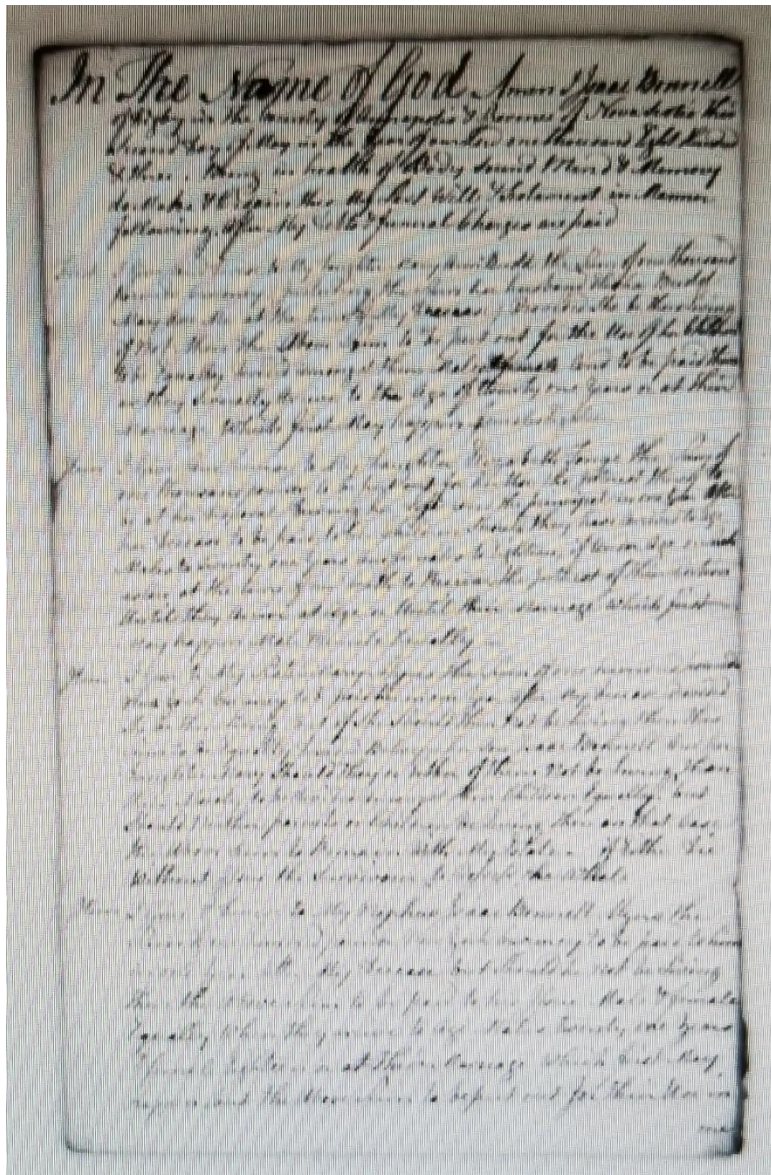


ISAAC BONNELL: A Loyalist who Willed his Slaves to Freedom

By Brian McConnell*

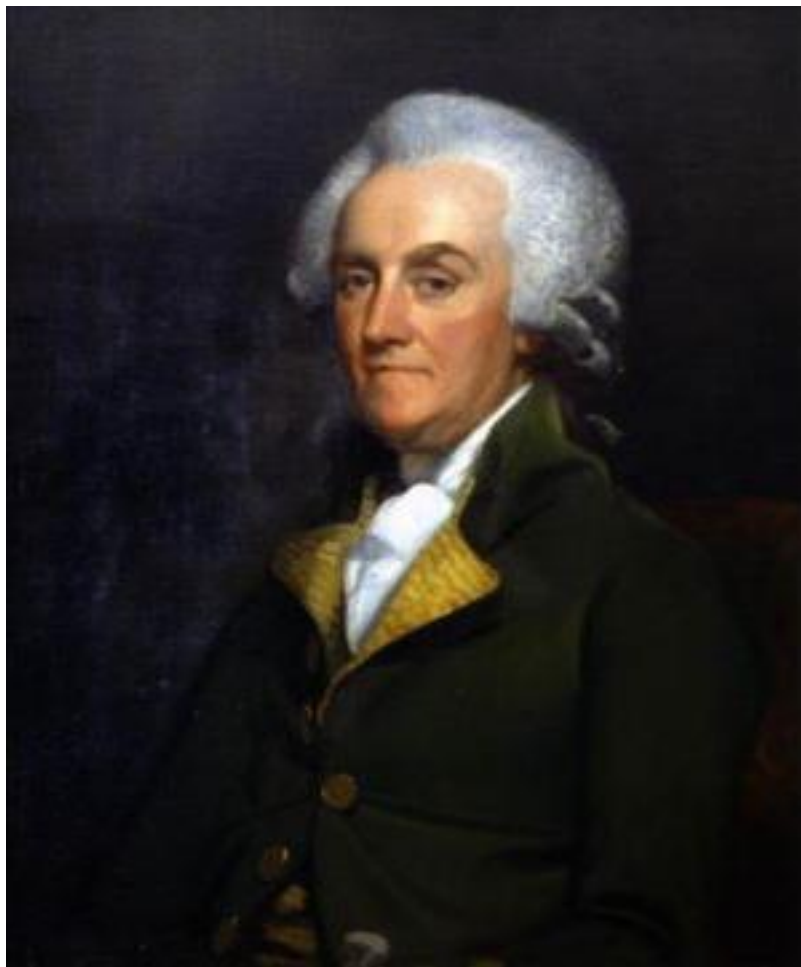
“My desire is that my Black Boys George, Tom and Bob be taught to read distinctly in the Bible and to write a legible hand that they be set at Liberty as they severally arrive at the age of twenty four years. Each to be allowed a suit of good new clothes of every description beside their common wearing apparel. George was born in November, 1790, Tom was born in May 1792, and Bob was born in February, 1794 ”
(1)

These words expressing a desire to educate and give freedom to three black slaves were included in the Will of Isaac Bonnell dated May 2, 1803. He was a Loyalist who arrived in Digby, Nova Scotia in 1783 from New York as a refugee after the American Revolution.



Last Will & Testament of Loyalist Isaac Bonnell

The Will also appointed his son William Franklin, who he had named after the last colonial Governor of New Jersey, and his son - in - law, Elisha Budd, married to his daughter Mary Ann and a former officer in the Kings American Regiment, as Executors. See Appendix A for transcription of the entire Will.



William Franklin, Governor of New Jersey from 1763 – 1776

William Franklin was an American born attorney and son of Patriot leader Benjamin Franklin, a member of the Committee which drafted the American Declaration of Independence. (2)

Who was Isaac Bonnell, this Digby Loyalist who desired to educate and free his black slaves? He is believed to have been born around Elizabethtown, New Jersey between 1736 and 1738. His grandfather may have been Nathaniel Bonnell, of New Haven, Connecticut and one of the founders of New Jersey.

Isaac Bonnell married Grace Fox at Perth Amboy, Middlesex County, New Jersey on December 3, 1763. She was the daughter of Thomas Fox who gave her a house and other property. By becoming friends with Governor William Franklin Isaac Bonnell received an appointment as Barrackmaster for New Jersey. In June, 1775 the Governor also appointed him Sheriff of Middlesex County, New Jersey.

