THE LOYALIST EXPERIENCE DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



It is often said that history is written by the victors, and the American Revolution was no exception. Because the War of Independence was won by the rebels, American colonists who remained loyal to the British Crown were often portrayed in a negative light. In historical accounts, legal documents, and popular culture, Loyalists have been shown as corrupt, inept, and greedy individuals whose unwavering loyalty to the Crown ultimately led to their downfall. However, these stereotypes downplay the difficult choices and genuine hardships that American Loyalists faced.

The total number of Loyalists in the American colonies prior to the outbreak of war in 1775 was approximately 380,000 to 400,000, about 15 to 20 percent of the population. By the end of the Revolutionary era, between 80,000 and 100,000 Loyalists had fled.[1] More than half of them escaped to Canada. Of those, 45,000 refugees settled in the Maritime region, and an additional 9,500 went to Quebec. About 7,500 of those ultimately settled in what became Upper Canada (now Ontario).[2] The Loyalist men, women, and children who departed lost more than just their homes and personal belongings—they left behind their way of life, communities, relatives, friends, and businesses.[3]



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Who were the Loyalists?

The lives of many colonists who ultimately became "Tories" did not obviously differ from their neighbors who embraced the cause of independence. Some Loyalists—among them well-educated Harvard graduates who were merchants, doctors, lawyers, and ministers—were elite members of their towns and communities. However, most colonists who remained faithful to the Crown hailed from the middle and lower classes.

In 2016, historian Amber Jolly examined court records relating to over 850 Loyalist property seizure cases in New York that occurred following the passage of the Confiscation Act of 1783.[4] She found that the overwhelming majority of Loyalists who lost property

Above: Howard Pyle, "Tory Refugees on Their Way to Canada," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, December 1901, 107. Colorized version by Carolyn Oakley.

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"Bostonians Paying the Exciseman, or Tarring and Feathering," by Philip Dawe (London, 1774). This print depicts a January 25, 1774, incident in which Loyalist John Malcolm, British Commissioner of Customs, was tarred and feathered, assaulted, and forced to drink tea by a Patriot mob. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library.

in New York were from the laboring, agricultural, and artisan classes. Only six percent would be considered "professional" by modern standards.[5]

Aside from Crown officials, who usually aligned with "friends of government," no single trait defined Loyalists. Loyalists came from every social class in colonial society, representing a variety of occupations and regions.[6] As Patriot pressure increased, many Loyalists fled to nearby areas held by the British army, including Boston, New York City, Lower Canada (Quebec), and Philadelphia. On the frontier settlements of the southern colonies—Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia—escaping to safety was much harder since British military outposts were scarce and spread out. As a result, Loyalists formed armed militias to fight back against harassment by local Patriots, many of whom were their neighbors and family members.[7]

The demographic profile of the Loyalists who ultimately settled in Upper Canada reveals a diverse population shaped by recent immigration. Over half of the refugees who settled in Upper Canada had not been born in North America.

More than fifty percent of these non-native Loyalists were Scottish Highland Roman Catholics who had fled from New York, the Hampshire Grants (modern day Vermont), and Maine. When the Revolution began, many of these Scots had recently arrived in the American colonies, having an average residence of only four years. Approximately forty percent of these Upper Canada arrivals were German and Irish immigrants who, on average, had lived in New York and the Hampshire Grants between eleven and eighteen years. Eight percent of these Loyalists were born in England and had lived in New England and New York for an average of eight years.[8]

Almost ten percent of Loyalists who fled to Canada were of African descent. Whether enslaved or free, many Blacks cast their lots with the Crown in an attempt to secure better lives for themselves and their families. Many Native American allies of the British also relocated to Canada after the war. Over 2,000 Iroquois from the Six Nations, Mohicans, Nanticokes, and Squakis had settled in Ontario by 1785.[9]

Reasons to remain loyal

American colonists remained loyal to the British Crown during the Revolutionary era for a variety of reasons. One was religious beliefs. Anglican ministers, like Benjamin Pickman of Salem, Massachusetts, and John Amory of Boston, viewed loyalty as a sacred duty. Some Congregationalists and Roman Catholics supported British rule due to pacifist principles or a desire to maintain Crown support for religious tolerance.

Financial concerns also played a role in the decision to side with Loyalists, as officials, merchants, and tenant farmers feared economic disaster if ties with England were severed.

Other colonists valued stability and upholding the social order and opposed Patriot violence. Mob attacks against fellow colonists and government officials in major Revolutionary strongholds like Boston, New York City, and Williamsburg pushed some moderates toward loyalty. Prominent Loyalists, including William Paine, Samuel Curwen, and Reverend Samuel Seabury, viewed Patriot actions as oppressive. Some early advocates of independence changed sides after the Declaration of Independence, unable to condone a radical break from the British Empire.

