

Was Richard Saxton Adams
A Revolutionary War Loyalist?

by
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Almost a decade after the end of the Revolutionary War (in 1791) Upper Canada was organized into a separate English-speaking province and John Graves Simcoe was appointed the provincial governor. One of his first acts was to issue a proclamation inviting Americans to cross the border and settle in Ontario Canada. Earlier, tens of thousands of displaced American/Loyalists had been resettled in Nova Scotia and in New Brunswick, and several thousand refugees settled in scattered communities along the Canadian side of the St. Lawrence River. Many of these refugees received land grants, sustenance for a year-or-so, and other assistance to compensate them for their services to the Crown or for property lost during the War. Simcoe offered similar terms to new American settlers if they simply swore allegiance to the King and to Parliament. Eventually, some twenty thousand "late loyalists" capitalized on Simcoe's offer and helped to colonize the wilderness that lay north of the St. Lawrence River (Jasanoff, p. 206). Our ancestor Richard Saxton Adams and his family were part of this tree-cutting adventure, leading some relatives to conclude he was a Loyalist.

Establishing if someone was a Loyalist is complicated by the variety of people who were called this, possibly amounting to as many as 15 to 20 percent of the overall population in the 13 colonies. Some of these were Americans who joined the British Army, provided financial support to the British, or were Church of England ministers or church members who maintained allegiance to the King. Also included were traitors, such as Benedict Arnold, who switched sides during the War. Still others supported the British because their business interests were damaged by the war, or they had strong ties to family members who still lived in the United Kingdom. Many runaway slaves and Indian allies of the British also qualified as Loyalists. Nonetheless, the majority of those who might be called loyalists, with a small "l," were otherwise average people who disliked the war, kept their mouths shut about their views, and felt life under the British was tolerable. Some of these closet loyalists were also opportunists who feigned loyalty to access benefits that were offered by the British Government, especially land grants.

Four generations of the Adams family lived in Simsbury, Connecticut before Richard Saxton Adams (R.S.) moved his wife and three children north to Pittsford, Vermont in 1779. Security concerns may have prompted the move, although the promise of owning land likely was the dominant motive for moving. In early July 1779 the British sacked

and briefly occupied nearby New Haven and this brought the War to the doorstep of Simsbury. Central Vermont was remote from the War and also was an area just opening for settlement, offering families of modest means an opportunity to obtain inexpensive land. The premature death of R.S.'s grandfather (Daniel II), and R.S.'s father (Daniel III) being raised by foster parents, resulted in slim pickings for R.S. when it came inheritance time.

R.S.'s move duplicated what many Loyalists did during the war: they fled their homes, especially to loyalist dominated centers such as New York, Charleston, and Savannah, to escape persecution by fervent patriots. An old copper mine near where the Adams lived also was used to incarcerate Loyalists, and numerous Loyalists in Connecticut were prosecuted for their beliefs. Contrary evidence, however, is that two of R.S.'s younger brothers (Oliver and Parmenio) served in the patriot militia (Bates, p. 83), and I could find no record that R.S. was prosecuted for being a Loyalist before he left Simsbury. None of this information, however, is conclusive proof that R.S. was, or was not, a Loyalist. There were some famous cases where families were split in their allegiances during the War, perhaps the most notable being William Franklin -- son of one of our founding fathers (Benjamin Franklin) -- who sided with the British. There were also a substantial number of Loyalists in Connecticut -- estimated as high as two thousand in number -- who muted their criticism of patriots and avoided prosecution.

R.S.'s wife, Lucy Matson Adams, had several relatives from Simsbury who joined the Adams in their move to Pittsford, one being Caleb Hendee, Lucy's brother-in-law. He is noteworthy because his father, Caleb Hendee Sr., organized the first Baptist congregation in Pittsford, suggesting that R.S. and his family may have been affiliated with the Baptists while they lived in Pittsford (Caverly, p. 40).

Central Vermont is scenic, especially during the summer, but thin soils and a short and undependable growing season severely limited the farming opportunities for R.S. and his three sons (Daniel, R.S. Jr., and Joshua). About ten years after they moved to Pittsford, for example, most of the wheat crop in Vermont was lost and the state had to import grain for the inhabitants to survive that winter. Despite acquiring some marginal land, that allowed hardscrabble farming, the Adams family was forced to seek other work to survive, including working in marble quarries, smelting iron, making charcoal, or selling other wood products. A decade later they, like many of their neighbors, began to look west for greener pastures.

