



## Robert Spencer and the Theft of the “Katy”

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Have you ever heard of the sloop *Katy*? I hadn't, either. Unless you're something of a military history fan, or particularly knowledgeable about the American Revolution, you might not have. So this is a cautionary tale, if you will, a reminder about the need for careful evaluation of historical evidence as we search for our ancestors.

As mentioned previously (<https://fromshepherdsandshoemakers.wordpress.com/2017/05/15/the-robert-spencers-of-canajoharie-and-stamford-upper-canada/>), one of my 6x-great-grandfathers was Robert Spencer, United Empire Loyalist. I've been having a grand old time lately, digging up documents for him from the website of the Library and Archives Canada, since they have so many great collections for those of us with Loyalist ancestors. Land petitions? Check. Haldimand Papers? Check. So I came to this database, [Carlton Papers: Loyalists and British Soldiers, 1722-1784](http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/loyalists-british-soldiers-1722-1784/Pages/introduction.aspx) (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/loyalists-british-soldiers-1722-1784/Pages/introduction.aspx>), and did a search for “Spencer” to see if they had anything for Robert Spencer. Sure enough, they did!

Figure 1: Search result (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/loyalists-british-soldiers-1722-1784/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=206&>) for Robert Spencer in Carlton Papers database.

Carleton Papers – Loyalists  
and British Soldiers, 1772-  
1784

Search: Database

## Item: Robert SPENCER (206)

Given Names(s):	Robert
Surname:	SPENCER
Gender:	Male
Type of Document:	Letter
Date (yyyy/mm/dd) :	1783-09-22
Additional Information:	REGARDING HIS INVOLVEMENT IN THEFT OF "KATTY" (SLOOP) AND OF NAVAL STORES FROM "EAGLE"
Place where the Document was Created:	New York
Document Page Number:	9183
Fonds:	British Headquarters Papers (Carleton Papers or American Manuscripts)
Microfilm:	M-365
Reference:	MG23 B1
Item Number:	206

I knew that Robert Spencer had served with [Butler's Rangers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butler%27s_Rangers) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butler%27s\\_Rangers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butler%27s_Rangers)), a British military regiment best known for their participation in battles in central New York and Pennsylvania. Since the document referenced here was created in New York and was dated 1783, prior to the disbandment of the Rangers in 1784, it seemed likely to pertain to my ancestor. Intrigued, I requested a copy from the archive, which is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Letter from Wm. (?) Thomas Buchanan, Compiler, to Major Upham, regarding the theft of the sloop *Katty* (sic) and of naval stores from *Eagle*.<sup>1</sup>

W<sup>m</sup> Thomas Buchanan Comptrol<sup>r</sup> to Major Upham, and agreeable  
 to his request, sends him the names of those persons, who carried  
 off on the night of the 3<sup>d</sup> March, from along side the Ship Eagle then  
 lying at anchor upon the Battery Rocks, the Hoop Kestly having  
 on board 115 purchasers of small casks, Jamaica Rum, also the  
 Sails, Guns, Water Casks, and other materials belonging to the  
 Eagle, which were by them landed at Elizabeth Town in  
 New Jersey

New York 22<sup>d</sup> Sept 1703

William Crain  
 Thomas Quigly  
 William Williamson  
 Melrose Miller  
 Moses Helfield  
 Robert Spencer  
 Samuel Perryman  
 John Flanagan

The transcription of the text is as follows:

*“Wm. (?) Thomas Buchanan, Compiler, to Major Upham, and agreeable to his request, sends him the names of those persons, who carried off on the night of the 3<sup>rd</sup> March, from along side the ship Eagle then laying ashore upon the Battery Rocks, the sloop Katty having on board 115 puncheons & 5 small casks Jamaican Rum, also the Sails, Guns, Water Casks, and other materials belonging to the Eagle, which were by them landed at Elizabeth Town in New Jersey.*

*New York 22 September 1783*

*William Crain*

*Thomas Quigby*

*William Williamson*

*Meline Miller*

*Moses Hetfield*

*Robert Spencer*

*Samuel Heryman*

*John Hanyon”<sup>1</sup>*

Since this document was indexed in a database of Loyalists and British soldiers, my initial interpretation was that these must have been British soldiers who captured an American ship. I began to search the internet, as any good historian does in the 21st century, to see what I could find that might help me understand this. The first reference ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS\\_Providence\\_\(1775\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Providence_(1775))) to the sloop *Katy* that I found seemed to confirm this suspicion: she was a sloop in the Continental Navy, originally chartered by the Rhode Island general assembly. But wait, what’s this about being “destroyed by her own crew in 1779”? That doesn’t fit with a capture by Robert Spencer et al. in 1783.

