

PATRICK McNIFF

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One of the earliest surveyors in what is now the Province of Ontario was Mr. Patrick McNiff, who did a great deal of work between the years 1784 and 1794.

An exhaustive search has failed to reveal the date of Mr. McNiff's birth, or the name of his birthplace, but it is probable that he was born in Ireland, and followed Sir William Johnson to America. Sir William was born at Warrentown, County Down, Ireland, came to America in 1738 and settled in the Mohawk Valley of what is now the State of New York, later becoming a great power among the Indian tribes. McNiff settled near Saratoga where he states he lived in "ease and affluence" until the Revolution, when he was compelled to flee first to New York and afterwards to Canada on account of his loyalty to the British throne.

The first record of him is in the Archives at Albany, N.Y., where it is recorded that on 1st November, 1775, he was married to Catharine McDavitt. In October, 1783, about the time that New York was finally evacuated by the British, Mr. McNiff appeared at Sorel, Que., in a state of destitution, with many other refugees, and addressed a memorial dated 30th October, 1783, to Lord Haldimand, the then Captain-General and Governor-in-Chief of Quebec. This memorial is now on file in the Haldimand Collection of the Canadian Archives at Ottawa, and on account of its quaint wording and information is given below in full.

"Sorel, the 30th October, 1783.

"His Excellency, Lieutenant-General Frederick Haldimand, Governor and Commander-in-chief in and over His Majesty's Province of Quebec, &c., &c.

"The Memorial of Patrick McNiff, late of Saratoga in the County of Albany, Merchant

"Most Humbly Sheweth

"That the Memorialist, Previous to the Late Rebellion, lived in Ease and Affluence at Saratoga, but from his Loyalty to his Majesty and Attachment to the British Constitution was obliged to Abandon his Family, and a Property of upwards of Three Thousand Pounds and take Refuge within the British Lines at New York; and

being brought up in the Mercantile Line, thought best to betake himself to that Business to obtain a support for himself and Family, rather than become a Charge to Government. In this Business the Memorialist was successful for some years, untill He, by unavoidable Misfortune, too Common to a State of War, was reduced to the greatest Distress, by being Plundered of everything, even his Wearing Apparel, by a party of Rebels, shortly before the Decliration of Peace, leaving his Family in the greatest Distress without Provisions or Clothing. Intirely Depending on friends for a support.

"That the Memorialist with a number of other Loyalists is Arrived in order to form a settlement in this Province under Your Excellency's direction, Leaving behind him his Wife, one Child and one Servant, being unable for want of Cloths and moneys to bring them with him.

"The Memorialist, being thus Reduced in a strange Country without Money or Friends or even deacent Clothing to Wear, finds no hopes of Relief but in his Present application to Your Excellency, whose Humanity relieves many other suffering Loyalists with daily subsistance Money, Many of whom have not suffered more, and Numbers not so much as the Memorialist have done.

"The Memorialist Humbly Prays Your Excellency would be Pleased to take his Present distressed situation into Consideration, and Grant him some relief, by Putting him in some Measure on a footing with other Loyalists who draw from Your Excellency daily subsistance money, or otherwise Point out to him some Employment whereby he may Earn some Money to Purchase Cloths, and bring his Poor Family through the Country to this Place. And the Memorialist as in duty bound will Ever Pray.

(Sd.) "Patrick McNiff."

"We do hereby certify that we Know the Contents of the within Memorial to be true, and believe that nothing but the greatest distress could Induce the Memorialist to Solicit Relief.

(Sd.) "Step'n De Lancey,

(Sd.) "Peter Van Alstine,

(Sd.) "Patk. Smyth."

"I certify to the Memorial of Mr. Patrick McNiff, and that he is worthy of attention, that when he fled from the Rebels he brought some very interesting information

relative to the State of the Country and the Rebel Army, also a plan of their fort at West Point, which was communicated to Sir Henry Clinton by Lord Rawden, then Adj't-Gen'l, to whom I went in person with Mr. McNiff on his arrival, he is also capable for business in a public line, having some Knowledge of Surveying business, &c. (Sd.) "A. Cuyler, Insp't Loyalists."

Of those who certified McNiff's application, Stephen De Lancey was soon afterwards appointed Inspector of Loyalists, replacing A. Cuyler, who was granted Leave of Absence. Peter Van Alostine took up land in the Bay of Quinte District, and became one of the leading men of that district, while Patrick Smythe, formerly Captain of Militia under Gen'l Burgoyne, settled at Kingston, and his descendants are still with us. It would appear from the Kingston Parish Register that McNiff and Patrick Smythe were married to two sisters.

McNiff's application to Gen'l Haldimand appears to have been turned over to Sir John Johnson (son of Sir William), who was then engaged in settling the Loyalists, and on the strength of Col. Cuyler's statement that McNiff "had some Knowledge of Surveying business" he was at once sent out to lay out lands for settlement along the St. Lawrence River from the present Quebec boundary westward through what are now the Counties of Glengarry, Stormont and Dundas. We read that he left Montreal with 26 men in batteaux on 1st March, 1784. Lieut. Kotte was to return from Catarauqui where he had been assisting John Collins, the Deputy Surveyor-General, the previous year, and meet McNiff on the ground, and instruct him in what was required.

