.

That Michael Gress/Grass was in the Province of New York in the mid 1750s is very likely. His brothers and parents probably stayed in Pennsylvania. It seems that Michael met Henrich Schwartz and his family in Queens, New York where they both lived, probably as neighbours after coming from Philadelphia. Queens is a suburb north of New York City. The Schwartz family was: Henrich (christened 02 May 1706), his wife Eva née Hohl (christened 07 Apr 1714), and their three children, Peter Bernhard Schwartz (b 09 Feb 1733), Maria Margaretha Schwartz (b 08 Feb 1736) and Anna Margaretha Schwartz (b 25 Sep 1738). Several other children were born to Henrich and Eva in Germany, but the only ones that reached America were the three indicated above. Another child, Jan Simon Schwartz, was born in Queens on 08 Feb 1756 to Henrich and Eva.

The Schwartzes had immigrated to British America in 1754 from Schweigern, near Boxberg, in the area of northern Baden-Wurttemberg in what is now Germany. This is a different town than Schwaigern (spelling is not the same) which is also a town in Baden-Wurttemberg about 80 km south of Schweigern.

In 1759, the Schwartz family changed churches from the Dutch Church in New York City to the

new German Reformed Church which opened its doors in 1758. They had been members at the Dutch Church because the German dialect that they spoke was similar enough to Dutch that they could understand it. They were probably Calvinist, so the Dutch Church, and the German Reformed Church would be a better match to their beliefs than Lutheran. Their background was likely not Dutch, because their forebears had lived in the Schweigern area of Germany for over 100 years.

Johann Michael Gress married Anna Margaretha Schwartz on 20 July 1760 at the Lutheran Church in New York City. On the same day, Peter Bernhard Schwartz married Appolonia Seibel (written as Zeisseling in the records) (b 21 May 1737), at the German Reformed Church in New York City. These two churches were just blocks from each other. Appolonia was the daughter of George Seibel and Maria Engeltje Hulss. Appolonia's mother had died before 1760 and her father had remarried.

Michael and Margaretha Gress had 4 children baptised at the Lutheran Church in New York City. They were Andreas Gress (b 01 May 1761), Eva Margaretha Gress (b 09 Jul 1763; another record says Eva Gress bpt on 29 Dec 1767 at the German Reformed Church in NYC), John Michael Gress (bpt 03 Oct 1765; another record says Johann Michael Gress bpt 03 July 1762 at the German Reformed Church in NYC) and Peter Gress (b 27 Jan 1770). As you can see, this information is confusing, with two baptisms for two of the children. My take on it is that Michael and Margaretha wanted to satisfy both sets of grandparents with baptisms in the two churches.

No further information about children Andreas Gress and Johann Michael Gress has been found. Eva Margaretha Gress and Peter Gress and later children came with Michael and Margaretha to Cataraqui in 1784 and lived their lives there. There is some indication that Michael and Margaretha moved from Queens to Cortlandt Manor on the Hudson early in the 1760s. Peter and Appolonia apparently lived there for a time, although it appears that father Henrich Schwartz had bought property near Knox, NY (close to Albany and Schenectady) and later in Tryon County, west of Schoharie, NY. People who lived at Cortlandt Manor operated as tenant farmers, living there in exchange for working on the manor.

After 1770, Michael's sons Daniel Grass (b 23 Dec 1771) and John Grass (b 23 Oct 1773) were both baptised at St. George's Episcopal Church in Schenectady, New York. It's likely that Michael and Margaret had moved to that area about 1770 after their son Peter was born. Margaret probably needed help raising her young family, and her mother Eva was there to help; I'm assuming they lived with or close to Henrich and Eva Schwartz, the in-laws.

It is known that Michael purchased 125 acres of land near Canajoharie, specifically Sprout Brook, NY, which was part of the William Dick Patent, in December 1772. The previous owner was Hendrich Diefendorf who owned a few properties in the area. Michael probably had to build a house, and that would be the reason that Margaret stayed with or near to her mother Eva until after 1773 when John was born.

Mary Grass was born about 1776 and probably was baptised at the Canajoharie Church, near where the family lived. No record has been located for her birth.

