

Sensebach Heritage

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A family history newsletter for:
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William Sencabaugh, Loyalist

by Kathie Sencabaugh

William Sencabaugh, founder of the Sencabaugh family on Prince Edward Island, is a figure shrouded in mystery. Twenty-five years of research have failed to unearth many tangible records of the life of this early settler of Murray Harbour. We cannot prove with certainty where or when he was born, or determine precisely when he died.

Faced with the absence of any single piece of conclusive documentation of his origins, careful examination of those few scraps of information we possess becomes even more essential. By applying critical analysis to this information and the context in which it appears, this article attempts to prove his connection to the Sensebach family of Montgomery, New York, and to construct the framework of his biography.

The Family Tradition

While family tradition can seldom be accepted as gospel, it often holds some grains of truth. In the case of William Sencabaugh, the Loyalist, there exists very little even of family tradition. In 1931, John Thomas Sencabaugh, a grandson of William Sencabaugh the Loyalist, wrote a letter to his cousin, Margaret Sencabaugh Reynolds, which read in part:

There was a large family of Sencabaughs. My grandfather Sencabaugh came to the Island from New York State and settled in Murray Harbour South... I was born on a farm fronting on the South River and on the other side Fox River. Twenty-five acres of that land was given to my grandfather. He was a Quaker of the same religion as our President and did not believe it was right to fight and kill each other when the United States gained their independence he refused to carry arms. The Brit-

ish government gave him a grant of land and a musket and he settled in Murray Harbour, P.E.I.

While there is no other evidence to suggest that William Sencabaugh was a Quaker, the family tradition of his origin in the American colonies is supported by an earlier statement of his son, James Sencabaugh, father of John Thomas above, the only one of the children of William the Loyalist who was still living at the time of the 1891 Census of Prince Edward Island. He listed "U.S." as the place of birth of both his father and his mother.³ In the 1881 Census, he had stated "German" in response to the question of his family's national origin.⁴

William's Age

There is no gravestone to indicate the final resting place of William Sencabaugh, the Loyalist. His will, written September 1 and proved September 26, 1815, tells us the month

and year of his death, but gives no indication of his age.⁵ The only record of William that refers even indirectly to the year of his birth is the 1798 Census of Prince Edward Island, in which William Shenshaback appears as the head of one of the three households in Lot 64. The household consisted of one male between 16 and 60; one female between 16 and 60; and three males under 16. Based on this census record, William must have been born no earlier than 1738 and no later than 1782.

Using William's marriage bond, issued on March 21, 1788,⁶ we can narrow this window to some degree. Assuming that he would have been at least twenty-one, but probably not over forty when he contracted a first marriage, he would have been born no earlier than 1747 and no later than 1767. Examination of the birth dates of his known children, which range from 1792 to 1813, leads to a similar conclusion. Assuming that he would have been no younger than 21 when he fathered John, born in 1792, and no older than 60 at Mary Ann's birth in 1813, he could have been born no earlier than 1753 and no later than 1771.⁷

We may thus conclude that William Sencabaugh of Prince Edward Island was born between 1753 and 1767. He was of German heritage, but was born in one of the thirteen colonies, probably New York.

A New York Candidate for William the Loyalist

If there is a kernel of truth to be found in the family traditions regarding William Sencabaugh's birthplace, it is likely to be the statement that he came from New York State. This fits several historical trends. During the Revolution, there was a large Loyalist popu-

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