

William Moll Berczy

by Lynne Belluscio

I just returned from a museum conference in Ottawa. The theme of the week-long session was "Loyalty in Living History". One of the keynote speakers, Charles Pachter, a contemporary Canadian artist who has a passion for Canadian history, presented a wonderful session on the Loyalist Legacy and the Creation of Modern English Canada.



During the American Revolution there were many people who remained loyal to the British crown. After the war, some sailed for England and others emigrated to Canada. Pachter mentioned William Berczy, who had originally settled in the "Genesee Country" but who later moved to Canada and became well known as a painter and a founder of several communities. I was intrigued by this story so I have been doing a little research.

William Moll Berczy was born in Germany in 1744 and studied in Vienna. In 1791, he was in London and heard that Sir

William Pultney had purchased land in the Genesee area of New York State. Berczy decided to lead a group of 220 settlers from Germany to the Pultney Tract. In 1792 he and his family, with the group of German settlers sailed for America and landed in Philadelphia. As they traveled north from Pennsylvania to New York

they opened the first north-south road between Williamsport and Painted Post, known as the Williams Road - now Route 15.

However, there was some dispute concerning the land and Berczy and 60 of the German families followed him to Upper Canada in 1794 to take advantage of free land offered by Lt. Governor John Graves Simcoe. They stopped for a brief time in York (now Toronto). It is recorded that the men helped clear Yonge Street in Toronto as partial payment for the land.

Most of the families settled in Markham Township and it became known as the German Company Lands. Berczy supervised the supply of rations to the settlers during the crop failure and famine of 1795. During this time he also designed many of the commer-

cial buildings in York. Apparently there were land disputes and he continually pleaded with the government to turn over the remainder of the 64,000 acres of land that they had been promised by Simcoe.

In 1798 he left the Markham area and moved to Quebec and later to Montreal. He suffered financial reversals but was able to support his family and repay his debts by painting portraits. In 1802, he returned to York and attempted to salvage what he could from his earlier investments but alienated many of the settlers in the process. It was during this time that he painted the portrait of the Indian, Joseph Brant that hangs in the National Gallery in

Ottawa. His financial fortunes continued to decline. In 1813, he traveled to New York City where he died on February 5 and was buried in the Old Trinity Church graveyard. So for a brief time, this celebrated Canadian pioneer and artist was in the Genesee Country. It's not clear to me whether he was a true Loyalist and supported the British crown, but he would not gain fame in the United States, but rather in Canada where his art is considered a national treasure and in Markham a school is named for him.



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