

...A Stone for Sarah

On Sunday, 8 September 1991, under the sponsorship of the United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada, Bay of Quinte Branch, a bronze plaque and granite memorial to SARAH KAST MCGINNESS will be proudly dedicated in the churchyard of St. John's Anglican at Bath, Ontario. The Honourable Lincoln Alexander, Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, has been invited to perform the unveiling ceremony.

The McGinness Project has been coordinated and directed by four UEL members: Edgar CLOW of Brockville, Evelyn (Van Dusen) DREW of Picton, Catherine (Blacklock) EVANS of Kingston and Barbara HOOPER of Ottawa (all descendants of SARAH MCGINNESS.)

Readers will remember LCol William Smy's "A Recounting of a Woman's Service in the Revolution" (*Loyalist Gazette*, Feb. 1989). It dramatically capsulized SARAH's story using the active voices of letters written while the events were happening. The following article "Loyalist Portrait of Sarah Kast McGinness" tells the full story.

The story of the life of SARAH KAST MCGINNESS' life is one of hardship, loss and incredible courage. Her experiences were in large measure identical to any early Loyalist who, choosing to remain true to a British ruler, was condemned as a traitor at home along the Mohawk River, stripped of possessions and forced to flee for the safety of British-held Canada. For many in middle age, starting all over again in a harsh northern climate proved to be an exhausting test of human endurance. SARAH's story, however, is singularly unique.

SARAH KAST MCGINNESS was born in 1713 to German-immigrant parents, Palatines who had been rescued from the Heidelberg area by Queen Anne of England. It was through the Queen's kindness and intervention that thousands of politically-dominated and cruelly-ruled Europeans were able to leave poverty-stricken lives and begin again in the freedom and forests along the Mohawk River.



Illustration by Peter Johnson, U.E.

There the KAST family prospered, both by farming and by entering into the fur trading business with Sir William Johnson. One of Johnson's trader, known locally as Teady Magin, was TIMOTHY MCGINNESS. He had arrived in New York as an indentured servant. Following the completion of his period of servitude, he took up fur trading for a living, and eventually met the family of JOHAN KAST. Smitten by daughter SARAH, he married her in 1734.

Over the next twenty years (1734-1754) the MCGINNESS family did well. Teady prospered in the fur trade, acting as Johnson's agent at Oswego. SARAH managed the home farm, supervised the raising of the children, and began to accumulate land holdings throughout the county of Tryon. There was also a great deal of work to be done at the trading post her father and husband had established at German Flats.

Eight children were born to the MCGINNESSES during that twenty-year period: Hannah, Elizabeth, Dorothy, Catherine, William, Margaret, Mary and finally George, who was born in 1754.

George's birth came at a time when North American history was being drastically changed. The French in Canada and the British in New York and the colonies were poised at each other's throats, ready to settle for all time the question of who owned North America and its rich fur reserves. The French pushed hostilities into war by invading down the Richelieu River to Lake Champlain. Pushing on to Lake George, they engaged in battle with

Sir William Johnson's English and Indian forces. Teady McGinness, now a Captain in the army, led out a party from Fort Edward and surprised a French battalion. Fighting bravely, he turned the French back, but was severely injured himself. Brought back into camp on horse back, he lingered two days in a coma, and died without ever waking.

SARAH now began the next phase of her life as a widow, carrying on the family trading business herself. When her daughters Elizabeth and Dorothy married Samuel and John Thompson, the two new sons-in-law were brought into the business with her as active participants in the trading post and fur trade. Her daughter Catherine married Adam Staring, and her daughter Margaret married Henry Wendell, son of a prominent merchant family of New York. Her youngest daughter, Mary, married Simon De Forest, of Huguénot descent, and George, the youngest, married Anna Staring (a distant cousin).

By the mid-1770s, SARAH and her children were living in considerable comfort. The trading post was successful, her farms were prosperous, and she had been able to provide all of her children with lots of their own. Her only sorrow at this point was her son William. No record exists to tell us what illness he had. Certainly it must have been a severe and debilitating one for in her claim for losses submitted after the war, SARAH indicated that he was "out of his senses, and bound in chains as he had been for several years." Today's moral outrage must be tempered with an appreciation of the lack of medical expertise at that time. Superstitious beliefs undoubtedly led to the treatment he received.

When the first stirrings of unrest and revolt began to be felt in the Mohawk Valley, SARAH and her family made it quite clear that their sympathies lay with the King and not with the "traitors" in Boston. It was the wrong move. The local Committee of Safety arrested Sarah and her sons-in-law, Simon De Forest and John Thompson. The men were imprisoned in Albany while SARAH was jailed at Fort Dayton (in part of what is now downtown Herkimer, N.Y.) Repeatedly questioned about her assis-

tance to other "Tories", she was nevertheless able to convince her captors that she was not guilty. Unable to prove anything, the Committee let her go. They also questioned her son George, and an officer struck him and knocked him down. Eventually SARAH was arrested a second time, along with one of her daughters and a grand-child. Again, the questioning. And another release, but not before the cruel treatment in the Fort Dayton dungeon had killed the little grand-daughter.

