

# Overwintering 1783- 84 at Cataraqui with George Harpell

By Valerie Harpell Howe, September, 2025

Though his life was not without impact, George Harpell (1762 – 1841) is one of the least known among the first Loyalists at the settlement that would become Kingston. Richard Preston's Collection of Kingston Loyalist Documents reproduces several Roll Calls showing George's presence at Cataraqui:

- On December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1783<sup>1</sup> when George was one of 18 Loyalists of Captain Grass' Company overwintering there. George is identified as being 21 years and 5 months old and claiming only 1 ration
- the Roll Call in Oct 1784 where it is noted that George Harpell's 'land is not run out' (surveyed) and he claims only 1 ration (so he remained a single man)
- a 1784 list of Proprietors in No. 1 (Kingston) Township, with George on Lot 1, Con 4
- an 1815 Plan with George owning Lot 16 in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Concession, Kingston Twp. beside John Stuart (Rev),
- his *benefaction for building a church at Kingston* in 1795
- and in 1796 as George Harple, U.E. in the *Roll of Inhabitants of the Midland District in the Province of Upper Canada who Adhered to the Unity of the Empire and Joined the Royal Standard in America*. This grandiose turn of phrase does not perfectly capture the position of the largely Pennsylvania Dutch and Associated Loyalists in the Company led by Captain Grass, as will be seen.

Preston provides biographical information for most of the Kingston Loyalists – but is unable to do so for George. Background for many Loyalists came from family memories and from claims for losses suffered during the American Revolution. However, George did not make a claim for loss and his family seems less inclined to transmit their family history. Larry Turner's *Voyage of a Different Kind: The Associated Loyalists of Kingston and Adolphustown*<sup>2</sup> text reproduces only the 1784 October 9<sup>th</sup> Roll Call but adds the notation that George is an Associated Loyalist. He adds no further biographical information. Indeed, Turner identifies George as one of very few for whom he could find no information before or after the settlement's early days.

From the usual key texts on Kingston area Loyalists that is all the information to be found – except for a vital footnote that Turner provides to the 1783 Roll. There Turner identifies George Harper/ Harpell as one among a handful of Loyalists who overwintered in 1783-4 to help survey

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<sup>1</sup> Preston, Richard ed. *Kingston Before the War of 1812: A Collection of Documents*. Champlain Society; U. of T. Press, 1959 includes this the Roll of Loyalists at Cataraqui. Preston xlv also says that Loyalists of Grass' Company from Sorel accompanied Collins in exploring the wider area before Cataraqui was settled upon.

<sup>2</sup> Turner, 2010 3<sup>rd</sup> printing Global Heritage Press, Milton.

and then build infrastructure for a settlement at the confluence of the Cataraqui and St. Lawrence Rivers and Lake Ontario.

The crucial planning and building that this advance guard contributed to the success of those settlements is a largely untold chapter in Loyalist history – camouflaged by the repeated report that the Loyalists arrived in 1784 – and the implication that the site was a wilderness. In fact, before 1783 there was already a small, largely Indigenous settlement there with a wharf and a few merchants serving the military base on Carleton Island<sup>3</sup>. Then this advance guard of ‘artificers’ and soldiers added substantially to that infrastructure between September of 1783 and the summer of 1784, so that the main groups of Loyalists arrived to find completed surveys of the township lines and the town and much of the foundation needed for a thriving military base and town.