Many ordinary citizens who initially leaned toward neutrality were reluctantly drawn into taking a side as

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events unfolded. Patriot use of nonimportation agreements and loyalty oaths during the late 1760s and 1770s prompted many neutrals to become Loyalists. Once the conflict began, residents were pressured to make a choice, as those who remained neutral often faced intimidation from both armies.[10]

Loyalists as refugees

At the start of the American Revolution, Loyalist men often sought refuge in British military enclaves, leaving their wives and children behind. The men assumed their families would be safe. However, Patriot authorities sometimes punished these women and children, rejecting the idea that they were innocent bystanders. Contemporary accounts illustrate the widespread abuse Loyalist women and their children endured, including public humiliation, beatings, and displacement.

After New York Loyalist Daniel McAlpin fled from local Patriot authorities, his wife, Mary, refused to assist the rebels in locating or securing her husband. A mob of rebels seized Mary and her oldest daughter, stripped them down to their shifts, and "carted" them through the streets of Albany as bystanders pelted them with dirt and rotten vegetables. Mary and her children were then kept in captivity for several weeks.[11]

Loyalists fleeing to British-held enclaves faced hardship and danger on their journeys. Loyalists traveling north to Canada typically followed an overland route through Native American territory to Lake Ontario. Since much of the journey was along forest trails, guides were essential. Unfortunately for the Loyalists, the route required passing through territory controlled by the Oneidas, who were American allies. The refugees also had to avoid Continental and militia detachments actively patrolling the area. Once out of enemy territory, the refugees crossed Lake Ontario at Oswego, New York, or traveled along the lake's southern shore to the Niagara River. The trip along the Niagara was often dangerous, especially during the spring floods.

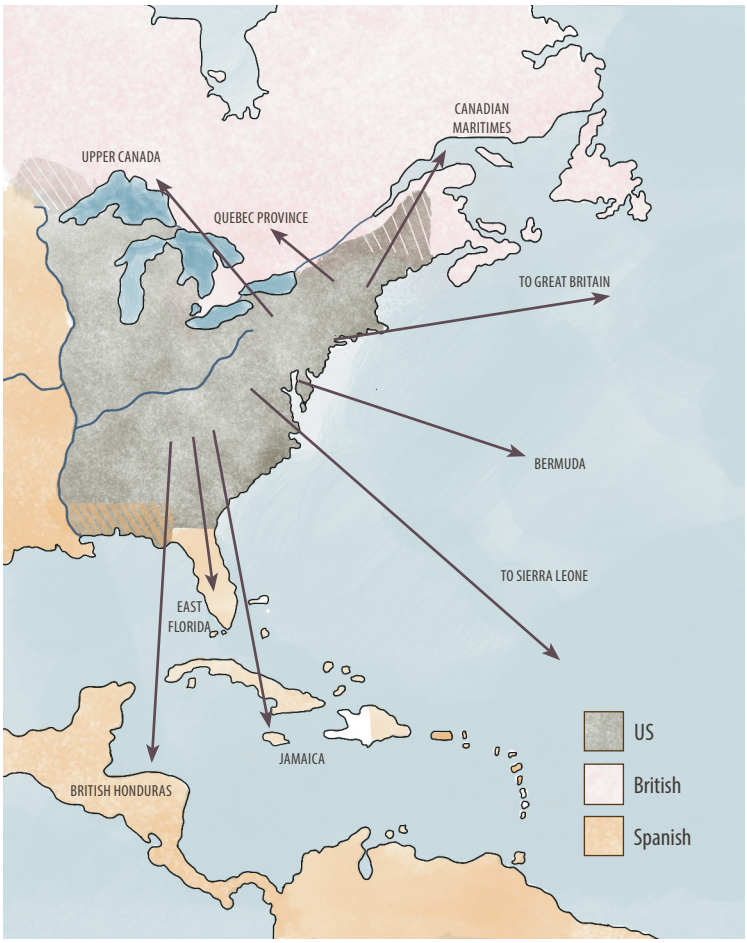
The British government was unprepared for the arrival of thousands of Loyalist men, women, and children in Canada.[12] Following the defeat of Burgoyne in 1777, estimates place the number of nonmilitary Loyalists in Canada at over 1,000 men, women, and children. By 1780, the number of Loyalist refugees in Canada had grown to 5,000; by 1784, the number had increased to 7,000.[13]

Loyalists in refugee camps

In response, the Crown implemented a policy reminiscent of its approach toward the impoverished in Britain. Loyalist arrivals were interrogated about their trades or professions and directed to designated areas for employment opportunities or recruited for military service. Destitute Loyalists, including the sick, infirm, children, women with infants, and the disabled, were assigned to refugee camps in Quebec and placed on public assistance. In exchange for this "protection" for their families, men were expected to enlist in Loyalist regiments and support the effort to suppress the American rebellion.