McNiff appears to have laid out the front range of lots facing the river across six Townships, viz.: Lancaster, Charlottenburg, Cornwall, Osnabrock, Williamsburg and Matilda. According to Judge Pringle's "History of Lunenburg," the original plan, signed by McNiff and dated 1st November, 1786, was found in the office of D. B. McLennan, Barrister of Cornwall, and is now in the Archives at Ottawa.

Deputy Surveyor-General Collins seems to have objected to McNiff working under Sir John Johnson, and in October, 1784, McNiff was transferred to Collins, and appointed Deputy Surveyor with headquarters at New Johnstown (now Cornwall) and territory extending from Point au Baudet to Gananoque. His pay was fixed at four shillings per day when

in his own district and not employed on actual surveys, and seven and sixpence per day when employed. Settlers were to find the necessary chain and axe-men to the number of six or more.

On 4th June, 1788, he was instructed by Collins to proceed to the Ottawa River, and was located at Carillon, from where he laid out lands on both sides of the river, and also received claims from those desiring to settle in that district. He laid out parts of the Townships of Chatham, Hawkesbury, Grenville, Caermarthen, Norfolk, Suffolk and Buckingham. His position at New Johnstown was filled by Wm. Chewitt, D.P.S., afterwards Surveyor-General.

On 24th July, 1788, Lord Dorchester, who had succeeded Lord Haldimand, divided Upper Canada into four districts, viz., Lunenburg (from the River Ottawa to Gananoque), Mecklenburgh (from Gananoque to River Trent), Nassau (from the Trent to Long Point), and Hesse (from Long Point to Lake St. Clair), and a Land Board was appointed for each district. In the spring of 1789, McNiff was appointed Deputy Surveyor for Hesse, and ordered to move to Detroit, which was still then in the hands of the British.

A trip from Montreal to Detroit in those days, with a wife and four small children (one of them born the previous year) must have been a very trying experience. There were, of course, no roads nor railways. There were a few sloops-of-war on Lake Ontario, but nearly all the travelling was done by batteaux or flat-bottomed boats, and distances which could now be covered by water in 24 hours then took as many days. He arrived in Detroit in August, 1789, having left Lachine some time during the preceding May.

Under the Land Board of Hesse he made many of the original surveys of the Counties of Essex and Kent, but reported that most of the lands were too low and wet to be ever of any use for agriculture. He also laid out Townships along the lower part of the River Thames as far East as Chatham.

When Upper and Lower Canada were created in 1791, and Lieut.-Governor Simcoe took charge of Upper Canada, McNiff applied for the position of Surveyor-General of Upper Canada, but his application was declined in favour of D. W. Smith. He, however, continued to make surveys for the Land Board until it was discontinued in November, 1794, when McNiff's

services as a Government officer ended, on instructions from Lord Dorchester to Lieut.-Governor Simcoe.

In 1795, McNiff, with a number of other prominent men of Detroit, promoted what is known as the "Cuyahoga Speculation," to acquire from the Indians an immense tract of land (about 3,000,000 acres) in the northern part of the present State of Ohio, including part of the present City of Cleveland. For some reason the speculation collapsed with great loss to all concerned.

On 11th July, 1796, Detroit was evacuated by British troops, and finally ceded to United States—McNiff appears to have elected to remain in Detroit, and become a United States citizen. The following note appears in the John Askin papers published by the Detroit Public Library in 1928.

"Patrick McNiff was prominently identified with the affairs of Detroit and vicinity during the late British and early American regimes. He was a man of positive temperament, which caused him to be involved in numerous disputes. He served as surveyor in the British period, and in the American held several offices, including those of Sheriff and Justice of the Court of Common Pleas."

Patrick McNiff died early in May, 1803. In J. Ross Robertson's "History of Freemasonry in Canada," it is stated that at an emergent meeting of Zion Lodge, No. 10, held at Detroit, 11th May, 1803, the sum of \$25.00 was granted to defray the funeral expenses of Patrick McNiff. He left a widow and at least four children, viz.: (1) Robert, born in 1784; died 16th April, 1844. (2) Margaret, born in 1786; married Lieut. Porter Hawks, who was in charge of Mackinac when it was surrendered to the British in the war of 1812. Mrs. Hawks lived in Detroit to a great age and died there on 14th December, 1869, aged 83. (3) Eleanor, married John Eastman. (4) Catharine, born 1788; married Thomas Rowland in 1814, and died 1853.

After the death of Patrick McNiff, his widow, Catharine, continued to live in Detroit, and died there in 1838, aged 85. It is probable that she was some years younger than her husband.

Some authorities state that she was Patrick McNiff's second wife, but no record of prior marriage is available. Some of their descendants still continue to reside in Detroit, but no portrait of either of them is available. But a photo of him will be published when discovered.