### **Why Settle at Cataraqui?**

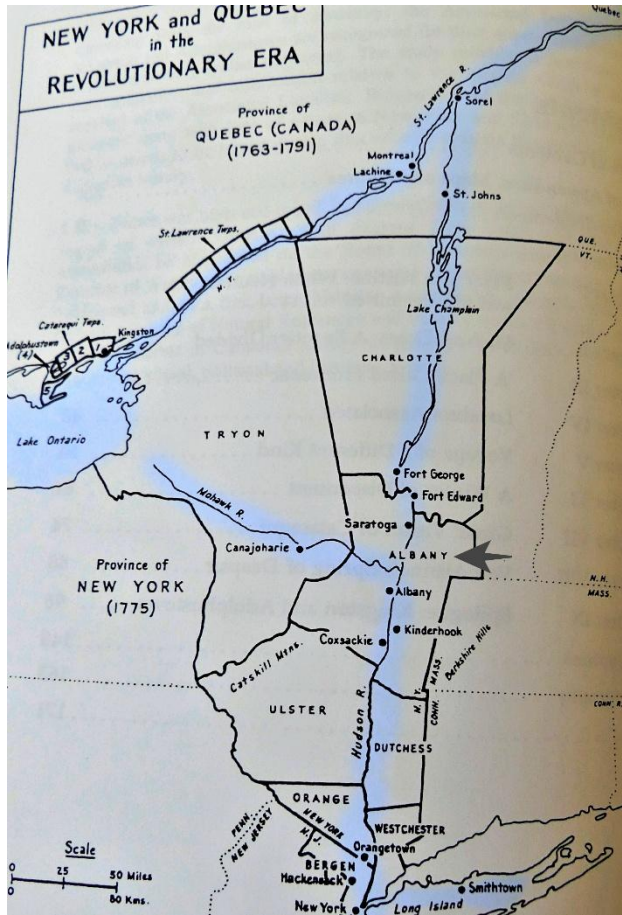
Unlike the Maritimes, where Britain deposited most settler Loyalists heading north, this location required a much longer journey, lacked infrastructure or English settlement, was less handy to Britain’s trade routes and would not add to the important Atlantic fishery. However, a few stubborn Loyalists had set their hearts on this distant and inconvenient destination. Peter Van Alstyne and Michael Grass recruited Loyalists to accompany them there.

Presumably men like George Harpell who accompanied Grass to Cataraqui and those, including future in-laws of George, who settled with Van Alstyne in nearby Prince Edward County, were more interested in being farmers than fishermen. A New York newspaper notice posted by Michael (Mik’l) Grass shows that Grass was especially interested in the fur trading opportunity at Cataraqui. Grass, Van Alstyne, and likely Harpell, were familiar with the fur trade on the riverine trade routes linking their Mohawk Valley homeland to Lake Ontario and beyond. Van Alstyne, Grass and Harpell likely knew John Johnson the British Superintendent of ‘Indian Affairs’ whose grand Mohawk Valley estate was near the Grass family home and just down-river from the Harpell family who were likely George’s kin.

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<sup>3</sup> Esford, Ivory, 2023 “The Legend of Captain Michael Grass” *The Logic of Elimination and Loyalist Myth-making in Upper Canada, 1783-84*. Ontario History. Volume 115, Number 1, Spring 2023, p. 1–20. <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/onhistory/2023-v115-n1-onhistory07936/1098782ar/> and his Queens MA thesis of the same title. (2021). <https://qspace.library.queensu.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/3859c484-dc4b-4c52-89e4-4e17>. See also: Donald B. Smith, “The Dispossession of the Mississauga Indians: A Missing Chapter in the Early History of Upper Canada,” in *Historical Essays on Upper Canada: New Perspectives*, ed. J.K. Johnson and Bruce G. Wilson (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1989). Esford argues that the description of the Loyalists, and of Michael Grass in particular, as founder(s) of Kingston negates the earlier French and Indigenous (mostly Mississauga) settlements and the work done by the military in 1783 – he misses, though, the fact that George Harpell and two score other Associated Loyalist artisans worked with the military establishing the enlarged infrastructure for the new town and settlement, for the Brandts and re-building of the derelict former French fort.

## The River Routes



These Pennsylvania Dutch men from the Mohawk River Valley hoped that they and their families might prosper from situating themselves near the Loyalist Haudenosaunee refugees from the Mohawk Valley and establishing new fur trade posts with them. They may have anticipated that this suggestion would appeal to the British officials. Eventually, Guy Carleton (Commander in Chief then) and Quebec Governor Haldimand, supported the idea.

On May 20<sup>th</sup> 1783 Grass invited Loyalists to his New York home on Chatham Street and encouraged them to consider settling near Fort Frontenac 'to carry on the Indian & fur trade.'