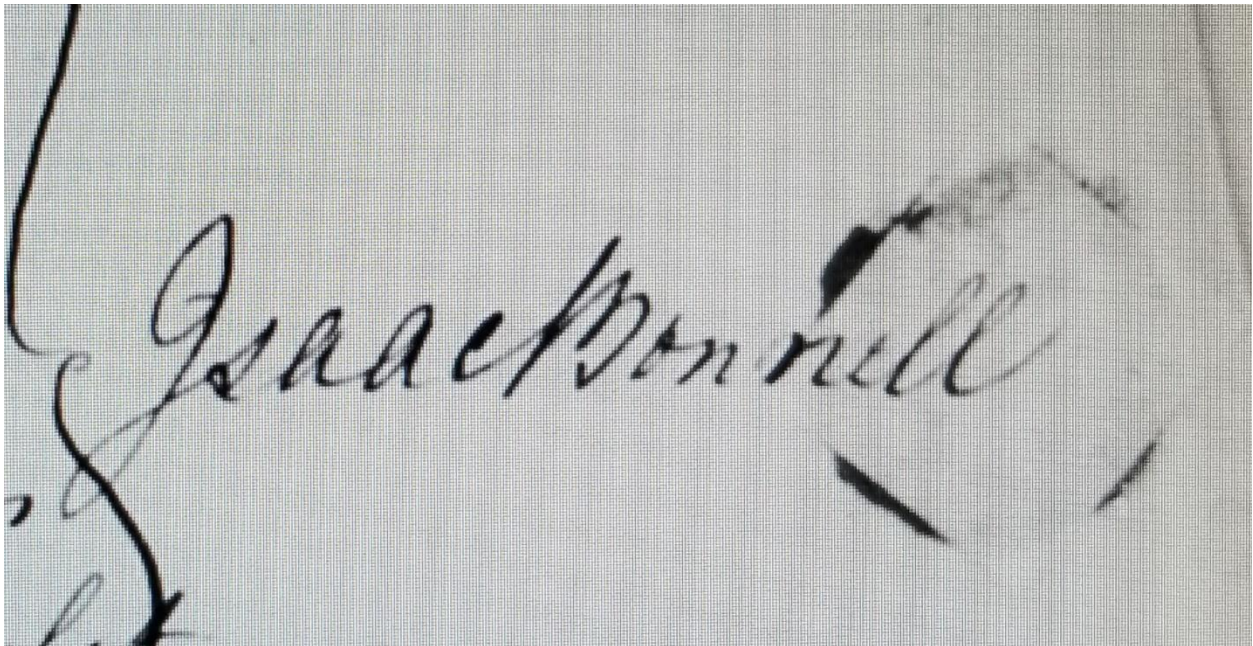
When the revolutionary war broke out Governor Franklin and Isaac Bonnell were both apprehended for being Loyalists. Bonnell was paroled but directed to remain at Trenton, New Jersey. In order to secure release he took an oath not to bear allegiance to King George III. He then signed up in an American militia, however later the same year, in 1776, switched sides by joining the British. By 1777 he was commissioned a Lieutenant in the Prince of Wales American Regiment.

On November 30, 1780 Bonnell's wife Grace died. Together they had three children, daughters Mary Ann and Elizabeth as well as son William Franklin. The Bonnell's fled to New York for safety and at the end of the conflict were evacuated in 1783 with other Loyalists to Digby.

In Digby, Bonnell became a successful merchant. He was appointed a Commissioner of Oaths, Justice of the Peace, and Judge of the Common Pleas. On June 15, 1788, his appointment as Commissioner of Oaths was made along with four others: Colonel Isaac Hatfield, Major Thomas Millidge, Mr. John Smith, Mr. Jonathan Fowler. It occurred in relation to the settlement of the Estate of George Sutherland, a merchant of Clements. The other Commissioners were also all of Digby and leading Loyalists. (3) Two, Hatfield and Fowler, also owned black slaves. Hatfield was one of twenty-seven owners of black slaves in Annapolis County who petitioned in 1807 the Nova Scotia House of Assembly for financial relief in the event of the abolishment of slavery. (4) Digby was part of Annapolis County until 1837 when Digby County was created. Fowler sold a young female black girl in 1796 to another Loyalist John Croscup of Granville. (5) The appointment was made by Judge Joseph Winniett who was the first Acadian elected to the Nova Scotia House of Assembly as the son of Acadian Marie – Madeleine Maisonnat and William Winniett. He represented the Town of Annapolis Royal from 1761 to 1765 and Annapolis County from 1765 to 1770.

