

Was John Frees of Matilda, Ontario born in Athens, New York in 1741?

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John Frees was a loyalist who moved to Matilda township in what became Dundas County, Ontario, Canada after the American Revolution. He appears in the United Empire Loyalists List, which the Canadian government created to record the Americans who stood by the British Crown during the Revolution.¹ It tells us John died in 1797, and indicates he was taken prisoner in 1777 and confined (perhaps restricted to his farm) until 1783.

Because a child of a United Empire Loyalist (UEL) could petition for land after he came of age or she married, there generally are reliable records available for that generation of a UEL family. William Reid's compilation of these records shows that John Frees had children Mary m. Van Camp, Hannah m. Pettys, Nicholas, Peter, John, David, Elizabeth m. Froom, and Michael.²

In the records made by the new Lutheran pastor for the area of Matilda and Williamsburgh, Rev. Samuel Schwerdtfeger, we find an 8 Aug 1790 baptism for Michael, child of Johannes Fries & wife Catharina.³ The witnesses were Michael & Margaretha Kermann, known to be residents of Matilda township. Johannes Fries & wife Catharina are also found as witnesses for a June 1790 baptism for a child of Jacob & Annatye van Camp, also of Matilda.⁴ Thus we see that John Frees' wife was named Catharina.

Many of the people who settled in Matilda township after the Revolution were from the Mohawk Valley of New York, and often of recent German immigration.

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¹ United Empire Loyalists Centennial Committee, *The Old United Empire Loyalists List* [original title: *The centennial of the settlement of Upper Canada by the United Empire Loyalists, 1784-1884*], (1885, repr. Gen. Pub. Co, 1969), p. 179

² William Reid, *The Loyalists in Ontario: the sons & daughters of the American Loyalists of Upper Canada* (Hunterdon House, 1973), p.119

³ Parish Registers of the United Anglican Mission of Williamsburgh, Matilda, and Edwardsburgh 1790-1886, National Archives of Canada microfilm M-1496 (MG 9, D7-23), transcription by John Helmut Merz, available at <http://www.flora.org/nancy/sdg/schwerdtfeger/ebery.html> [hereinafter Williamsburg Ch. Rec]

⁴ Williamsburg Ch. Rec

Research has turned up records there which fit the outline of the John Frees family provided by Reid's data.

One such record is that of the baptism of Elizabeth Fries 4 April 1773 in the Reformed church at Caughnawaga (which also records her birth as 13 March).⁵ Her parents are shown as Hannis Fries and Catrina Coons; the sponsors were Cosper Coons and Catrina Coons. "Hannis" is probably a short form of "Johannes", or John.

We get good support for assigning this birth to the Elizabeth of the Matilda Frees family from other records. The UEL data show that Elizabeth married a Froom. There is a marriage record by Rev. Schwerdtfeger showing that James Froim (or From) of Edwardsburg married "Elizabeth Fries of Matilda" on 21 Oct 1792.⁶ A Froom genealogy reports tombstones for both James and Elizabeth Froom, and reports she died 28 Oct 1862 aged 90 years 7 months.⁷ This would put her birth about March 1772, a fairly good fit with the Caughnawaga record, being one year off to the month.

Other relevant baptismal records from the Mohawk valley:

Maria, born 6 Mar 1771, dau. of Johannes Fris and Catharina, wife, wit: J. Cuns and Catharina Ergesinger, at Palatine, N.Y.⁸

Anna, born 22 Dec 1778, dau. of Johann Fries and Catharina; wit: Christian Lederer and Elizabeth Kaas, at Palatine, N.Y.⁹

Jacob, born 7 Dec 1780, son of Johannis Fries and Catrina Coons, wit: Jacob Busert and Maragrita Bushar, at Caughnawaga, N.Y.¹⁰

Nicholas, bap. 3 Mar 1782, son of John Fries and Catarina Coens, at Schenectady, N.Y.¹¹

We can recognize these as the Mary, Hannah, and Nicholas of the Matilda family; the entry for Jacob appears to be for a son not known from the Canadian records.

The marriage of John Frees also appears in the Mohawk valley records. On 3 Jan 1769 "Johannes Fris and Catharina Kunzin" were married at the Lutheran Trinity Church of Stone Arabia in Palatine, N.Y.¹²

⁵ R. W. Vosburgh, ed., Records of the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Caughnawaga, now the Reformed Church of Fonda (transcription 1917 by N. Y. Gen. & Bio. Soc.), LDS FHL microfilm [hereinafter Caughnawaga RPDC]

⁶ Williamsburg Ch. Rec.

⁷ Grace Y. Froom & Bernard Froom, *The Family Record of James Froom, Sr.* (1975); LDS FHL microfilm, p. 16

⁸ R. W. Vosburgh, ed., Records of the Lutheran Trinity Church of Stone Arabia (transcription 1917 by N. Y. Gen. & Bio. Soc.), LDS FHL microfilm [hereinafter Stone Arabia LTC]

⁹ William S. Coons et al., *Koon and Coons Families of Eastern N.Y.* (1937) [hereinafter Koon Families], p. 232. Anna's bap. is quoted from "S.A.L." which is used also by him for Maria's, so presumably refers to the Lutheran Trinity Church of Stone Arabia.

¹⁰ Caughnawaga RPDC

¹¹ Koon Families, p.232, quoting "Sche. D. R.", presumably the Schenectady Dutch Reformed Church

We also see "Johannis Fries" on the tax list for the Canajoharie district for January 1766.¹³ The district included what are now the towns of Palatine, Canajoharie, Minden, Cherry Valley, and others. The list includes people with the surnames Marselus, Kuhn, Dillenbagh, and Casselman, which are also surnames of Matilda settlers.