The youngest child of Michael and Margaret, Catherine Grass, was born in Sorel, Canada East/Quebec, late in 1783, the same year that Michael had brought, several months earlier, his party of Loyalists to Canada. No record has been found for her birth, but the family had said her birthdate was 02 December 1783. She would have been about 5 or 6 months old when Michael Grass and his party headed from Sorel to Cataraqui in 1784.

Michael had sided with the British during the American Revolution. Apparently he was offered a Captaincy by the rebel commander General Herkimer, which he had turned down, either formally or by not being present to take the command. That certainly would send a signal to the rebel authorities that he was not on their side. At any rate, by 1777, he felt the need to leave his home in the Canajoharie area and seek safety in New York City, still a British-held territory. But he did not take his family, which seems odd, because they might also have been at risk. His family did receive threats when he was gone.

Michael may have been thinking that New York City was going to remain under British control and that the Revolution was going to fizzle at some point, for he went ahead to find a lot to build a house for his family there. It took him until 1780 to get the house completed and then send for his family. In the meantime, he had joined the local militia, as was his duty, as a Private. By 1780, he was given the rank of First-Lieutenant in the British New York City militia. This rank would be based on his previous militia service. His duties would have been to command a group of junior militia men at keeping order - an increasingly difficult job in a restless city.

The story about Michael contacting the British command about taking boatloads of Loyalists to Canada has been told before. In July of 1783, Michael was appointed Captain of the Militia for a Company of Loyalists who were sailing from New York to Sorel and then, on to establish new communities in Upper Canada. About 900 persons were involved in this displacement. Michael's appointment was signed by Sir Guy Carleton, Commander-in-Chief of all British Forces in North America during the final two years before the Evacuation of New York City. In 1783, Upper Canada (present-day Southern Ontario) was a landscape of thick forests and was almost untouched by humans, save the Indian tribes that had occupied the land for many centuries and the French, who had established but then abandoned fortifications like Fort Frontenac, Fort Niagara and Fort Detroit, when they were defeated by the British.

Did Michael know about the Cataraqui area and notify the British in New York City in 1783 that it would be suitable for settlement? In 1811, in a writing he sent to the newspaper, he says "Seven and twenty years have rolled away since my eyes, for the second time, beheld the shores of Cataraqui". It could be that he was talking about his first visit in 1783, during the survey visit, and then in 1784, when they finally settled there. The British had taken control of Upper Canada after the French relinquished their influence in America with the Treaty of Paris in 1763. After that time, they may have gained some knowledge of the north shore of Lake Ontario and the St Lawrence River, such that they felt confident that it would be suitable for settlement.

Many have questioned whether the various earliest Grass families of Canada are related.

I believe that Michael's brother, George Jacob Gress, is in fact the Jacob Grass who left America

for the Sunbury area of New Brunswick, in 1789, as a Loyalist. There he married Pruella (later called Priscilla) Mills, daughter of John Mills and Lydia Webb, who came from Connecticut as Loyalists. I also believe that the Sebastian Kress, who settled in the same Knox area of New York as Henrich Schwartz and his wife Eva, was a cousin of Michael Gress. There were several men named Sebastian Kress brought up near Roppenheim, Alsace in the Michael Gress era. More work needs to be done on this idea.

The Sebastian Kress that settled in the Knox area married Margaretha Seibel, another of George Seibel's daughters, on 3 January 1760 in Schoharie, NY. They had a family of 3 boys and 1 girl. One child, Michael Kress, who had been in Butler's Rangers, a Loyalist militia based out of Niagara, NY, turned down filing his petition for land as a Loyalist to look after his aging parents in the Knox area. He finally settled in Niagara, Upper Canada, in 1801 and had a large family. In the war of 1812, this Michael Grass (name change from Kress to Grass) was killed serving in the militia. It was his oldest son David who finally petitioned for land on his father's behalf for the other family members. This family represents the ancestors of the Western Ontario branch of the Grass family.

The facts in this article are based on information gleaned from many reliable sources. The opinions are based on what I feel probably happened. They formed an important part of allowing me to make progress on finding out the story of the Grass family. If you wish further information, please contact Glen Grass. My email address is: ggrass@bell.net.

General References for this document have been provided to the Central Branch, Kingston Frontenac Public Library in Kingston, Ontario, along with the original and revised copies of the document.