

"LIBERTY TO SLAVES"

Black Loyalists in the American Revolution

On November 7, 1775, Lord Dunmore, the Royal Governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation promising freedom to all indentured servants and enslaved people who were willing to join the British forces during the American War for Independence. It's hard to determine the exact number, but some historians estimate that tens of thousands of enslaved people fled to join the British Army over the course of the war. These men and women who bravely escaped bondage are now known as Black Loyalists.

At the beginning of the conflict, the colonial population was estimated to be about 2.1 million people. Twenty percent were people of African descent, and nine out of ten of them were enslaved.[1] The ideals of freedom and liberty were perceived much differently by Black and white colonists. While most white Patriot colonists fought for economic and political independence, those of African descent longed for freedom from enslavement.

In 1961, historian Benjamin Quarles wrote, "whoever invoked the image of liberty, be he American or British, could count on a ready response from the Blacks."[2] Although free Black men did join the Patriot cause, General George Washington and other southern leaders opposed arming enslaved men due to fears of rebellion.[3] The British understood the potential gains of utilizing the enslaved population. Those benefits included securing much-needed manpower to help their forces while simultaneously damaging the American economy, which relied heavily on enslaved labor.[4]



Danielle Rose *is the 10 Million Names Volunteer Manager at American Ancestors.*

Wartime service

The varied skills and resourcefulness of Black Loyalists meant that individuals contributed to the war effort in different ways. Many were trained in specialized occupations, like blacksmithing and carpentry, and performed these duties during their service. Black Loyalists commonly acted as guides and intelligence agents since they were more familiar with the local terrain than the British. Black women served as cooks and laundresses. Like the Continental Army, British Army regiments generally had a Black drummer or fifer.[5]

Some Black Loyalists served in combat. Immediately after his proclamation, Lord Dunmore formed the Ethiopian Regiment with the enslaved men who had escaped to his troops in Virginia. They wore uniforms with the words "Liberty to Slaves" across their chests. The regiment fought in several battles but was disbanded in 1776 after a series of losses and a smallpox outbreak.[6] The remaining members of the Ethiopian Regiment later formed another unit, the Black Pioneers. Most Pioneers were not armed and primarily performed engineering duties such as building fortifications and digging trenches.[7]

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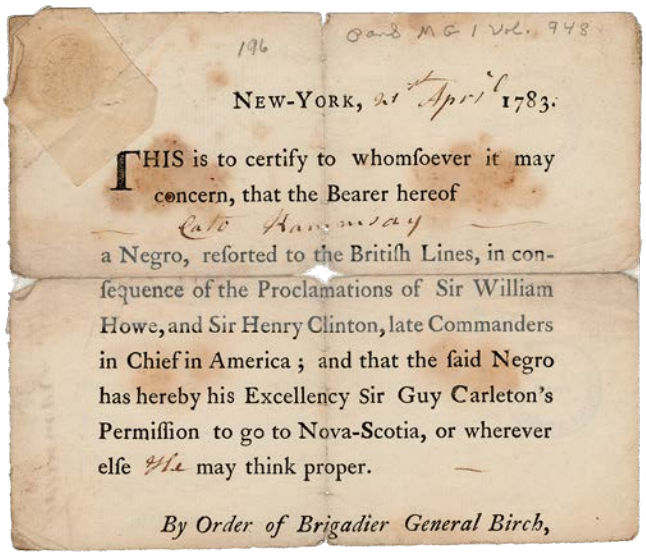
Evacuation after the war

After the British surrendered in 1781, Black Loyalists feared a return to enslavement. One formerly enslaved man, Boston King, later wrote in his memoir:

> This dreadful rumour filled us all with inexpressible anguish and terror, especially when we saw our masters coming from Virginia, North-Carolina, and other parts, and seizing upon their slaves in the streets of New-York.[8]

On November 30, 1782, the American and British governments signed a provisional peace agreement, but the status of Black Loyalists remained unclear. General Washington demanded that the British return all American property, including the enslaved people who fled during the war. However, Sir Guy Carleton, commander of the British Forces, was committed to honoring the promise made to Black Loyalists through Dunmore's proclamation. He argued that any enslaved individual who was with the British by the time of the agreement had declared their freedom through the proclamation and were technically free people.[9]

After the war, thousands of Black Loyalists relocated to various British territories, including Jamaica, Florida, and England. However, most evacuations and resettlement plans were disorganized, leaving minimal records.