The Committee, aware that SARAH had been adopted by the Iroquois as a girl and knowing that her parents had allowed her to live among them, felt that she would make a perfect Rebel agent. She knew the language and the customs. They offered her a guard of 15 men and a daily fee if she would go to the Indians and convince them to come over to the American side. SARAH refused. Her loyalties were with the King. And, strangely, the Committee let her go.

At the same time (August 1777) Brig. Barry St. Leger had laid siege to the American-held Fort Stanwix (at the western end of the Mohawk Valley where Rome, N.Y. stands today). With him was a huge force intent on invading the Mohawk Valley - British regulars, Sir John Johnson's Greens (the King's Royal Regiment of New York), several forest-wise members of the Indian Department (acting chiefly as interpreters with the Indians), and several hundred Six Nations warriors under Joseph Brant. The Tryon County Committee of Safety easily perceived the exposed position of the Valley settlers with St. Leger on their doorstep. Decisions were made, and orders were given. A detachment of armed men was hastily dispatched to re-arrest SARAH, just eight days after her release. They were given orders to drag her back, perhaps forever.

They were too late. An unknown ally had secretly passed a message to the trading post to alert SARAH. The men were coming. In a frenzy, the women quickly gathered together some food, bits of clothing, blankets, and a knife. Floorboards were pulled up to recover gold coins hidden there. Everything else was left in the head-long desperate rush to get away before the Committee's armed men

arrived. And in the frantic haste to escape, poor William was left behind, still chained inside the house. (Word came much later that he had been burned alive when he was found.)

The little band of escapees struggled westward through the night-black forest, staying off the King's Road that would have led them more easily to Fort Stanwix. They could not chance meeting anyone. Hours later, they staggered into St. Leger's camp. SARAH collapsed in exhaustion and total defeat. Her world had come to an end.

St. Leger's siege of Fort Stanwix failed, and he was forced to retreat. SARAH and her family walked with the retreating soldiers to the fort at Oswego where they were temporarily housed and fed meagre government rations, before being shipped by boat to Montreal. The women were now homeless and penniless.

Daniel Claus, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, was very much aware of the Indians' high regard for SARAH, and cleverly perceived in her an asset that could be used to British advantage. He persuaded her to go to the Indians and live among them as she had as a child, but now her duty was to attempt to keep them loyal to the King. She was now a woman of sixty-four, and everything she had ever loved and owned had been taken away. Only her children remained, and all she wanted now was to be able to rest.

However, she was made of sterner stuff. She agreed with Claus' plan, and with some apprehension and fear, kissed her daughters goodbye and set out for the winter woods of northern New York in late 1777. Reports of the time indicate that they flocked to her from the remotest villages, and "that faithful and zealous Chief Sakayengwareghton expressed to her his satisfaction and thanks on behalf of the whole body for...having her among them to direct and advise them in that critical time, and she was treated with all the Friendship and civility the place afforded."¹

While in the Indian village, SARAH heard that a belt of wampum had been received by the Indians from General Schuyler, attempting to swing them over to the American side. Rather than let this

belt pass on through the entire Six Nations territory, she told the Indians it was an evil message and had them bury the offending parcel in a hidden spot.

Throughout that winter, SARAH kept the Six Nations focused and loyal to King George, ensuring their continued support and allegiance. Indeed, the scheme was so successful that Claus persuaded her to return to the Indians once again in the winter of 1778, this time accompanied by her son George, an interpreter with the Indian Department (who would later be severely injured in the leg during the Battle of Stone Arabia in 1780 when Sir John Johnson swept through the Schoharie and Mohawk Valleys on his destructive raids on rebel crops and farms.)

SARAH was never paid for her service to the British government, no certificate of gratitude was ever offered nor has any letter of thanks ever been received. She has rested in an unmarked grave in Bath for 200 years. But now, her proud descendants will gather to honour her memory with the unveiling of a granite memorial dedicated to the staunch spirit that marks all those of Loyalist heredity.

The weekend of 7-8 September 1991 will be marked by the first gathering of MCGINNESS descendants ever organized in North America. A dinner and a boat tour to Carleton Island will also be held. The highlight of the weekend's activities will be the unveiling, at St. John's in Bath, of the bronze plaque and monument in her memory.

