

Alexander McNish

Alexander McNish and his family were a typical family on the New York frontier before, during and after the American Revolution. Alexander's family were of Scots-Irish descent and settled on the northern frontier in present-day Washington County, where land was cheap and plentiful. The family was broken apart by the events of the American Revolution. After the war, the family put their lives back together through hard work and innovation.

Alexander McNish, an early Salem settler, was born in Ireland; his father, James McNish, was an emigrant from Scotland. Alexander, James, and James' brother immigrated to America from Ballibay, Ireland with Rev. Thomas Clark's group of Scots-Irish Presbyterians. Clark's congregation shared the area with James Turner's and Joshua Conkey's New England settlers, who were also largely of Scots-Irish descent. The two groups jointly settled a 25,000 acre patent leased to them by New York City land speculators Peter Dubois and Oliver Delancey. The New England settlers called Salem "White Creek," while Clark's Scots-Irish settlers knew it as "New Perth." Turner's group arrived around 1764, while Reverend Clark's group arrived in 1766, after a short stay in Stillwater, New York. The two groups were intermixed within the patent and both established their own Presbyterian churches in Salem prior to the Revolution

The Revolutionary War split the McNish family apart as Alexander's father, James, took the Patriot side, while James's brother John— who had had also come to Salem with Dr. Clark in 1766— became a Loyalist. According to Dr. Asa Fitch Jr., John died before the actual war began but his three sons, James, Joseph, and William, sided with the British. After Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga, John McNish's three sons fled to Canada.

Alexander and James cleared a piece of land and began subsistence farming. The two worked their farm until the Revolutionary War broke out, at which point Alexander McNish joined a company formed by Joseph McCracken, another Salem resident. McCracken's company traveled to Fort Ticonderoga and eventually to Canada from 1775 through 1776. While in Canada, McCracken's company was involved several minor battles and skirmishes. According to his pension depositions, McNish was with the army for 18 months, until the American forces evacuated Canada. McNish was stationed at Fort Ticonderoga until July 1777, when the approach of General Burgoyne's army forced its evacuation. Alexander McNish returned to Salem, where he and other Charlotte County militiamen built a fort—Fort Salem— into which was incorporated the unfinished New England Presbyterian meetinghouse. After being discharged from McCracken's regiment, McNish joined Captain John Barnes' ranger company. McNish remained part of the Charlotte County Militia and in July 1777 marched to Bennington, and next joined Barnes' company when it marched off to the Battles of Saratoga. Crisfield Johnson's History of Washington County indicates that McNish was shot through his neck on October 13, while confiscating a horse from the British, mere days before the surrender of the British at Saratoga. McNish was brought home by John Rowan, a neighbor, where he recuperated for the next year. McNish was called out with the Charlotte County Militia and Barnes' Ranger Company throughout the rest of the year, for periods up to two or more weeks at a time, to such places as Whitehall and Granville. In 1780, the Charlotte County Militia was marched to Fort George to try to intercept the British after the destructive raid of Christopher Carleton Raid, which came to be known as the Great Burning. By the end of the war Alexander McNish had risen to the rank of sergeant. Due to the wounds he received during the war he was awarded a pension in 1786. He requested an increase in the pension

in 1824 and, after his death in 1827, his wife, Sarah McCoy McNish, asked and received a pension from the federal government.

Alexander had married Sarah McCoy while recuperating after the Battles of Saratoga. The McCoy family were also members of Clarks' party of Ballibay settlers. Alexander and Sarah had several children: William, who settled in Salem; Alexander Jr., who migrated to the West; Sally, who married Thomas Steele, of another longtime Salem family; and Betsy, who married Alexander Steele. Alexander McNish lived until 1827, only three years longer than his father, James, who lived to the remarkable age of 104.

At the end of the war, Alexander McNish and his father purchased the land where the 1794 McNish house still stands today. After the Revolution, eastern New York farmers moved from subsistence farming to commercial farming, which centered on wheat production through the first quarter of the nineteenth century. James McNish, who had been a weaver in Ireland, was among those responsible for the growth of sheep husbandry in Washington County in the early 19th century. James and Alexander McNish were among the first owners of Merino sheep in Washington County, which they purchased in Queens, and became very prominent sheep farmers in the Salem area. The McNish farm, where the house remains, stayed in the hands of the McNish family until 1927, when Darley McNish willed the property to Evergreen Cemetery Association.

Sources used for the article:

William E. Krattinger (January 2010). "National Register of Historic Places Registration: Alexander McNish House". New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

Harriet M. Williams, The Salem Book: Records of the Past and Glimpses of the Present, Salem, New York, 1896.

Phillip D. Weaver, *Joseph McCracken: New York's First Revolutionary Captain, Journal of the American Revolution*, April 22, 2021.

Kenneth A. Perry, The Fitch Gazetteer: An Annotated Index to Manuscript History of the Washington County, New York, Volume I, Heritage Books, Inc. Bowie: 1999.

Crisfield Johnson, *History of Washington County*, New York: Reprinted Heart of Lakes Publishing Interlaken, New York, 1991.

Ancestry. Com

Fold3.com