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NEW-YORK, 21st April 1783.

THIS is to certify to whomſoever it may concern, that the Bearer hereof Cato Ramsay a Negro, reſorted to the Britiſh Lines, in conſequence of the Proclamations of Sir William Howe, and Sir Henry Clinton, late Commanders in Chief in America; and that the ſaid Negro has hereby his Excellency Sir Guy Carleton's Permiſſion to go to Nova-Scotia, or wherever elſe He may think proper.

By Order of Brigadier General Birch,

Opposite, left: "A Black Wood Cutter at Shelburne, Nova Scotia," 1788. Library and Archives Canada, Acc. No. 1970-188-1090, W. H. Coverdale Collection of Canadiana. *Opposite, right:* Lord Dunmore's Proclamation, 1775. Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, loc.gov/item/2020769134. *Above:* Cato Ramsay's Birch certificate allowing him to emigrate from New York to Nova Scotia, April 21, 1783. Gideon White family fonds, Nova Scotia Archives, MG 1, volume 948, number 196.

The most well-documented group of evacuees went to Nova Scotia; approximately 3,000 sailed there from New York in 1783.[10] Once their service to the Crown or their refugee status was proven, Loyalists each received a certificate of freedom, signed by British Brigadier General Samuel Birch. The certificates granted "permission to go to Nova Scotia, or wherever else [they] may think proper," allowing them to start new lives as free people.[11]

Life in Nova Scotia

Black Loyalists founded settlements in several areas throughout Nova Scotia. About 1,500 people settled in Birchtown, which soon became the largest community of free Blacks anywhere in North America.[12] Black families also settled in Preston, Brindley Town, and Old Tracadie Road.[13]

However, life in Nova Scotia was not without difficulty for its Black residents. Most families struggled to receive their land grants issued by the provincial governors. The land they eventually received was often located on the outskirts of the main towns and of poor quality, making it almost impossible to develop livelihoods as farmers. Although some Black Loyalists found work as artisans, carpenters, and blacksmiths, they generally received lower wages compared to other Nova Scotians.

Eventually, most became discontented with their lives in Nova Scotia. Thomas Peters, a former member of the Black Pioneers, arranged free passage through the Sierra Leone Company, a British anti-slavery organization, for those who wished to resettle. In January 1792, about 1,200 Black Nova Scotians set sail once again, this time for Sierra Leone in West Africa, with the hope of a better future. This intrepid group established the colony of Freetown. Some of the descendants of those who remained in Nova Scotia still live there today.[14]

Researching Black Loyalists

These are the key resources for researching Black Loyalists who resettled in Nova Scotia.

The Book of Negroes

The Nova Scotia Archives refers to the *Book of Negroes* as "the single most important document relating to the immigration of African Americans to Nova Scotia following the War of Independence."[15] Compiled by Carleton during the evacuation from New York, the book contains the names of the 1,336 men, 914 women, and 750 children (3,000 in all) who sailed to different ports in Nova Scotia between April and November of 1783.[16]

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Rose Fortune (ca. 1774–1864), 1830s. She has been identified as the daughter of "Fortune — a free Negro," who came to Nova Scotia after the Revolution. Nova Scotia Archives, Documentary Art Collection: accession number 1979-147/56.