The late Dr. H.C. Burleigh captured the essence of this woman's contribution in these words: "I often wonder if the Continental Congress ever discovered that its aim to draw the Iroquois from their allegiance to the British Crown was foiled by a tired but indomitable woman of sixty-four years, or that their Belts of Wampum still lie buried somewhere in the forests of northern New York."²

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Letter, Colonel Claus to General Haldimand, 5 November 1788, National Archives of Canada, Haldimand Papers, B 114, p. 11.
2. Burleigh, H.C., *The Deforests of Avesnes and Kast, McGinness*, (private monograph, available National Library of Canada).

THE HUMBLE PETITION OF SARAH MCGINN SHEWETH

That your petitioner, Widow of Captain McGinn who was killed last was under the Command of the late Sir William Johnson Bart, near Lake George and who has a Son being her only Son now living Lieutenant in the Six Nations Department, that was wounded in the Knee on this unnatural Rebellion, & his leaving a Helpless Family, renders him unable to give her any assistance she is aged & very infirm & the Rebels have destroyed, plundered and taken almost all her property; because they alledged and not without reason that she was tampering with the Indians in favour of Government.

That she was confined at Fort Eaton and at different times brought before their Committees strictly cautioned about Indian Matters and as often got clear but

with difficulty of the Committees resentment.

That when our Forces were before Fort Stanwix, your petitioner made her escape to it, with her family, except a Son, who she was obliged to leave to their mercy; who was out of his senses, and bound in Chains as he had been for several years and sometime afterwards was burned alive in said situation.

That if your petitioner had not got away, the Rebels would certainly have obliged her to act for them with the Indians. The Rebels by way of inducement to come over to their side offered her Twelve Shillings York Currency per day and a Guard of Thirty men to protect her against any harm from the Kings Troops, which offer she refused with contempt.

That after our Forces returned From Fort Stanwix to Oswego, your petitioner was sent with her Son, Mr. George McGinn mentioned before, to Quayouga Castle to

be of every service in her power to Government among the Indians during her stay there. It happened that an Indian was going with a belt of Wampum to the different Indians, from General Schyler acquainting the Six Nations that all the Kings Troops had been defeated and taken Prisoners at Saratogaby the American Army & if the Six Nations would not come immediately and make Peace with the Congress, they would find means to compell them; which Belt your petitioner stopped & prevailed upon the Indians to carry an account of a different nature, favourable to Government and encouraged the Six Nations, who soon after went to War against the Rebels on their [indecipherable].

Your petitioner now resides at Carleton Island and has nothing to support her but her Rations there.

Public Record Office Reference AO 13/14, pages 138-139

A DOCUMENT FROM OUR PAST

The Trial of David Mathews, Loyalist Mayor of New York

7 July 1776

The committee [against conspiracies opposed to the revolution] met, and ordered David Matthews (sic), late mayor of the city to be brought before them.

Mr. Mathews being brought in, cast a look of contempt on the court, and affected to treat it with derision.

President. We sit here by the authority of the people to enquire into a most horrid conspiracy, with power to acquit or punish, as evidence shall appear. You are charged, Sir, with being a principal adviser and abettor of schemes against your country; we have evidence of your having attended an unlawful meeting, associated for the purposes of overturning the present constitution, and introducing the old tyranny...If you have anything to say, we are ready to hear it.

Prisoner. This is a new mode of trial to hurry a man to prison without letting him know his crime, to seize his papers and put armed men into his house, and then examine him in a private manner, without a jury of his peers, or giving him any information of his accusers, or allowing him to prepare for his defence. I scorn your mercy, and am ready to suffer for my King and country. If I am to undergo the formality of a trial, let it be in the accustomed manner, by a jury.

Mr. MacDougal. Sir, we are ready to do you all the justice you can ask; but we do not expect to be bullied and cavaliered in this manner...

Prisoner. I am sensible [aware] all defence will be in vain with men thirsting after blood. How many fathers have you already torn from their families and thrown into prison, only for a difference of sentiment? If my principles are my crime, I never made a secret of being a friend to the King and constitution. You know yourselves that the conspiracy you talk of is a mere pretence to punish. The people you have thrown in prison were guilty of no other misdeeds than meeting in a social manner, and expressing their

wishes for the restoration of the old constitution; they could not hurt you, when you are surrounded by so formidable an army in your service: they never were mad enough to attempt so wild a project. All they have done is to declare their opinions freely, during the openness of sociability and wine...You must, therefore use your pleasure, for I cannot in my conscience admit of any authority in this body, to try and confine, or punish any subject of England.

Minutes of the Trial and Examination of Certain Persons in the Province of New York... (London, 1786)

VICTORIA CROSS-with its 93 Canadian winners and worldwide cachet should remain Canada's premier award for gallantry in war. Only those seeking to re-write history and deny traditions could argue. Look where such a view has got our country today. Affirm our monarchical identity. Stand up for our V.C.! Agree? For fact sheet and information write: The Monarchist League of Canada, PO Box 1057, Oakville, Ont. L6J 5E9.