A week later Grass posted a notice in the Loyalist broadsheet, The Royal American Gazette, stating that the British Commander in Chief in New York, Guy Carleton, agreed with the notion of bringing 'the King's subjects' to Fort Frontenac also known by the Indigenous

name of Cataraqui. The Gazette notice stresses the suitability of the area for trade with the Indigenous population. It is emblematic of how history is written that the 'Indigenous advantage' of settling at Ka'tarohkwi has been invisible ever since.

on May 27, 1783, the Royal American Gazette printed this notice:

*Those Loyalists who have had a meeting at the house of Michael Grass, in the outward of this city, on the evening of the 20th inst. & have signed their names to form a settlement on Fort Frontenac, at the mouth of Lake Ontario & head of the River St. Lawrence, in Canada, The only eligible place left by the late treaty for the King's subjects, to carry on the Indian & fur trade, etc. are hereby notified, that their request has been communicated to his Excellency the Commander in Chief, by the gentlemen appointed for that purpose, & that his Excellency was pleased to give them the encouragement they desired. A list of the names of those who may be inclined to settle in this new country, is opened at the house of the said Mr. Grass, in Chatham Street, near the Tea-Water Pump, New York May 26, 1783.*

George Harpell, who joined this group of Evacuees, is likely related to the Loyalist Harples from the Mohawk Valley and quite likely also to the Harple family who move to Royalist New York<sup>4</sup> during the late 1770s as war was looming. I believe that he is the George Harp recorded as a carpenter at the Quartermaster General's Department in New York on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1781<sup>5</sup>. At these May meetings at the Grass house the 20-year-old carpenter may have met, or been re-acquainted with, his future bride Eva Metzberg/Millspaugh the teenaged niece of Michael Grass's wife.

### **The War Refugees' Journey to Fort Frontenac/ Cataragui**

As soon as Quebec Governor Haldimand and Surveyor-General Holland determined that the derelict Fort Frontenac and the prime shoreline around it had potential for a significant British Loyalist settlement, they turned their thoughts to creating the essential infrastructure. A July 28, 1783 letter from Quebec Headquarters ordered Major Ross to bring Regimental soldiers to the Fort and to prepare to survey the land – but to tell no one of the possibility of settling Loyalists at Cataragui since he had no approval from Britain.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Grass and Van Alstine had Loyalists on board ships in New York harbour waiting, and hoping, to sail to Cataragui while Britain had only agreed that Haldimand could settle Chief Joseph Brandt's Haudenosaunee warriors there. In fact, determined Loyalist George Harpell and his shipmates would already be working to build the settlement before Imperial headquarters approved the settlement.

From Cataragui, Major Ross, who effectively commanded the town and fort during the first couple of years, promptly responded to Commander in Chief Haldimand's direction to begin a surreptitious survey. Ross replied that he could accomplish little without a sawmill, and he could not build one for lack of a millwright and masons. His superior's response on August 15<sup>th</sup> offers Ross hope that such artisans (artificers in military parlance of the time) might be available soon since Loyalists from New York who wished to settle at Cataragui were expected soon. After battling Atlantic waves, the *Camel* reached Quebec on August 12<sup>th</sup> – the first ship bearing Loyalist refugees. On board were Captain Michael Grass, George Harpell, 38 other men, 15 women and 37 children. Because many of her passengers were ill with malignant fever, measles and smallpox, the company were told to 'proceed immediately to Sorel.'

The trip to Sorel was made by bateau – the clumsy, flat-bottomed carrier open to the elements, low to the water and not at all agile or built for comfort. As Turner describes it: "*experienced Canadiens would row, pole, yank, push, tow, channel and guide the boats around perilous rapids while the occupants might scramble ashore and tumble alongside until ready once again to re-embark. It was a strenuous and time-consuming endeavour to climb the long sets of rapids with damp nights spent crowded into tents*".<sup>7</sup> Imagine George's bateau lunging and plunging with

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<sup>4</sup> There are very few Harples in Germany or America. Likely the 2 or 3 Harple families among the Pennsylvania Dutch followed each other in chain migration from the same area near Heidelberg in the Rhine Valley. George was the first Harpell in Canada and most of the few Harpells now in Canada are his descendants.

<sup>5</sup> British Headquarters Papers New York City 1774-83. Carleton's Loyalist Index, Carleton Branch, UELAC.

<sup>6</sup> Capt. Mathews Letter to Major Ross, Haldimand Papers, Public Archives of Canada, reproduced in Preston, xliii.