Government authorities struggled to provide adequate housing in Quebec for the growing number of refugees. The situation was exacerbated by delays in construction, shortages of building materials, and the failure to establish essential infrastructure including sawmills and schoolhouses. Living conditions in refugee settlements were extremely cramped. In 1779, in Machiche, near Sorel-Tracy, over 400 refugees were packed into just twenty-one small buildings, each only about 18 by 40 feet, forcing many families to endure overcrowded conditions during the harsh winter.[14]

The Loyalist Diaspora. Created by Alex Cain and Carolyn Oakley.



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British officials struggled to provide refugees with essential supplies like food, clothing, blankets, and cooking equipment. Many refugees suffered or even died from malnutrition, inadequate apparel, and harsh living conditions. Attempts to create self-sufficient refugee communities outside Quebec City largely failed, leaving thousands dependent on government aid.

Loyalist refugees were horrified by the dire conditions in the Quebec camps. Residents of the Machiche refugee camp suffered from extreme poverty, overcrowding, and a lack of provisions. Accusations of corruption further fueled resentment. British authorities restricted movement outside the camps and denied refugees opportunities to earn an income or sell goods, further deepening their hardships. Diseases such as camp fever, malaria, smallpox, and pneumonia spread rapidly. Government officials dismissed the complaints of Loyalist refugees as exaggerated or ungrateful.

Black Loyalists, who were promised freedom in exchange for allegiance to the Crown, could face especially harsh treatment. Some were re-enslaved, sold, or denied the rights they had been promised, despite protests from some British officers.[15]

As the war continued, the emotional and psychological toll of confinement grew in the refugee camps. The long-term absence of men due to military service added to the burden, and marital breakdowns, alcoholism, infanticides, and suicides became increasingly common.[16] Frustrated British leaders saw the refugees as a drain on resources and used the group's dependence to maintain control, forcing the refugees to either endure poor conditions or fend for themselves.

Wealthy Loyalists

Unlike many of the "lower sort," wealthy and politically influential Loyalists like Sir John Johnston of New York, George Leonard of Massachusetts, and William Franklin of New Jersey enjoyed privileges while under the protection of the British army. These Loyalists were allowed to move freely throughout the colonies, raise regiments of soldiers, pursue business ventures, and receive political and military appointments that often brought them profit.

However, even the Tory elite were not completely secure from the hardships of being refugees or from the wrath of the Americans—or the British. In 1775, Loyalist merchant John Andrews bitterly complained that British soldiers stationed in Boston and their female camp followers routinely plundered his property.[17] Although during the war James Clarke benefited from being safely behind defensive lines in British-held Newport, Rhode Island, he concluded he could not stay



Landing of the Loyalists, 1783, by Henry Sandham in Beckles Willson, *Romance of Empire: Canada* (London: T. C. & L. C. Jack, Ltd., 1907). Wikimedia Commons. This view of Loyalists arriving in New Brunswick reflected romanticized notions of Loyalist history. Both the artist and author were Canadian.

permanently. In a 1786 letter, he reflected on leaving the colony and relocating to New Brunswick: "My Attachment to our native Country is so fervent and sincere that I could freely give up my Life, and Ten Thousand more if I possess them, could I restore dear Rhode Island to its former happy, happy Situation."[18]

After the signing of the Declaration of Independence, several states, including Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, enacted confiscation laws that criminalized dissent by allowing the seizure and sale of Loyalist property. Wealthy Tories were especially targeted. In one case, Loyalist John Borland's property in Braintree, Massachusetts, was confiscated and subsequently acquired by John and Abigail Adams, who renamed it Peacefield.[19]

Resettlement and rebuilding

After the Treaty of Paris ended the Revolutionary War in 1783, approximately 60,000 American Loyalist refugees from the former American colonies and Quebec were forcibly relocated to new locations, primarily Upper Canada, several Caribbean islands, West Florida, and Sierra Leone.[20] These Loyalists faced arduous journeys and arrived ill-prepared. They, too, relied heavily

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on inadequate British provisions and charity for their survival.

Most Loyalists who had left their homes in the American colonies during or after the war and settled in Canada faced the immense challenge of rebuilding their lives with limited resources, few markets, and poor infrastructure. They cleared forests, built shelters, and cultivated land while enduring isolation and the emotional strain of displacement.