Birth Date and Place

What do we know of the origins of John Frees of Matilda? Some secondary works list him as being born 13 Sep 1741 in Athens, Greene Co., N.Y.¹⁴ These works generally do not give a source for this data or a reason for thinking it belongs to John of Matilda.

Some investigation shows that a bible record of this birth was published in 1897 in the widely known and well indexed *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*.¹⁵ It says that Jacob Freeze and Rebecah Van Loon had "John Freeze born Sept. 13, 1741" but no location is mentioned. The siblings of this John were Rebecca, Jacob, Dorothy, Rachel, Abraham, Maria, and Magdalen. There is also a baptismal record at the Zion Lutheran Church of Athens giving the same birth date for "John Frees", son of Jacob & Rebecca, thus confirming Athens (then called Loonenburg) as the birthplace.^{16, 17}

The birth date is not unreasonable for a man who married in 1769, but is there anything that connects this record to the John Frees of the Mohawk valley and Matilda? None of the works making that connection puts forward evidence to support it, and it turns out there is good reason to believe otherwise.

First, there are tax lists (contemporaneous with the Canajoharie list mentioned above) which list men who could be the Athens John Freese. The 13 Feb 1766 list for Cossackie (which included part of Athens) has "Johannis Fresier" on it;¹⁸ elsewhere on it is "Jacop v: Loon". The 1 Feb 1766 list for Claverack, an area on the east side of the Hudson opposite Athens, lists "John Frees".¹⁹ Supporting associations are shown in the 1767 Cossackie militia roll (Halenbeck's company),²⁰ which includes John Freeser, Jacob van Loon, and Dirck Spoer (probably the future brother-in-law of the Athens John Freese), and in the 1767 militia roll for Claverack

¹² Stone Arabia LTC

¹³ Florence Christoph, *Upstate New York in the 1760's* (1992) [hereinafter *Upstate 1760s*], p. 140

¹⁴ for example: Toronto Branch, The United Empire Loyalist Assoc. of Canada, *Loyalist Lineages of Canada 1783-1983*, (Generation Press, 1984), v. 1 p. 245 and v. 2 p.399

¹⁵ Curtiss, F. H., "Family Record of the Freeze, Spoor and Allied Families, from an Old Dutch Bible", *NEHGR* 51:344 (July 1897).

¹⁶ Baptismal records of Zion Lutheran Church of Athens, N.Y., from *History of Greene County* (J. B. Beers, 1884) extracted by Ann Clapper, accessed at http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nygreen2/zion_lutheran.htm

¹⁷ *The Albany Protocol* by Berkenmeyer has material on the background of this Jacob Freese.

¹⁸ *Upstate 1760s*, p. 96

¹⁹ *Upstate 1760s*, p. 81

²⁰ *Upstate 1760s*, p. 188

(Hogeboom's company),²¹ Jacob Freese Jr. is listed next to John Freese. There is also a "John Free" listed on a 1767 roll (Van Aernan's company) for the Poestenkill area, near what is now Troy, N.Y., on the eastern side of the Hudson.²²

Of these lists, the Claverack lists seems most likely to be recording the 1741 Athens John Freese because the militia roll lists what would be his younger brother immediately after his name. Whether the Athens man is on this list or on the Coxsackie or Poestenkill list, it seems fairly evident that none of these men could reasonably be the same man as the "Johannis Fries" of the Canajoharie list of the same year because of the separation of the places. Since the location and associations of the Canajoharie list are indicative of the man who eventually moved to Matilda, the natural conclusion is that the Matilda John Freese was not the John Freese born in Loonenburg in 1741.

A second line of evidence come from Hyde's 1878 history of Lee, Massachusetts, which says:

John Freese, who married Desire Williams of Stockbridge, and was thus allied to "the blue blood" of Berkshire County, was a tailor and tavern keeper in Egremont, in 1776. He came to this town during the Revolutionary war and became a very large landholder. The house he first occupied ... The Freese family were of Dutch descent, among the early settlers of Lunenburgh, now Athens, N. Y. With real Dutch forethought, and quaint ideas of propriety, they brought with them from the old country, mahogany coffins and satin grave-clothes. The family name has entirely disappeared from the town, since their removal in 1814, to Brunswick, Ohio. Miss Sarah Goodspeed is the only immediate descendant left..²³

This town history is obviously not a primary source, but the stories come from local memory and from a time not too distant from the events. The story of the Athens origins is supported by the Lee vital records, which show that when "John Freese" died there 25 Mar 1814 he was aged 72 years, which would be right for someone born in September 1741.²⁴

In summary, there is no evidence known that the John Freese born in 1741 in Athens (Loonenburg) was the same as the Matilda man, and furthermore there is substantial evidence provided by the tax lists and the Lee history that he was not.

²¹ Upstate 1760s, p. 179

²² Upstate 1760s, p. 163

²³ C. M. Hyde & Alexander Hyde, *Lee: The Centennial Celebration and Centennial History of the Town of Lee, Mass.* (1878), p. 145 accessed at <http://books.google.com/books?id=dJ1jal0XAYwC>

²⁴ *Vital Records of Lee, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (New Eng. Hist. Gen. Soc., 1903), p 199 accessed at <http://books.google.com/books?id=7yElAAAAMAAJ>