<sup>7</sup> Turner p. 89.

many small children, a woman 9 months pregnant (Margaret Swartz Grass), and many invalids burning up with fever. Turner reports: *Officers from Sorel sent other batteaux down to remove the sick from the transport – 16 in all, 12 being children – taking them to a hastily prepared hospital.* Without these ill family members, the Grass party finally arrived at Sorel on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August, a grueling nine days after arrival at Quebec City. Sorel's officers feared lest the outbreaks of smallpox and measles spread. Six had died at Quebec City and 10 more became ill after reaching the tent city at Sorel. The sick were moved on to Fort Yamaska and a guard posted to prevent contact<sup>8</sup>. Mrs. Vanalstine would linger for many months nursing children with measles before dying at Sorel in the summer of 1784. Michael Grass' wife Margaretta Swartz, meanwhile, gave birth to a daughter in Sorel and both mother and daughter survived. Throughout this time the authorities complained of the refugees tirelessly requesting blankets to keep warm.

### Send Artificers

In the military parlance of the time, George was 'an artificer' and an Associator. Turner<sup>9</sup> asserts that all the Loyalists leaving New York City with Grass and Van Alstine are considered Associated Loyalists. Associators were civilians who played vital roles in the military effort – provisioning, transporting, building, equipping, spying and acting as diplomats, for examples. Canadian historian and Trent University professor Larry Turner<sup>10</sup> established that George Harpell was among the Associated Loyalists who “*served the British Army in New York in such activities as guiding, timber cutting, intelligence and garrison duty as well as positions as engineers, artificers, carpenters, shipwrights, suppliers and in such places as the Indian Department, Commissary General's Department, the Navy Yard, Kings' Stores and Barracks taking an active part in the British war effort*”<sup>11</sup>. As mentioned, I believe he was a sawyer/carpenter employed by David Babcock at the Quartermaster General's Department in New York – one support for this idea lies in the fact that three of his children married Babcocks at the new settlement.

Once Britain decided to allow a small group of Loyalists to settle on the North shore of Lake Ontario it was artificers among the Associated Loyalists, rather than soldiers, who were essential if the remote settlement were to succeed. A few weeks after their arrival at Sorel, Michael Grass was instructed to select a few fit and healthy axmen and artificers from his Company and to bring them to Montreal.

Preston reproduces a Letter from Haldimand to Surveyor John Collins of September 11, 1783<sup>12</sup> asking Collins to proceed to Cataraqui to lay out the towns and townships and assures Collins that: *For your assistance in the execution of this business, you will be joined at Montreal by*

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<sup>8</sup> Letter from Haldimand in Preston p.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, p. 122.

<sup>10</sup> Turner, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> Turner, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> Preston, B21 p. 36-7.

*Capt. Sherwood and Lte. Cotte and also by Mr. Grass... and these gentlemen will be attended by axmen, etc. proper for that occasion.*

On the same day Captain Mathews wrote Inspector Cuyler<sup>13</sup> recommending that “*thirty to forty men being mostly artificers (from Grass’ Company) could be accepted into a survey party being led by Deputy Surveyor-General John Collins.*” (Collins was acting for Surveyor-General Holland throughout this period).

On September 15, 1783, thirty-eight Associated Loyalists, including Michael Grass and five other Officers, were outfitted at Sorel, Quebec, then bateauxed to Montreal to join Deputy Surveyor-General John Collins and his survey party. As Turner, on page 78, reports: “*the party including 8 carpenters, 2 masons and 2 blacksmiths left Lachine with Collins on the 17<sup>th</sup>.*” When Mikl Grass and half of his company returned to Sorel before the snow and ice set in, a group were asked to remain at the Cataraqui post to work through the winter. As Turner notes in fn 11, p. 86 they were Lt. Thomas More, Will Bell, Tom, John and William Burnett, James Brady, Barnabas Day, John Forrest, Joe Grooms, Richard Hall, George Harpell/ Harper, John Mosham, Richard Morden, Alex Simpson, William Wells, Barnabus Wemp, Joseph Willison and Catherine Wemp and Melia Terry. (Turner omitted Barnabus Wemp in this list).

Thus, while John Collins and his crew conducted the survey and while Major Ross and his soldiers worked on the infrastructure for the new settlement, George Harpell and a handful of other Associated Loyalist artificers worked alongside them through the fall, winter and spring. Indeed, George continued in that role for another few years – according to family lore and according to the Roll Calls that show him without his land and at the fort until 1785.