Further internet searching produced more interesting results. In the book, *Elizabeth: First Capital of New Jersey*, by Jean-Rae Turner and Richard T. Koles, the incident with the *Katy* is mentioned:

*“On March 3, 1783, Major William Crane, later a general, captured the armed ship Eagle and the sloop Katy within pistol shot of the Battery in New York City. The Eagle had to be left because she was grounded. The Katy was brought to Elizabethtown where the cargo and vessel were sold at auction. Crane was elevated to brigadier general for this action.”<sup>2</sup>*

The book *Cyclopedia of New Jersey Biography, Memorial and Biographical* further clarifies the parties on each side in this conflict. General Crane is described as a “Patriot Soldier, Useful Citizen”<sup>3</sup> and the events of 3 March 1783 are also described:

*“General William Crane was born in 1748 in Elizabethtown, New Jersey....He had been advanced to the rank of major, and in 1783, led an enterprise of which he left the following report:*

*‘I have the pleasure to inform you of the capture of the sloop, Katy, of twelve double-fortified twelve-pounders, containing one hundred and seventeen puncheons of Jamaica spirits, lying at the time of capture within pistol shot of the grand battery of New York and alongside of the ship Eagle of twenty-four guns, which we also took but were obliged to leave, as she lay aground. The captains and crews of both the vessels were brought up to us in the sloop to this place, where we have them secure. This was performed on the night of the third of March by six townsmen under the command of Captain Quigley and myself, without the firing of a musket by any of our party.’”<sup>4</sup>*

This makes it clear that the sloop *Katy* and the *Eagle* were both British ships, having been captured by a party of Americans, including one Robert Spencer, who was clearly not my ancestor. A little more digging finished the job: both the *Katy* and the *Eagle* are named in a [list of Loyalist ships](http://www.uelac.org/Loyalist-Ships/Loyalist-Ships.php) (<http://www.uelac.org/Loyalist-Ships/Loyalist-Ships.php>), and there is evidence for the New Jersey Robert Spencer ([http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?\\_phsrc=qEi207&\\_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&gss=angs-c&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=robert&gsfn\\_x=NP\\_NN\\_NIC&gsln=spencer&gsln\\_x=0&msypn\\_ftp=new%20jersey&msbdy=1740&cpxt=1&cp=12&catbucket=rstp&MSAV=1&MSV=0&uidh=uy2&pcat=35&h=18733508&recoff=7%208&dbid=3562&indiv=1&ml\\_rpos=1](http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?_phsrc=qEi207&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true&gss=angs-c&new=1&rank=1&msT=1&gsfn=robert&gsfn_x=NP_NN_NIC&gsln=spencer&gsln_x=0&msypn_ftp=new%20jersey&msbdy=1740&cpxt=1&cp=12&catbucket=rstp&MSAV=1&MSV=0&uidh=uy2&pcat=35&h=18733508&recoff=7%208&dbid=3562&indiv=1&ml_rpos=1)) in Ancestry’s database, *New Jersey, Compiled Census and Census Substitutes Index, 1643-1890*, living in Trenton township, Hunterdon County, New Jersey in 1741.<sup>5</sup>

So why was this Robert Spencer named in a Canadian database of Loyalists and British soldiers? In defense of the Library and Archives of Canada site, they did specify in their [description of the records](http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/loyalists-british-soldiers-1722-1784/Pages/introduction.aspx#a) (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/loyalists-british-soldiers-1722-1784/Pages/introduction.aspx#a>),

*“The series includes a variety of documents about loyalist soldiers and civilian refugees (both white and black people) but also about people who were on Manhattan Island or the adjacent mainland dominated by the British during the American Revolution, as well as many British and German soldiers who settled in Canada later and also some rebels (emphasis mine).”*

What amazes me about this particular story is not that there were two Robert Spencers — I’ve come to expect that — but that there were also two sloops called *Katy*, one American and one British. It nicely illustrates the importance of digging deeper to understand documents in their proper historical context, and not be lured into the trap of seeing only what we expect to find.

