

A short history of the Keefe/Keith family on Kennebecasis Island

James Keefe was born in c1750. It's not known if he was born in North America, in what were then Britain's American colonies, or in Great Britain itself. However, he served in the British Army as a sergeant in the Queen's Rangers during the American Revolution. In May 1783, Keefe and his family were among the thousands of Loyalists who arrived in Saint John on board the "spring fleet" which had sailed from New York. An accounting, for administrative purposes, of the newly arrived Loyalists, described the Keefe family as consisting of one adult male, one adult female, one child over 10 years of age and one child under 10 years of age. The Keefe's had a third child, a son Thomas, who was born in Saint John in c1785.

James Keefe received a grant of land in Saint John's South End (known then as Parrtown) but there is no record of him actually settling there. Rather, Keefe seems to have been drawn to Kennebecasis Island soon after his arrival in New Brunswick. In 1786, the Royal Gazette published a notice about a 17-year-old Keefe boy who died in a March storm on the Milkish Creek side of Kennebecasis Island. This may have been James' son. In 1789, Keefe purchased 50 acres of land on the Island from Michael Butler who had been granted lot 5 in 1785.

On September 25, 1807, Keefe petitioned His Majesty's Council for lots 7, 8 and 9 on Kennebecasis Island. In the petition, Keefe stated that he owned lot 5, that his family had been living on the Island for 12 years and that his was the only family living there, that he had cleared some of the land and had planted more than an acre of turnips on lot 9 owned by Jeremiah Mabee, who was no longer living in New Brunswick, and that he needed more land. He further stated that since the original grantees had made no improvements to the land in question (it was expected that when Crown land was granted that the grantee would develop the land in some way - live on it, farm it, harvest the forest, etc.), that the land be escheated and granted to him. Keefe's petition was successful and he was granted lots 7, 8 and 9 in September 1807.

James Keefe's wife's name is not known nor are those of his two oldest children. There is also no record of what happened to these members of the Keefe family other than a report that a 17-year-old Keefe boy (who may have been James' son) died on Kennebecasis Island in 1786. There is also no record of when James died although it was after June 1833. Much more is known about James' son, Thomas.

Thomas Keefe was born in Saint John in c1785 and in c1811, married Jane Hayter (born c1786). Thomas and Jane lived for many years on Kennebecasis Island and died there in the 1870s. They had at least 7 children including James (b. c1813), John Thomas (b. 1815), William Lloyd (b. 1817), Michael (b. c1820) and Joseph (b. c1822). Only John and William stayed on the Island where they married, raised families, and farmed the land that belonged to their grandfather, James, and their father, Thomas. The other Keefe brothers moved to Maine in the 1830s and 1840s and never returned to live in New Brunswick.

Thomas and Jane's son, John, (b. May 12, 1815) married Letitia Kerr (b. c1826 in Cork Co., Ireland) on October 5, 1846 in Hampton, NB. Letitia had arrived in New Brunswick from Ireland in June 1839. John and Letitia lived on the Island where they farmed the land and raised 10 children (born between 1847 and 1869). John had purchased 40 acres of land on lot 8 from his father in 1840 (see below). John and Letitia's daughter, Adelaide (b. December 15, 1861; d. April 26, 1940), was married to James Morrow. Adelaide lived on the Island until the death of her husband in August 1930. Of John and Letitia's other children, only their youngest son, Albert (b. May 18, 1869), was still living on the Island when the census was taken in 1891. John died of an apparent heart attack on July 21, 1898 while rowing to Bayswater to attend church with his grandson, Clarence Morrow. Letitia passed away at a relatively young age (mid 40s) on April 26, 1872.

Thomas and Jane's son, William, (b. May 3, 1817) married Elizabeth Ann Saunders (b. June 6, 1819) on May 13, 1839. William and Elizabeth lived on the southeast side of lot 8 where it borders lot 11. They had 12 children, born between 1840 and 1862. Three of their children (Joseph, b. December 25, 1848; James M., b. July 5, 1852; Caroline, b. April 19, 1860) later raised their own families on the Island. The other children either died young or married and left the Island. William died on May 21, 1901 while Elizabeth died on May 18, 1904. Both William and Elizabeth are buried on the Island in the Keefe/Keith family cemetery.

Joseph Keefe (b. December 25, 1848) was William and Elizabeth's fifth child and second son. In 1868, Joseph married Martha Ann Gamble (b. c1851) and they had four children, all of whom were born on the Island between 1869 and 1878. Joseph owned 40 acres of land on lot 11 where it bordered on lots 7 and 8. This was land that William Keefe had purchased from William McColgan in March 1865. Joseph bought the land from his father in October 1871, a few years after his marriage to Martha Gamble. By 1881 when the Census was taken, Joseph and his family were no longer on the Island having moved to the US.

James M. Keefe (b. July 5, 1852) was William and Elizabeth's seventh child and third son. In 1878, James married Elizabeth Gamble (b. c1856). About a year after her marriage, Elizabeth and her baby died during childbirth. Elizabeth was the younger sister of Joseph Keefe's wife, Martha. On January 21, 1883, James married Mary Estelle Beatty (b. January 14, 1862 in Saint John). Family lore says that Mary did not like the spelling of "Keefe" and therefore in the mid 1880s, "Keefe" was changed to "Keith". James and Mary raised four children on their Island farm: Elizabeth, b. November 14, 1883; Mabel, b. July 1, 1886; Louis, b. October 1, 1889; Leonard, b. November 4, 1894. James bought the Keith farm on lot 8 from his father, William, in 1891. A few years later, in 1899, he purchased from his brother Joseph, the 40 acres of land that Joseph had bought from their father in 1871. He also owned a small parcel of land on the north side of Keith's Cove which he purchased from George Johnston in 1892. James died on September 16, 1912 while Mary died on February 10, 1943. James and Mary, as well as James' first wife, Elizabeth, and their infant baby, are buried in the Keefe/Keith family cemetery.

Caroline Keefe (b. April 19, 1860) was the eleventh child and sixth daughter of William and Elizabeth. Caroline was married to William Morrow and lived on the western end of Kennebecasis Island.

When the 1901 Census was taken, other than Caroline and Adelaide Keefe who were married to the Morrow brothers, the only Keefes/Keiths still living on the Island were William and Elizabeth, and their son James and his family.

After James' death in 1912, his farm passed to his wife, Mary, and their two sons, Louis and Leonard. The land was willed to the sons with a "life interest" for their mother. On February 23, 1922, Leonard married Edith Mae Forbes (b. c1902). Leonard then bought out his brother and took ownership of the farm. Leonard and Edith had two children, James (b. November 27, 1924; d. 1993) and Audrey (b. July 30, 1927).

Leonard and his family were the last of the Keiths to live year-round on Kennebecasis Island. They moved to Saint John in 1944 after the death of James' mother the previous year. Leonard and Edith died in Saint John in 1970 - on January 13 and July 20, respectively. The Keith farm (estate) was willed to Leonard and Edith's children, James and Audrey, who then divided the property.

Note: for details of land grants, deeds, land division and ownership see *K-Island History* page embedded document: *Property On Kennebecasis Island*.



Note: The Keith family farm house (picture taken 2013) - located at the corner of Kennebecasis Island Rd and Old Ferry Rd.