While in America, aboard ship and bateau on overnights on shore putting up tents, gathering game, fish and firewood, while setting up camp at Sorel, and at Fort Frontenac, George likely worked beside unnamed Indigenous people and African-American Loyalists and ‘servants’ as well as French Canadians and Metis people who also helped found the settlement. Probably those non-white Loyalists and locals did more than a little of the labour as well as providing valuable lessons on surviving off the land.

### **Conducting the Survey**

The survey parties were made up of about 10 men - one qualified surveyor and 9 axmen and chainbearers. Collins used his own tools including a theodolite, telescope, quadrant and a mason’s level. Survey lines were marked along ‘the Front’ i.e. the Lake and Cataraqui River to take advantage of the water highway. The work included felling trees on the survey line, wading through marshes and swamps, climbing over rocks, rowing bateaux, and fighting off the bugs and the elements<sup>14</sup>. In the Muster at Cataraqui in December of 1783 George Harper/ Harpell is

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<sup>13</sup> Haldimand Papers MSSB, cited in Turner p. 78 and fn 10.

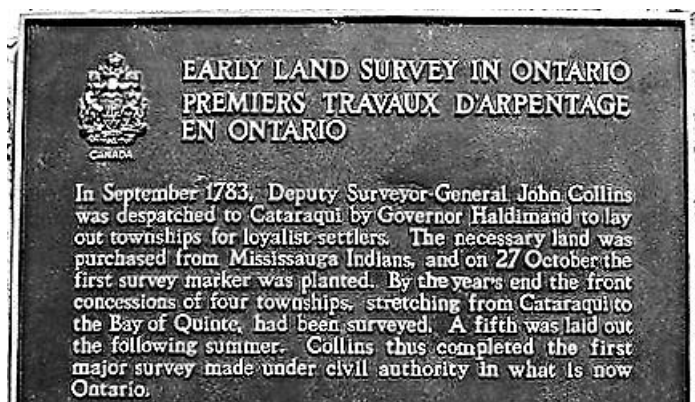
<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Geiger of Queen’s U., Ontario’s First Township, Pdf. Kingston Historical Society p. 18.

described as 21 years and 5 months old. Most of the 17 members of Grass' Company who overwinter working at Cataraqui are in their twenties. All appeared to have survived this grueling introduction to Canada.

The rations provided typically included flour and pork, but often there was no pork or it was rancid – so just flour and, perhaps, some turnip seeds. No doubt the men fished, hunted and foraged whenever they had a moment to do so. Collins' report notes that he was paid 15 shillings a day, plus expenses, and the 'other surveyors' 7 shillings and 6 pence plus 1 shilling, thrupence additional for provisions. With the pence, axemen such as George likely procured some goods from their Indigenous neighbours – but that may have been used for buckskin shoes or pants rather than food. That autumn's heavy rains slowed progress, made the work more exhausting and greatly reduced the ability to fix positions using astronomical observations.<sup>15</sup> It no doubt also left the workmen wet, cold and hungry as there would be less forgeable food.

Geiger notes that the survey teams could only aspire to 'good enough' in the circumstances: The lines marked on the ground were probably the front and sidelines of the township and the corner posts of the first twenty-five lots. This "singlefront" grid system was used for many years to take advantage of the existing water highways and to compensate for the shortage of trained surveyors. The corners were marked by a cooper's iron cutting blazes on healthy trees. The settlers would eventually be responsible for running out the sidelines of their lots. A 1784 muster reports that George Harpell's land was not 'run out' – likely because he was too busy working on the townsite while others were starting on their homesteads.

Per Geiger p.20: Holland and Collins put *all available surveyors - army, ex-army, Loyalists - in charge of other survey parties along the St. Lawrence and up to Quinte and carried on survey work themselves. By July, despite a very late spring, over 3,500 people had been placed on their lots, 187 of them in the first township at Cataraqui.*



A stone cairn commemorates the planting of the first survey marker at a corner of what would be Township # 1, later Kingston Township where George Harpell would build his home.

The next three Townships were marked out by November 17. The following day, after George and his fellow pioneers had put in roughly 6 weeks work and laid out four townships, England

announced that the Seigniorial system was to continue. The land, in what was still the colony of Quebec, was to be laid out in Seigneuries or Fiefs with tenants paying an annual ground rent.

<sup>15</sup> Geiger, p.19.