The information was gathered from interviews conducted by Brigadier General Birch, and generally included each passenger's name, age, gender, race, place of origin, former legal status (free or enslaved), name of former enslaver, destination port in Nova Scotia, name of ship, and shipmaster.

Two original versions of the *Book of Negroes* were created at the same time. The British version is preserved at the National Archives in the United Kingdom but is available digitally through two Canadian archives. The Nova Scotia Archives maintains a searchable database of the original images, while an indexed version can be found through Library and Archives Canada. The American version is held at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. An edited transcription was published by Graham Russell Hodges as *The Black Loyalist Directory* and is available online as an American Ancestors database.[17]

Land grants

After the war, the British government established a system to distribute available land in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and Ontario to displaced Loyalists. Sadly, this system did not favor the new Black residents. Those who lost large estates in the American colonies were prioritized and given grants comparable to their former properties; some received as much as several hundred acres. As formerly enslaved individuals, Black Loyalists could hardly claim any lost property. In addition, Loyalists who had served in the military at a higher rank received more land. For instance, a field officer was eligible for up to 1,000 acres, while privates generally received about 100 acres.[18]

Black Loyalists also waited longer and ultimately received less acreage than their white counterparts. For instance, one land grant for Tracadie of 3,000 acres was split between 74 Black men, leaving each with about 40 acres.[19] White Loyalists who settled in neighboring Guysborough Township generally received at least 100 acres each.[20]

The Nova Scotia Archives has digitized land records from 1765 to 1800.[21] The names of all grantees are included, as well as land locations and acreage amounts. Race is sometimes noted, making it easier to differentiate Black residents.

Settlement records

Settlement records offer insight into the early experiences of Black Nova Scotians. Library and Archives Canada has two relevant online collections with correspondence, land grants, court documents, petitions to the government, and lists of residents.

Loyalists in the Maritimes—Ward Chipman Muster Master's Office, 1777–1785 has a muster roll of Black Pioneers who helped clear the land in Port Roseway, later Shelburne, and built the Black settlement of Birchtown. *Black Loyalist Refugees, 1782–1807—Port Roseway Associates* includes a 1784 muster book that serves as a census for the free Black residents who settled in Birchtown. Occupations are provided for men and ages are included for most residents, which can help determine family units.[22]

Newspapers

Historic newspapers can provide a fuller picture of everyday life for Black residents in Nova Scotia. The Nova Scotia Archives offers digitized newspapers on their website. Several of these began shortly after the Loyalist displacement, including *The Royal American Gazette*, *The Port-Roseway Gazetteer and The Shelburne Advertiser*, and *The Nova-Scotia Packet and General Advertiser*.[23]

Church records

Black Loyalists relied on religion for a sense of community in their new homes. Many initially joined the Anglican Church but were often forced to sit in separate pews. Some later switched to the Methodist Church, which was considered "anti-slavery, highly egalitarian … and open to Black membership."[24] The Baptist Church also became popular among Nova Scotia's Black residents. Many local church records can be found on FamilySearch.

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Memoirs, diaries, and letters

Firsthand accounts, such as memoirs, diaries, journals, and letters, can provide incredible details of a person's lived experiences. Boston King published his 1798 memoir recounting the war, life in Nova Scotia, and his eventual move to Sierra Leone. David George, a formerly enslaved Baptist preacher who founded congregations in Nova Scotia, published an account of his life in 1793.[25] These types of sources can often be found in local historical organizations, but many are not digitized. The Black Loyalists: Our History, Our People webpage provides transcripts of letters and personal accounts.[26]



Researching the lives of Black Loyalists can be challenging yet rewarding. New discoveries help shed a deserved light upon this group of formerly enslaved individuals who fought so hard for the opportunity to live as free citizens. ◆

Notes

1 Dorrie Phillips, "Early Years of the Black Loyalists," in *Loyalists in Nova Scotia*, eds. Donald Wetmore and Lester B. Sellick (Lancelot Press, 1983), 68; and "10 Facts: Black Patriots in the American Revolution," American Battlefield Trust, battlefields.org/learn/articles/10-facts-black-patriots-american-revolution.