As a Loyalist Isaac Bonnell was granted a lot in the town of Digby, two water lots, and lands in Digby Township. (6) The Town lot was located on Water Street. He made two Memorials as a Loyalist seeking compensation for his losses of property during the American Revolution. Two homes he had owned in New Jersey and personal property were seized by the Rebels as well as a sloop called *Lively Hope* which had been pressed into service with the British and lost. As well he claimed loss of income as a Sheriff and Barrackmaster. These memorials were dated February 10, 1784 and May 28, 1789.

Bonnell was involved in a property dispute with Digby's first lawyer Terrence Kerrin, over ownership to a lot of land in Digby Township. Kerrin was a native of Ireland who came to Digby as a Loyalist in 1783 from New York. In March, 1790 the matter was settled in Nova Scotia Supreme Court when it was ruled in favour of Kerrin. He had been the original assignee of the lot of land by the local board of land agents. However, there was a condition it be improved within six months. One version of the evidence was that this improvement did not occur but nonetheless Kerrin was able to get his grant confirmed by Lieutenant - Governor John Parr. As Bonnell was occupying all or a portion of the land Kerrin brought an action for his ejectment. The court decided Kerrin had the better title based on his patent from the Lieutenant - Governor and combined with the original assignment. It was also noted that as the land had been assigned once to Kerrin it could not be subsequently assigned to Bonnell. (7)

A close-up photograph of a handwritten signature in cursive script. The signature reads "Isaac Bonnell" and is written in dark ink on a light-colored, textured paper. The signature is fluid and somewhat slanted to the right. There are some faint, illegible markings above and below the main signature.

Signature of Isaac Bonnell

On November 10, 1806 the Saint John, New Brunswick newspaper reported the death of Isaac Bonnell with the following:

On the night of 7th instant, Isaac Bonnell, Esq., at age of 70, died at Digby, Nova Scotia having an unblemished reputation.

Isaac Bonnell was buried in Trinity Anglican Church cemetery in Digby on November 11, 1806. (8)



Gravestone of Isaac Bonnell

The inscription on the gravestone of Isaac Bonnell reads:

In memory of
Isaac Bonnell, Esq.
Who departed this life
the 7th November, 1806 aged
69 years 2 months and
9 days

If useful life through long protracted years,
In unassuming worth have claim to praise,
If praise is due to him whose liberal hand,
Gave bread and raiment to the laboring poor,
If wealth diffused with just and liberal hand,
The glow of pious gratitude demand,
Then sure the sacred ashes buried here,
Deserve the tribute of a grateful tear.

Appendix A

In The Name of God, Amen, I, Isaac Bonnell of Digby in the County of Annapolis & Province of Nova Scotia this second day of May in the Year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and three. Being in health and body sound Mind and Memory do make and ordain this My Last Will & Testament in Manner following. After my debts and funeral charges are paid

First. I Give and Devise to my daughter Mary Ann Budd the sum of one thousand pounds currency (including the sum her husband Elisha may owe me at the time of my decease) provided she be then living. If not then the above sum to be put out for the use of her children to be equally divided amongst them males & female. And to be paid as they severally arrive at the age of Twenty one years or at their marriage which first may happen females Eighteen.

Item. I Give and Devise to my daughter Elizabeth Tongue the sum of one thousand pounds to be put out for her use the interest thereof to be at her disposal during her life and the principal in one year after her decease to be paid to her children should they have arrived to age males to Twenty one and females to Eighteen, if under age or such as are, at the time of her death to receive the interest of their portion until they arrive at age or until their marriage which first may happen male & female equally.

Item. I Give to my sister Mary Myers the sum of one hundred pounds New York currency to be paid her in one year after my decease provided she be then living. But if she should not be then living then this sum to be equally divided between her son Isaac Bonnell and her daughter Mary. Should they or either of them not be living then their moiety to be divided amongst their children Equally, but should neither parents or children be living then in that case the above sum to remain with my Estate. If either die without issue the survivor to possess the whole.

Item. I Give & Devise to my nephew Isaac Bonnell Myers the sum of one hundred pounds New York currency to be paid to him in one year after my decease but should he not be living then the above sum to be paid to his issue male and female equally when they arrive to age males Twenty one years & female Eighteen or at their marriage which first may happen but the above sum to be put out for their use year after my decease but should he die without issue then the above sum to ho to his sister Mary in case she be living but if not living then to her children should she leave any. If not to continue with my Estate.