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> "Carlton Papers — Loyalists and British Soldiers, 1772-1784", Government of Canada, Library and Archives of Canada (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Pages/home.aspx> (<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Pages/home.aspx>)), New York, 1783, citing Robert Spencer, document page number 9183, MG 23 B1, Microfilm M-365, item number 206.

<sup>2</sup> Turner, Jean-Rae, and Richard T. Koles. *Elizabeth: First Capital of New Jersey*, Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2003, p. 47 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=1F6iYssnaVkC&pg=PA47&lpg=PA47&dq=katy+eagle+general+william+crane+new+jersey&source=bl&ots=vviGkHUII9&sig=W90Rda4huJlAu61rXqeBdjL0nuw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiK89vm6ePUAhXKdD4KHbrMCasQ6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=katy%20eagle%20general%20william%20crane%20new%20jersey&f=false>). Google Books, <https://books.google.com> (<https://books.google.com>), accessed 29 June 2017.

<sup>3</sup> *Cyclopedia of New Jersey Biography, Memorial and Biographical: With the Assistance of the Following Advisory Committee : Joseph Fulford Folsom, Chairman ; Hiram Edmund Deats ; Charles Tiebout Cowenhoven ; Alfred M. Heston ; David Demarest Zabriskie ; John Stillwell Applegate ; Frank John Urquhart ; John Albert Blair ; George Mason La Monte ; Carlton P. Hoagland, Volume 1.* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=6rUNAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA116&lpg=PA116&dq=gen+william+crane+katy&source=bl&ots=tZ7MEneRy1&sig=E8Cg-7z6ePGvoSbgMz2LFdSYMQM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjRoLrh0OPUAhWOOD4KHSNpCuIQ6AEIPzAF#v=onepage&q=gen%20william%20crane%20katy&f=false>) New York: American Historical Society, Inc., 1921, p. 116 (<https://books.google.com/books?id=6rUNAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA116&lpg=PA116&dq=gen+william+crane+katy&source=bl&ots=tZ7MEneRy1&sig=E8Cg-7z6ePGvoSbgMz2LFdSYMQM&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjRoLrh0OPUAhWOOD4KHSNpCuIQ6AEIPzAF#v=onepage&q=gen%20william%20crane%20katy&f=false>). Google Books, <https://books.google.com> (<https://books.google.com>), accessed 29 June 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ancestry.com. *New Jersey, Compiled Census and Census Substitutes Index, 1643-1890* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 1999, citing Robert Spencer in New Jersey Early Census Index, Trenton, Hunterdon, New Jersey, 1741, p. 50, accessed 29 June 2017.

Featured Image: *Continental Sloop Providence (1775-1779)*, (originally the sloop *Katy* before she was renamed), U.S. Naval Historical Center Photograph. Painting in oils by W. Nowland Van Powell, licensed under CC0 1.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

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CATEGORIES SPENCER, UNITED EMPIRE LOYALISTS

## 2 thoughts on “Robert Spencer and the Theft of the “Katy””

1. **Dennis Golombek** says:

*June 30, 2017 at 1:34 pm*

Here's a source for you: [http://www.exploringniagara.com/all\\_about\\_niagara/the\\_history\\_of\\_niagara/butlers\\_rangers.html](http://www.exploringniagara.com/all_about_niagara/the_history_of_niagara/butlers_rangers.html)

REPLY

1. **Julie Roberts Szczepankiewicz** says:

*June 30, 2017 at 8:59 pm*

Yep, both Robert and his son-in-law (my 5x-great-grandfather) were privates in Butler's Rangers.

REPLY

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