

Part One

THE HISTORIC BIRCHTOWN SITE



The windows of the Black Loyalist Heritage Centre reflect an image of St. Paul's Church, which once housed a congregation of Black Loyalist descendants. The church is one stop along Birchtown's historic walking trail.

The National Monument

CELEBRATING THE RECOGNITION OF HERITAGE

Unveiled on July 20, 1996, the plaque commissioned by the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board commemorates the story of the Black Loyalists at Birchtown *in just eighty-eight words*.

“After the American Revolution, over 3500 free African Americans loyal to the Crown moved to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick where they established the first Black communities in Canada. Birchtown, founded in 1783, was the largest and most influential of these settlements. The population declined in 1792 when many Black Loyalists, frus-

BELOW: Had it not been for the efforts of the Black Loyalists’ descendants, this beautiful vista would have become the site of a provincial landfill.

RIGHT: Once a burial ground for the community, the land that overlooks Birchtown Bay is now the site of the national monument to the men and women who founded Birchtown.





trated by their treatment in the Maritimes, immigrated to Sierra Leone in West Africa. Although diminished in numbers, Birchtown remains a proud symbol of the struggle by Blacks in the Maritimes and elsewhere for justice and dignity.”

The founders of Birchtown — men and women who had been emancipated by the British government — gave the settlement its name. Because documents that certified their status as free people bore the signature of General Samuel Birch, the British commandant of New York City, they were known as Birch certificates. The name “Birchtown” celebrated the fact that its settlers were no longer enslaved.

Given the richness of this heritage — revealed through primary documents, archaeological digs and painstaking research — it is astounding to think that just a century ago very little of the Black Loyalist story was known to mainstream Nova Scotia, or Canada.

The entry for “Birchtown” in a 1922 book entitled *The Place Names of the Province of Nova Scotia* demonstrates how much knowledge of Black Loyalists had been lost since they came to the Maritimes:

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The interpretive plaque has at its centre a "Birch Certificate," the document that verified each Black Loyalist's freedom. Celebrating their emancipation, the settlers named their community Birchtown.

THE NATIONAL MONUMENT



“BIRCHTOWN: A descriptive name, as the birch wood was plentiful there. This place is opposite Shelburne town. It was laid out about the year 1783 as a town for the Negroes. They numbered about four thousand at the time and built quite a large town there. The greater number of them were removed to Sierra Leone in 1790 or 1791.”

Things were no better by the mid-twentieth century. In 1963, Black Loyalist descendants wrote to the Nova Scotia Historic Sites Advisory Board to seek recognition of the town’s significance, documenting the lack of understanding of Birchtown’s history and exhibiting an unself-conscious racism common at the time. The board’s chair advised the premier of the day that Birchtown was only “a sort of shack town, a settlement of the slaves who came with the loyalists and were left there by the loyalists who moved on.” Black Loyalists, he felt, were not important enough to be considered historic.

Were it not for the tireless efforts of the Shelburne County Cultural Awareness Society (now the Black Loyalist Heritage Society) that formed in 1991, Birchtown might well have been made into a landfill site and bulldozed into oblivion — an act that would have been tantamount to burying the history of one of Nova Scotia’s founding peoples. In 1994, the society finally had the landing site of Black Loyalists recognized as having historical importance for all Canadians via a successful application to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

Black Loyalists

Black Loyalists — In the latter part of the twentieth century, historians began to use this term to describe Blacks who supported Great Britain during the American Revolution. In the eighteenth century, these people of African descent who had been enslaved by Patriot masters and emancipated by the British were simply known as “the black refugees” or “the free blacks.” At the Black Loyalist Heritage Centre, the term “Black Loyalist” is used to include those who were enslaved by white Loyalists and thus were part of the general Loyalist diaspora.