Exactly when the entire Adams family moved to Canada is uncertain. It could have been as early as 1793, a year or so after Governor Simcoe offered free land in Ontario to loyalists, or as late as 1798 when land records show that R.S. sold his farm in Pittsford for the modest sum of £150. Since the area where the Adams eventually settled in Canada was described as a mosquito-infested, howling wilderness, that was

twenty miles from civilization, the family may have moved in stages. It appears that mature son Richard Saxton Jr. and his wife were the first to move there as their names are found in Canadian property records dated 1793. Other parts of their family and their elderly parents may have followed later after a toehold had been established in the heavily wooded area that became known as Bastard Township in Leeds County. Since land sales at the time may have been recorded some years after the actual sale, my guess is that most of the family was located in Bastard by about 1795 or 1796.

The individual who organized the migration of Vermonters to this area in Canada was Abel Stevens, the son of convicted loyalist Roger Stevens, and also a deacon in the Pittsford Baptist church (Blanchard). Stevens submitted a couple of petitions to Governor Simcoe in 1793 asking for recognition of property claims by 57 claimants in Kitley and Bastard townships. Nine of the claimants were named Stevens along with Richard Saxton Adams Jr. who was married to a Stevens.¹ Although not explicitly stated, most of those on the list were likely Baptists from Central Vermont.

In 1798 Stevens submitted another document to the government listing the names of 120 Vermont families that he had convinced to settle in Kitley and Bastard Townships. Besides several Adams names, another notable name on this list was Chipman, another important name in our family line. Most of the adult males on the list received 200 acres of land each, and families also received a cow, a horse, a few implements, and a variety of seeds. Until they could clear their land and established farms, families were also furnished some rations. These arrangements meant that R.S. and his two oldest sons received total land grants of 600 acres after settling in Bastard, with son Joshua receiving an additional 200 acres when he reached the age of 21 in 1801. The move to Canada converted the Adams family from the status of small farmers to being substantial land owners. Whether or not they sincerely affirmed their oath to King and Parliament, their move was a substantial step up, socially and economically.

Over the next couple of decades youngest son Joshua shouldered more and more of the family's burden. Sometime before 1804 brother Richard Saxton Jr. died, leaving a wife and young family. Then in 1810 R.S. passed away, and sometime after the War of 1812 brother Daniel also passed away leaving a wife and family in Joshua's care. Along with these substantial family responsibilities, Joshua joined the local militia, perhaps to earn additional income and also to use a traditional British way of enhancing his social status. These local militias were ways of protecting the British's interests in Canada from the quarrelsome Americans to the south. Many of the communities in Ontario before and after the War of 1812 were quasi military outposts manned by local militias. Exhibiting his leadership skills, Joshua was appointed captain and served as adjutant in

¹ Source, <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~riman/riman/nti03906.htm>

the second regiment of the Leeds Militia, experiencing combat against the Americans early in the war.

Did Joshua's siding with the British in the War of 1812 indicate his whole family, especially his father, were fervent Loyalists? From the distance of two centuries it is impossible to discern the genesis of Joshua's enthusiasm for the British cause. One explanation is that he had become a Canadian in body and spirit as he matured to adulthood in British-controlled Canada. He likely appreciated the kind treatment he and his family received from the Provincial Government: land grants amounting to 800 acres, substantial material assistance until the family became established, and later providing Joshua recognition in the militia. His support for the government was reinforced later when he was given additional land grants in other parts of the country due to his military service. The governmental treatment of the Adams family in Canada was in marked contrast to the hostile reception supplied by various elements of the government in the U.S. to Joshua's sons (Arza and Barnabas) when they later migrated to the American West.

If pressed to render a judgment, I'd say that the Adams' move to Canada was prompted by opportunism rather than by fervor for the British cause. Grandfather Joshua, in contrast, clearly put on a red coat and, understandably, became a British supporter. He did so many years after the American Revolution, perhaps so much later that he shouldn't be called a Loyalist. He was simply a Canadian who helped to defend his country.

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