The settler's 'townships' were only that in name. It must have been an awful blow for George and his fellows slogging to survey, build roads and clear land – to learn, at this stage, that their promised land would not really be theirs.

### **George Harpell's Contribution to building Kingston, Ontario and Canada**

With the survey work well in hand and favourable reports of the quality of the soil, shorelines and trees, Haldimand, from Quebec, writes Major Ross with further instructions on November 13, 1783<sup>16</sup>: (summarized below)

*Your letter and the 'state of works at Cataraqui is very satisfactory to me (and yours and Collins' reports) of the country in that neighbourhood promise every success in the formation of a very extensive and advantageous settlement.... It is my intention ... to make the buildings permanent.... I wish you to prepare and transport materials for the masonry and squared timbers and shingles... to build houses and stores for the Naval Department... and the wharf you propose.... If in the course of the winter anything can be done in preparing the necessary timber for grist and saw mills... it would be forwarding the general plan.... I would have a house built for Joseph Brandt near his sister Molly's....*

Glenn A. Steppler's article, *British Military Artificers in Canada, 1760-1815*<sup>17</sup> documents Haldimand's repeated expression of the pressing need for 'engineers', builders, and artificers' in the new settlement to build fortifications and infrastructure. He relies heavily on Loyalist civilians for these purposes. Haldimand's letters of the time, in Preston, indicate that the regimental 'artificers' i.e. army engineers and tradesmen, were reluctant to work on the infrastructure, preferring to be discharged. Even so, by June 1784 Ross reports that his regimental and Loyalist workers had succeeded in building: *Wharf, sawmill, grist mill, Captain Brandt's house 40 foot by 30 foot; Molly Brandt's house, Navy store 50 foot by 25. In addition, the sawyers/ carpenters had prepared: 9,000 cubic feet of squared timbers, 1,000 round logs and 50 building timbers.* This is in addition to soldiers' barracks and officers' quarters for over 400 men, and a hospital as well as a bake house, lime kiln, and provisions store at the Fort.

This work with the advance guard who prepared the settlement that would become Kingston, is likely Loyalist George Harpell's greatest contribution. It is not his only one though. He built a log cabin that was so sound that it survived until 2019, it's last 50 years as an exhibit at Upper Canada Village. George's homestead had been expropriated for the Highway #401 exchange at Kingston and his bones, once on his homestead, likely lie under that highway.

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<sup>16</sup> In Preston, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> Glen Steppler. *British Military Artificers in Canada, 1760-1815*. *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, vol. 60, No. 243 (Autumn 1982), pp. 150-163.





In 1795, about the time he built his cabin, George donated to the building of the first protestant church in the area, which became St. George's Anglican Cathedral. He served as a Constable. He and his family created a settlement known as Harpells Corners which was a regular stop for the Methodist circuit-riding preachers. George's firstborn son's limestone home at Sunnyside, still stands and is in Kingston's Heritage register. George served during the War of 1812,

defending York, then was elected representative for his District, Midland.

Some of his descendants continued, many as farmers, for at least seven more generations, until now, in the Kingston area; many served in the local militia and as Soldiers in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> World Wars, some giving their lives for this nation.

*In my childhood I learned that I was a 6<sup>th</sup> generation Kingstonian whose father and his siblings had grown up in 'Harpellsville' in Kingston Township on farms near the original homestead. Dad was a storyteller by nature, and he gave me a sense of the old ways, showed me some of the old homes, villages and fishing holes and, in the 1960s, took me to see the original George Harpell log cabin at Upper Canada Village, proud that it was the oldest building there. I have always felt deeply Canadian – that is something that I inherited and have passed on. I could not imagine any other Citizenship or home. It is not surprising, then, that I did my master's degree in Canadian Studies and my nearly completed Phd. on Canadian policy before working for the federal government as a Policy Researcher – including reporting on the 1987 Meech Lake Accord hearings to the Minister of Constitutional Affairs. In retirement, research on Ancestry.com filled in gaps in my family tree. Then I threw myself into the social history of their times so that I could 'walk a while in their shoes'. Finally, in 2024, I received my U.E. (Thanks to Anne Redish!) Our family remembers George Harpell (1762 – 1841) saying that he was German and Yankee and a Loyalist and that he had helped to build Kingston's infrastructure for years before he settled on his homestead. My focus here is on that contribution to building Kingston's foundation.*