Despite the hardships they endured, Loyalists gradually transformed the wilderness into productive farms and communities. With only limited government support in the form of supplies, land grants, and protection, Loyalists not only survived but also laid the foundation for lasting prosperity. ◆

Notes

1 Robert M. Calhoon, "Loyalism and Neutrality," in *A Companion to the American Revolution*, eds. Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole (John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 235.

2 Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (Random House, 2012), 357.

3 Bruce Wilson, *As She Began: An Illustrated Introduction to Loyalist Ontario* (Dundurn Group, 1981), 13.

4 Amber Jolly, *Map of Loyalist Property Confiscations in New York*, created for Alexander Cain, December 1, 2016. Data from "List of Loyalists Against Whom Judgements Were Given Under the Confiscation Act," Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library, accessed June 20, 2025, digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/92a14bb0-0e2f-0134-a08b-00505686a51c. The largest number of property confiscations occurred in Albany and Tryon Counties.

5 Ibid. Only twenty-three men were identified by Jolly as "esquires." Eight were gentlemen, twelve were merchants, and seven were physicians or attorneys. Only four were military officers.

6 Shannon Duffy and Zoie Horecny, "Loyalists," *George Washington Presidential Library Digital Encyclopedia*, Mount Vernon, last modified July 3, 2025, mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/loyalists.

7 Ibid.

8 Wilson [note 3],17.

9 Ibid., 18.

10 For a detailed study of Pennsylvanians who identified as "neutral" during the American Revolution, see Aaron Sullivan, *The Disaffected: Britain's Occupation of Philadelphia During the American Revolution* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 304.

11 Great Britain, *Audit Office Records*, vol. 21, reel B-1159 (1776), Library of Congress, guides.loc.gov/british-manuscripts/audit. One local minister later recalled, "Mrs. McAlpin was brought down to Albany in a very scandalous manner so much that the Americans themselves cried out about it." A second account asserted that "when Mrs. McAlpin was brought from the hut to Albany as a prisoner with her daughter … they neither of them had a rag of cloaths to shift themselves."

12 Janice Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept: Loyalist Refugee Women in Eastern Ontario* (McGill–Queen's University Press, 1993), 96–97.

13 Alexander Clarence Flick, *Loyalism in New York During the American Revolution* (Columbia University Press, 1901), 38–39.

14 Letter from Conrad Gugy to Frederick Haldimand, November 16, 1778, quoted in Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept* [note 12], 114.

15 Regrettably, although numerous court cases from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Upper Canada addressed attempts to re-enslave freed Blacks, a comprehensive data set detailing the total number of individuals re-enslaved is lacking. Several white Loyalists, such as Jesse Grey from Charleston, Nova Scotia, have been identified as profiting from kidnapping Black freedmen and subsequently selling them back into slavery. See "Enslaved Again," *The Black Loyalist: Our History, Our People*, accessed July 26, 2025, at blackloyalist.com/cdc/story/exile/enslave.htm.

16 Barry St. Leger to Frederick Haldimand, in Potter-MacKinnon, *While the Women Only Wept* [note 12], 121. For further examples of the upheaval of Loyalist lives within Quebec refugee camps, see Potter-MacKinnon [note 12], 120–125; and W. Stewart Wallace, *The United Empire Loyalists: A Chronicle of the Great Migration* (Glasgow, Brook & Company, 1914), 27. There are contemporary accounts of several "insane Loyalists" being sent from refugee camps in Quebec to a hospital in Quebec City. Colonel Daniel Claus to Frederick Haldimand, June 14, 1784, in Potter-MacKinnon [note 12], 121.

17 "Soldiery think they have a license to plunder evry ones house & Store," John Andrews to William Barrell, June 1, 1775, Andrews-Eliot correspondence, Massachusetts Historical Society, Collection Online, accessed July 26, 2025, masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=2050.

18 James Clarke to Miss Coggeshall, Halifax, February 5, 1786, in Catherine S. Crary, ed., *The Price of Loyalty: Tory Writings from the Revolutionary Era* (McGraw-Hill, 1973), 446–47.

19 Mark Boonshoft, "Dispossessing Loyalists and Redistributing Property in Revolutionary New York," *The New York Public Library Blog*, September 19, 2016, accessed July 27, 2025, nypl.org/blog/2016/09/19/loyalist-property-confiscation.

20 Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles* [note 2], 357. Approximately 12,000 Loyalists went to Great Britain, 12,000 to the Caribbean, 5,000 to Florida, and 1,200 to West Africa.

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