Item. I Give & Devise unto my niece Mary, the daughter of my sister Mary Myers the sum of fifty pounds New York currency to be paid her in one year after my decease should she then be living. If not living then to be equally divided amongst her children male & female but should she leave no issue then to be paid to her brother Isaac Bonnell if he be living If not to his issue male & female but should he leave no issue then to be paid to his mother if she be living if not living this sum also to remain with my Estate.

Item. I Give & Bequeath to my kinswoman Priscilla Mitchel, daughter of the late Abraham & Mary Burgeau the sum of fifty pounds New York currency to be paid her in one year after my decease & to no other person without her Special Order but should she not be living then to her children at the discretion of my Executors.

Item. I Give & Bequeath to my two grandsons Isaac Bonnell Budd and Bonnell Tongue the sum of fifty pounds currency of Nova Scotia to be paid out for their use until they arrive at the age of Twenty one years, the interest to be annually allowed them. Should Isaac Bonnell Budd not live to the age of Twenty one years then his portion to be allowed his sister Mary Ann or should Bonnell Tongue not live to the age of Twenty one years then his sister Grace to be allowed his portion. Should Mary Ann & Grace or either of them die before they arrive to age then their portion to be divided among their surviving brothers & sisters.

Item. My desire is that my Black Boys George, Tom and Bob be taught to read distinctly in the Bible and to write a legible hand that they be set at Liberty as they severally arrive at the age of twenty four years. Each to be allowed a suit of good new clothes of every description beside their common wearing apparel. George was born in November, 1790, Tom was born in May 1792, and Bob was born in February, 1794

Item. The whole & Residue of my Estate both Real & Personal I bequeath to my son William Franklin he allowing my sister Susannah Thompson fifty dollars per annum during her life to be paid her half yearly but should she live and become to infirm by old age or otherwise as not to be able to make any provisions for herself & the above sum insufficient to support her comfortably then in that case to make her a further allowance of ten dollars annually.

Lastly. I Nominate Constitute and Appoint my son William Franklin and my son in law Elisha Budd Executors to this my Last Will & Testament hereby revoking & annulling all other Wills heretofore by me made.

In Witness Whereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal the day and year above written.

Sealed, Published Declared

And Pronounced by the said

Isaac Bonnell to be his Last Will

& Testament who signed his name in

ISAAC BONNELL (signed)

the presence of us. And we witness

in the presence of each other

Charles Coulbourn (signed)

Isaac Hatfield (signed)

William Beman (signed)

Notes

- Brian McConnell completed this article on April 2, 2021. He can be contacted at email brianm564@gmail.com
- (1) Nova Scotia Probate Records, 1760 – 1993, Annapolis Estate Files, 1763 – 1860, B1 – B75, pp. 170 – 173, familysearch.org
- (2) For an interesting account of the two Franklins see “The Loyal Son: the War in Ben Franklin’s House”, by Daniel Mark Epstein, published by Ballantine Books, 2018
- (3) Nova Scotia Probate Records, op. cit., S1 – S60, p. 79.
- (4) Owners petition to Nova Scotia Assembly, December 3, 1807, Nova Scotia House of Assembly, Nova Scotia Archives RG 5 series A vol. 14 no. 49 (microfilm no. 15591)
- (5) Deed of Sale for Negro Child, July 14, 1796, Chesley family fonds, Nova Scotia Archives MG 1 vol. 177 no. 75
- (6) Harvey, D.C., “Loyalists and Land Settlement in Nova Scotia”, Global Heritage Press, 2006
- (7) Phillips, Jim, “The Impeachment of the Judges of the Nova Scotia Supreme Court, 1787 - 1793: Colonial Judges, Loyalist Lawyers and the Colonial Assembly” (2011) 34:2, Dalhousie Law Journal, 265
- (8) To see a video of visit to the gravestone of Isaac Bonnell on YouTube go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSJXgevYwQI>