



## First Nations, the Nelles Family and Truth and Reconciliation

By Catharine Bingle-Gonnsen UE, September 2021

I am thankful the Truth and Reconciliation Day has been passed into law by our federal government to be observed September 30 each year.

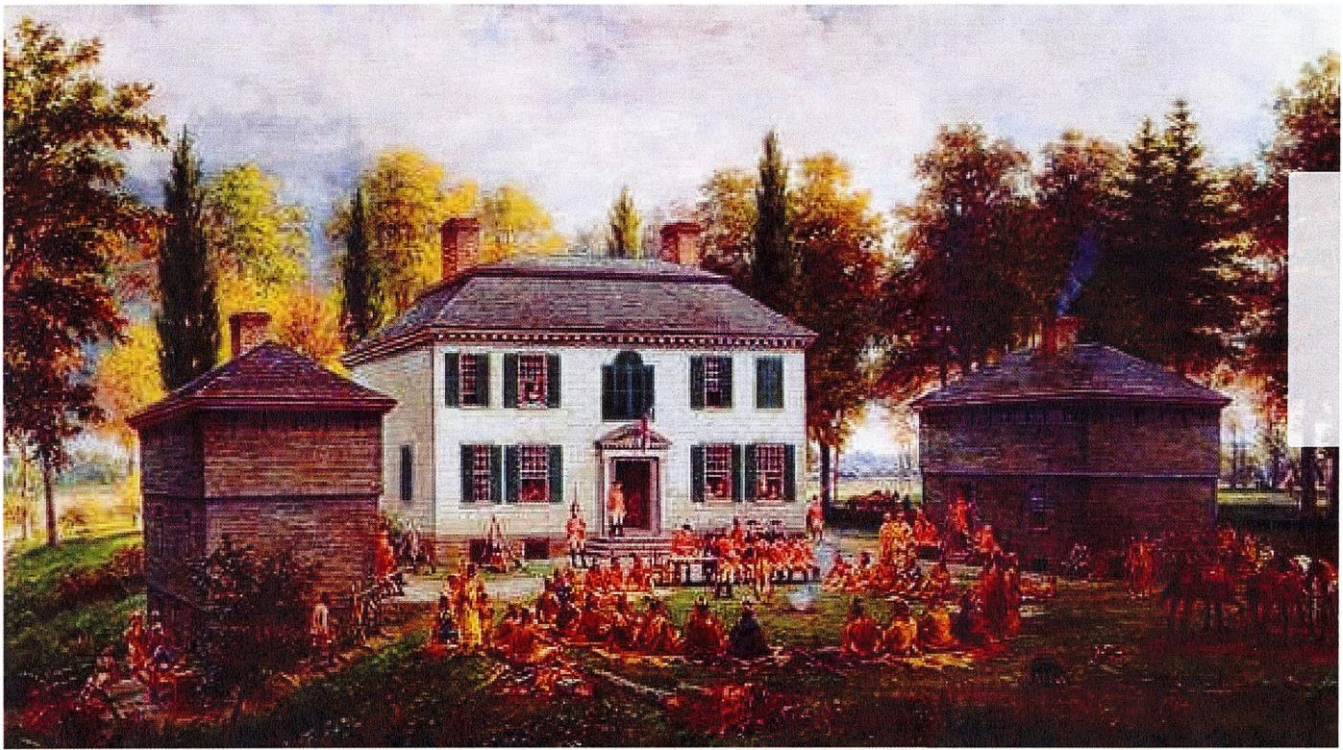
As hard as it may be to look honestly at this subject we have to, and the recent discovery of unmarked graves all across Canada at the sites of Residential Schools is so sad and heartbreaking it can't be hidden or ignored any longer.

In my part of Canada where the disputes of the "Grand River Tract" remain so unsettled, Ontario Homebuilders are being held at bay from development lands they own by Six Nation disputes and claims of unpaid treaties. This has to be settled once for all.

United Empire Loyalists were refugees from the American Revolution and many of those families came to the Thirteen Colonies as immigrants themselves before establishing, in some cases, vast holdings, such as Sir William Johnson of New York Province. In her book "*Flint and Feather*", Charlotte Gray writes about Sir William who married Captain Joseph Brant's sister Molly, having "fathered some 200 children", many with Indigenous mothers. One such child she writes might have been Pauline Johnson's grandfather.

The 1903 painting (on the next page) of Sir Williams' home, Johnson Hall, depicting the presentation of medals to the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy in 1772, shows a gracious Georgian home, not dissimilar in appearance from Nelles Manor. Johnson Hall is a museum in Johnstown, New York State, USA, while Nelles Manor is a museum in Grimsby, Ontario, Canada.

In 1970 The Grimsby Historical Society published "Indian Oratory and other papers "Brothers Open Your Ears" and " Letters of Rev. Abram Nelles" which tells the story of Abram Nelles, Missionary to the Six Nation Indians. He was the grandson of New Jersey Captain John Moore UEL, and son of Mohawk Valley New York, Robert Nelles. UEL who became Lieut. Col October 12, 1815.



Edward Lawson Henry (1841-1919) - Canadian Museum of Civilization

Abram was born in Nelles Manor on Christmas Day 1805 and was seven when the War of 1812 broke out. Nineteen year old sister, Margaret, wrote of the war "this was a fearful time, with the roar of cannon, carts of wounded brought home and the thousands of red men (Indians) who were encamped on our place."

The Nelles / Indigenous People and British government / Indian Department connection on the Grand River Six Nations is widely documented and there were a number of Loyalist - Indian intermarriages. Indeed many Indigenous persons weren't just British Allies, they were red-coat uniformed officers themselves, Loyalists, and some slave-owners here in Canada as well.

Robert Nelles' step-mother, Priscilla Ramsey-Nelles had been " a captive of the Indians (in New York State) from age 6 about 1747, raised by them and married to Captain Little Billy's uncle", who then died before she became the second wife of Henrick Nelles of the Grand River Tract.

As a blood relative of Rev. Abram Nelles , and direct descendant of both Loyalist and British Army settlers to "The Forty" , I was mistakenly proud of the efforts to Christianize and educate Six Nations children taken by my family. I was brought up to believe that "spreading the gospel" and "bringing souls to the Lord" is a good thing, but this was always in the context of "whosoever will may come" , a

voluntary choice, not something rammed down people's throats or forced or coerced upon them in any way.

From the age of eight Abram Nelles was raised by step mother, Maria Jane who had been born in England, christened as an infant in a Unitarian Church there, come to "The Canada's "with her Scottish gentry family of Francis Waddell, who was the stone mason with a shipbuilder crew which actually built Nelles Manor for Robert Nelles, and lived in Niagara-On-The-Lake (Newark) where his home was razed by the Americans in 1813. Abram's biological mother, Elizabeth Moore, had been christened as an infant in St. Johns Anglican Church in Elizabethtown , New Jersey in 1769 before her family had come to "The Forty" . Abram Nelles' childhood upbringing was shrouded in sorrow, loss, and ironically also new beginnings and Anglicanism.

His mother Elizabeth, and Aunt Mary and Uncle Alan Nixon had died within weeks of each other at "The Forty" in 1813. Older sister Margaret had married her dashing British Army Officer, Edward Pilkington, and left The Manor. Then a new mother had come to live at The Manor with two young children, one, a boy, six months younger than Abram. Abram's father was often away at York in the Legislative Assembly so step-mother Maria Jane would have been a strong influence in his life and Christian development as was evidenced by his later adult letters home to a loving "mother" from Brantford.

As he grew Abram Nelles had been sent to York (Toronto) to be educated by Bishop Strachan and Alexander Neil Bethune. By age 23 he was an educated man of the cloth who understood farming and entrepreneurship, had been raised waking up to Indians sleeping to warm themselves in front of the kitchen cook hearth in harsh winters at his home, Nelles Manor, had regular contact back and forth with uncles and cousins on the road to the Grand River elles Settlement Tract from the Forty, and was more than willing to learn the language and customs of the people he was charged with ministering to in the Chapel of the Mohawks and the Mohawk Institute of which he became principal.

Funded by the Interdenominational New England Company which supported Nelles' predeceator Luggar, on Sept. 30, 1837 Rev. Abram Nelles became the senior missionary to the Grand River Community. "His post carried with it the rectorship of the Mohawk Chapel and principalship of the Mohawk Institute, a day school operated by the New England Company for Indian students under his administration for 35 years. The Institute teaching both academic and practical subjects became a model for Indian schools which had assimilation of the Indians as their object. It was thought to have started out as a "Mechanics Institute" but soon bore no resemblance to that.

By 1844 Nelles had 50 children boarding at the school. In 1839 he published a



hymnal in the Mohawk language and in 1842 an edition in Mohawk language of the Anglican Common Book of Prayer. In 1872 he retired from the Mohawk Institute although he retained rectorship of the Mohawk Church, so clearly he was in charge during the 1866 Fenian Invasion at Ridgeway and subsequent 1867 time of Confederation of Canada.

Was Abram part of the abuses and atrocities done to residential school children we read about today? I doubt it, but as one of the earliest principals of the earliest such school in Canada my Loyalist family is not without its part of the story.

Regardless of the character of the man himself, whom I prefer to think of as politically ambitious like his Nelles father and grandfather, well-meaning, but misguided and uniquely, because of the vast wealth, holdings, and influence of his Family Compact family. more able to handle the financial constraints of the isolation, and uncertain living conditions of the Indian mission than any other clergy of his time would have been. He could write home to his father at "The Forty" and simply ask that supplies be sent and father Robert would supplement his vastly inadequate income.

Clearly it was a confluence of circumstances that had lead Rev. Abram Nelles to seek out an early and influential position in the beginning years of what would turn out to be a horrible abuse of power and family wrecking system across Canada.

I refuse to believe that Abram Nelles was anything like the horrible John Zimmerman who became principal of the Mohawk Institute later. That man was truly evil from everything I have read.

The time for justice and truth is now, not by burning down one of only three Chapels' Royal in Canada and the oldest surviving church building in Ontario (built 1785 by the British Crown), but rather by openly admitting what was done there.

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#### References:

Wikipedia and online Biography

Indian Oratory

The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Report of Canada

*In The Shadow of the Escarpment* story of John Moore by Paul Bingle

*Flint and Feather* by Charlotte Gray