

DIGBY'S OLDEST LOYALIST GRAVESTONE, JACOB GETCHEUS & BLACK LOYALISTS

By Brian McConnell, UE*

There is a very old gravestone in Digby, Nova Scotia which by investigating its' origin is found a story of activities before, during and after the American Revolution. It would not be there if a Master of a Sloop carrying Black Loyalists did not come to the area in 1783.

The oldest gravestone in Digby's Trinity Anglican Church Cemetery is for Mary Getcheus who died on November 17, 1785 almost two years after the Town was settled by the arrival of approximately 1,200 United Empire Loyalists at the end of the American Revolution. She was the wife of Captain Jacob Getcheus, also sometimes spelled Getsheus, a sea captain who lived in Philadelphia before the War of Independence began. The Trinity Cemetery contains over two hundred graves associated with the first settlers of the area and their descendants.(1)



**Gravestone of Mary Getcheus which is located
near the main entrance to Digby's Trinity Anglican Church Cemetery**

Although the gravestone of Mary Getcheus has deteriorated over time, some of the wording is still visible including the words identifying her date of death and age as 37. (2)

Jacob Getcheus, her husband, was Master of the Sloop Lydia which transported Black Loyalists to Annapolis Royal from New York in May 1783. It was part of the evacuation of the city after the American Revolution when United Empire Loyalists as well as Black Loyalists came to Nova Scotia as refugees.

(56)

Inspection Roll of Negroes

<i>Ship's Name Where Commanded</i>	<i>Where board'd</i>	<i>Negroes Names</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Comments</i>		<i>Name of the Person or Refugee No.</i>
					<i>Name</i>	<i>Residence</i>	
<i>25 March 1783 Sloop Lydia Jacob Getcheus M^r</i>	<i>Annapolis Bay</i>	<i>Thomas Smith</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>Short fellow almost white</i>			<i>Major Brown</i>
		<i>Thomas Thomson</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>Short Wench</i>			<i>do</i>
		<i>Lafayette</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>Short Lad</i>			<i>do</i>
		<i>James Brown</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>Short fellow</i>			<i>do</i>
		<i>Peter Thomas</i>	<i>56</i>	<i>Old</i>			<i>do</i>
		<i>Elie</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>Short boy</i>			<i>do</i>
		<i>James Brown</i>	<i>44</i>	<i>Short Wench</i>			<i>do</i>
		<i>James Thomas</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>Short Lad</i>			<i>Jacob Getcheus</i>

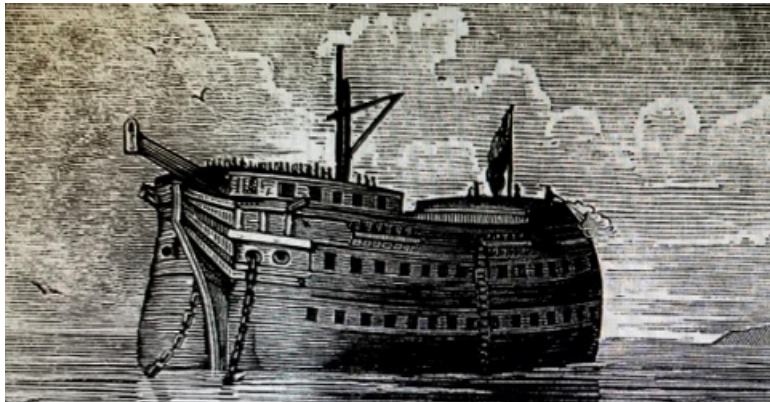
**Sloop Lydia with Master Jacob Getcheus transporting
Black Loyalists to Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia as appears in Book of Negroes**

By reviewing the entries in the Book of Negroes the names and other information of those who were transported aboard the Sloop Lydia commanded by Captain Jacob Getcheus can be determined. They amounted to ten men, five women, and five children. One of them named James Johnson was identified as hired to Jacob Getcheus and the Sloop Lydia. (3) He had been a slave in Virginia and then taken away by the British military for whom he had worked until taken on and paid by Getcheus. The entry appears as:

" James Johnson, 15, stout lad, (Jacob Getcheus). Formerly slave to Tyna Hudson of Homnwryka, James River, Virginia, from whence he was brought by Lt. Rogers, Royal Artillery, about 2 years ago who hired him to Mr. Prior of the Engineers department who has since hired him to this sloop."

Jacob Getcheus was residing in Philadelphia when the American Revolution began. He was contracted to Captain a ship to procure and transport arms and munitions for the rebels at the beginning of the American Revolution. In March, 1776 he received a contract to take the ship Aurora, owned by Ben Gibbs, to Barcelona, Spain on the instructions of a Secret Committee of the Continental Congress. It was one of seven ships contracted by Willing, Morris, & Company to export provisions and invest the proceeds in arms and ammunition. The British Man of War Enterprise, a frigate of 28 guns, captured the Aurora captained by Getcheus off the coast of Spain and brought it into Gibraltar in May of 1776. It was loaded with wheat and flour. (4)

In the course of this undertaking, Getcheus was captured and confined in the Whitby Prison Ship. It was a large transport anchored in Wallabout Bay along the northwest shore of Brooklyn, New York and said to be the most sickly of all prison ships. Bad provisions, bad water, and scant rations were provided to the prisoners. (5) The British used prison ships like it to turn prisoners away from supporting the Rebels and recruit them.



British Prison Ship during American Revolution

Upon his release in 1777 Jacob Getcheus had taken a more pro - British position and in 1778 was given command of the Loyalist Privateer Impertinent. (6) It sailed out of New York. In June she was captured off the Capes of Delaware by the American ship General Green. She was then outfitted by Pennsylvanians and sent back to sea to harass British shipping around the Outer Banks off the coast of North Carolina.

Part of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, ff.
T O A L L whom it may concern.
NOTICE is hereby given, That a Court of Admiralty will be held at the Court-house in the city of Philadelphia, on the fifth day of July next, at Ten o'clock in the forenoon of the same day, then and there to try the truth of the facts alledged in the bill of James Montgomery, Esq; &c. (who as well, &c.) against the brig or vessel called the Impertinent, lately commanded by Jacob Getcheus, burthen about seventy tons, and mounting fourteen carriage guns, &c. To the end and intent that the owner or owners, or any person or persons concerned therein, may appear and shew cause, if any they have, why the same should not be condemned according to the prayer of the said bill.
By order of the Judge,
June 11. **ANDREW ROBESON, Reg.**

Notice placed in "The Pennsylvania Packet", published in Philadelphia on June 15, 1779 after capture of Impertinent which refers to commander Jacob Getcheus

There are four ships mentioned in the Book of Negroes which transported Black Loyalists in May 1783 from New York to Annapolis Royal. These were the William and Mary, Grand Duchess of Russia, Ranger, and the Lydia commanded by Captain Getcheus.

It is not known how Getcheus came to be in Digby but perhaps given its' close proximity to Annapolis and being less than a day's sail on the Basin it offered more opportunities than an established settlement. He is listed in the Muster Roll for the Town of Digby taken on May 29, 1784. He also was assigned a Town Lot. However, there is no mention of him in the records of the Land Registry for Digby or Annapolis Counties. This is not surprising, however, as the Town of Digby suffered badly from emigration during the years after the arrival of the Loyalists. It started with 396 landowners, however, by 1795 there were only 128 of which 117 were Loyalists or their sons. (7)

The gravestone of Mary Getcheus remains as the only visible evidence of the connection to Jacob Getcheus and his experiences during the American Revolution. His story seems to include several parts, master of a Commercial ship with activities supporting the Rebel side, imprisonment, service on a Loyalist Privateer, departure to Nova Scotia with Black Loyalists. It is a reflection of the complexity of the challenges which were faced and the changes which occurred during the period.

NOTES:

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(1) For a listing and description of remaining gravestones in Trinity Anglican Church Cemetery see “ The Loyalists and the Victorian Build a Church: Trinity Anglican, Digby, Nova Scotia” by Doreen Evenden, Scallop Boat Press, 2018

(2) In “Some Chapters in the History of Digby County and Its Settlers” by Reverend Allan Massie Hill, Old Lyme, Connecticut / Smith's Cove, Nova Scotia : Longview Press, (1995) it indicates that visible remaining words on the gravestone indicate Mary Getsheus departed this life November 17, 1785 aged 37 years.

(3) Book of Negroes, 1st Baron Dorchester: Dorchester: Papers, The National Archives, Kew <https://novascotia.ca/archives/Africanns/BN.asp>

(4) Naval Documents of the American Revolution, Vol. 4, edited by William Bell Clark, Washington, 1969

(5) Extract from a letter written on board the Whitby Prison Ship. New York, Dec. 9th, 1776.
“ Our present situation is most wretched; more than 250 prisoners, some sick and without the least assistance from physician, drug, or medicine, and fed on two-thirds allowance of salt provisions, and crowded promiscuously together without regard, to color, person or office, in the small room of a ship's between decks, allowed to walk the main deck only between sunrise and sunset. Only two at a time allowed to come on deck to do what nature requires, and sometimes denied even that, and use tubs and buckets between decks, to the great offence of every delicate, cleanly person, and prejudice of all our healths. Lord Howe has liberated all in the merchant service, but refuses to exchange those taken in arms but for like prisoners.” Source: Trumbull Papers, p. 76 as referred to in “Documents and Letters Intended to Illustrate the Revolutionary Incidents of Queens County”, by Henry Onderdonk, NY, 1846

(6) Richard D. Pougher, "Averse...to Remaining Idle Spectators - the Emergence of Loyalist Privateering During the American Revolution, 1775-1778 “, Volume I. (2002).

(7) Taunya J. Dawson "Genealogical Resources and the Town of Digby", in Nova Scotia Genealogist, Vol XI, 3, 1993, p. 109