2 Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (University of North Carolina Press, 1961), vii.

3 Noel B. Poirer, "A Legacy of Integration: The African American Citizen-Soldier and the Continental Army," *Army History* 56 (Fall 2002), 18–19; jstor.org/stable/26306022.

4 Not all Black Loyalists were enslaved; some free Black men joined the British, partly due to Washington's early enlistment bans for Black men in the Continental Army. Massachusetts Historical Society, "Revolutionary Participation," African Americans and the End of Slavery in Massachusetts, masshist.org/features/endofslavery/rev_participation.

5 James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783–1870* (University of Toronto Press, 1992), 5.

6 Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* [note 2], 28–30.

7 Phillips, "Early Years of the Black Loyalists" [note 1], 70.

8 Boston King, "Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, A Black Preacher" (1798) in *Black Loyalists: Our History, Our People*, Canada's Digital Collections, blackloyalist.com/cdc/index.htm.

9 Walker, *The Black Loyalists* [note 5], 10.

10 Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *The Shelburne Black Loyalists: A Short Biography of All Blacks Emigrating to Shelburne County, Nova Scotia after the American Revolution 1783* (Nova Scotia Museum, 2000), 18; ojs.library.dal.ca/NSM/article/view/3899.

11 Walker, *The Black Loyalists* [note 5], 11.

12 Christopher Moore, *The Loyalists: Revolution, Exile, Settlement* (Macmillan of Canada, 1984), 158.

13 Nova Scotia Archives, "Black Loyalists, 1783–1792," *African Nova Scotians in the Age of Slavery and Abolition*, archives.novascotia.ca/africanns/results/?Search=&SearchList1=2.

14 Graham Russell Hodges, ed., *The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in Exile After the American Revolution* (Garland Publishing, Inc., in association with the New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1996), xxxii, AmericanAncestors.org/search/databasesearch/2823/black-loyalist-directory-1783-1788; and Nova Scotia Archives, "Black Loyalists, 1783–1792."

15 Nova Scotia Archives, "Book of Negroes," *African Nova Scotians in the Age of Slavery and Abolition*, archives.novascotia.ca/africanns/book-of-negroes.

16 Phillips, "Early Years of the Black Loyalists" [note 1], 71.

17 For the British *Book of Negroes*, see archives.novascotia.ca/africanns/book-of-negroes for the original images and bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/book-of-negroes for the indexed version. For original images of the American version, see catalog.archives.gov/id/17337716. See note 14 for *The Black Loyalist Directory* database.

18 Walker, *The Black Loyalists* [note 5], 19.

19 "Brownspriggs, Thomas and others—1787—Antigonish County," *Nova Scotia Land Papers 1765–1800*, Nova Scotia Archives, archives.novascotia.ca/land-papers/archives/?ID=978&Doc=warrant&Page=201107720.

20 Marion Gilroy, ed., *Loyalists and Land Settlement in Nova Scotia* (Board of Trustees of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, 1937), 119.

21 See the *Nova Scotia Land Papers 1765–1800* collection at archives.novascotia.ca/land-papers.

22 See bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/loyalists-ward-chipman/Pages/loyalist-maritimes-ward-chipman.aspx for the *Loyalists in the Maritimes Collection*. See bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/military-heritage/loyalists/loyalist-port-roseway/Pages/port-roseway-associates-loyalists.aspx for the *Port Roseway Associates Collection*.

23 See archives.novascotia.ca/newspapers for the digitized newspaper collection.

24 Hodges, *The Black Loyalist Directory* [note 14], xxvi.

25 King, "Memoirs" [note 8]; and David George, *An Account of the Life of Mr. David George, from Sierra Leone in Africa* (1793).

26 See blackloyalist.com/cdc/index.htm.

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