

## INTRODUCTION

# Laying the Foundation for the Black Experience in Canada

When asked to give an example of a major event in their country's Black history, most Canadians would cite the fact that the Underground Railroad guided enslaved African Americans to freedom within their borders. The Underground Railroad allows Canadians to see their country as the "happy ending" for Blacks, and to view their white ancestors as those who created that happy ending, welcoming those who had suffered under the centuries-old institution of slavery in the New World. It is a straightforward story of the heroic efforts of early Canadians to help a disadvantaged population escape the oppression of a more powerful foe.

What's not to like?

Ever willing to be seen as more enlightened than Americans, Canadians have embraced the story of the Underground Railroad as a prime example of how their

society of “peace, order and good government” has done (and by implication, has *always* done) a better job of treating their Black citizens. Canada, not the United States, is clearly the true “land of liberty.”

In addition to being “feel good” history and bolstering a positive view of Canada, the Underground Railroad is generally thought to signal the starting point of Canada’s Black history. This is a false perception and it has led to a series of assumptions in the general population: Until the mid-nineteenth century, Canada was only home to European settlers and Indigenous peoples. It was always a sanctuary for Blacks. Slavery never existed within the territory that now makes up Canada. “Following the North Star” was always the route to freedom.

As the stories of New Brunswick’s Black Loyalists demonstrate, Canada’s African founders arrived fifty years earlier than the men and women who escaped slavery via the Underground Railroad. But the Black Loyalists were not the first “Canadians” of African descent; they were simply the country’s first *free* Black settlers.

The Europeans who settled in what are now Quebec and Nova Scotia enslaved Africans as labourers and household servants. The earliest enslaved African in Acadia (as Nova Scotia was then known) was Mathieu de Coste, who worked for its French governor in 1608. Slavery was given legal status in New France between 1689 and 1709 when the colony imported Blacks from France to resolve a chronic shortage of labour. New Englanders, who settled in the Maritimes following the Acadian Expulsion of 1755, brought enslaved Africans with them to Halifax, the Annapolis Valley and the St. John River Valley. In 1770, one landowner in Falmouth, Nova Scotia, had no less than sixteen enslaved Blacks.

When the Patriots won the American Revolution, more

than 60,000 Americans who remained loyal to the British Crown became refugees. Seeking sanctuary in what is now Canada, the Loyalists not only provided British North America with tens of thousands of white, English-speaking settlers, they were also the reason for the single largest influx of enslaved people in Canadian history. At one point, the number of Black slaves who accompanied the Loyalists to the Maritimes may have been as high as 2,500.

However, the 60,000-plus Loyalist refugees of the American Revolution also included free Black men and women among their numbers. Later given the name of Black Loyalists, these people had once been the slaves of American rebels. They were granted their freedom in a series of British proclamations on the condition that they escape their masters and then side with the Crown. It was a tactic aimed at destabilizing the Patriot economy and increasing the number of British allies — not a gesture made to abolish slavery. The British did *not* liberate the slaves of white Loyalists.

When the Patriots won the American Revolution, the Black Loyalists joined the evacuation of British troops and loyal American colonists from the new republic. By the end of 1783, between 3,500 and 4,000 Black Loyalists — amounting to one out of every ten Loyalist refugees — had arrived in the colony of Nova Scotia.

Within a year of their arrival, the Loyalist refugees had forced the map of Nova Scotia to be redrawn. The territory that was north of the Bay of Fundy and the Isthmus of Chignecto became the colony of New Brunswick in 1784. Nova Scotia's land mass was further reduced to just its peninsula with the establishment of the colony of Cape Breton Island. Scattered across this redefined corner of the

British Empire were approximately 3,500 *free* Blacks — the Black Loyalist allies of the king.

The history of Canada's free Black settlers begins in the Maritimes. This book examines the lives of nine Black Loyalists who settled in the colony of New Brunswick. Founded by Loyalist refugees, New Brunswick provides us with insights into how late-eighteenth-century American colonists dealt with the completely novel reality of free Blacks living and working in a predominantly white society. It was an unprecedented moment in history — one that could either lay the foundations for a co-operative society in which races were treated with equality or set the template for racist attitudes and institutions that considered one race to be superior to the other.

While it was highly improbable that Loyalist society could ever rise above the systemic racism of the eighteenth century and treat its Black citizens as equals, it was, nevertheless, not beyond the realm of the possible. The story of the early years of New Brunswick's settlement contains a chapter that demonstrates that the colony had the potential to be a genuine land of liberty for its Black settlers. In 1783, the territory that would become New Brunswick was the site of the only known settlement in North America to be founded on abolitionist principles.

In the summer of 1783, forty-nine Quakers gathered in New York City to make plans for a fresh and truly revolutionary start. Forced to become refugees at the end of the War of Independence, those gathered were determined to found a settlement in which every man and woman would truly be free. Whereas American Patriots claimed to have created a land of liberty, the Quaker refugees boldly planned to create the first and only intentional anti-slavery settlement in all of North America.

The newly formed association commissioned three agents to seek out land in western Nova Scotia. When their agents returned with news of a site at Beaver Harbour, 254 refugees boarded the *Camel* and set sail for the mouth of the St. John River. Among their number were eighty Baptists, seven indentured servants and twelve Black Loyalists.

Once they arrived in Belle View, its founders posted a sign at the settlement's entrance: NO SLAVE MASTERS ADMITTED. Here were Loyalists with a vision of a post-revolutionary society that included equality and freedom for all. The Belle View settlement was the only exception to the universal practice of slavery in early Loyalist New Brunswick.

In the years that followed, the settlement at Beaver Harbour swelled to a population of 800. Comprising 15 streets and 149 lots, Belle View was incorporated in 1785. Within five years' time, a forest fire engulfed the town, burning all but one settler's home. The original hope of creating a community of racial equality based upon merchant shipping had not materialized during the settlement's seven-year history. In the aftermath of the fire, Belle View's founders — including its Black Loyalists — decided to seek better opportunities in other settlements along the Bay of Fundy coast.

Belle View's fire destroyed more than buildings; it removed a model of racial equality and harmony that could have served as an example for the rest of New Brunswick, if not for all of British North America. Sadly, it also wiped out any record of the names of its Black Loyalist settlers — men and women who must have carried the memory of equality to other parts of New Brunswick.

Belle View's founders envisioned a society whose basic tenets were far more radical than those of the new republic to the south. But rather than becoming the template

for a new kind of racial harmony, the ideals of Belle View were never seriously considered by the rest of the colony's Loyalists. Instead, the colonial leaders felt a more conservative and ordered society would make them the envy of the victorious American Patriots. They envisioned a society that would continue to benefit from the hard labour of Black second-class citizens. Initially given town lots and provisions equal to their white counterparts, the Black Loyalists were helpless to stop the rapid re-establishment of the racist society the white Loyalists had known in the United States.

Within two years of their arrival in New Brunswick, the white majority banned Black Loyalists from working or living within Saint John, the colony's largest city. The city's 1785 charter of incorporation specifically forbade any free Black from living or working within its boundaries unless Saint John's mayor gave that person permission to do so. What would become known as the "Loyalist City" began as a segregated city, intentionally excluding the new colony's Black Loyalists.

While land grants were quickly and generously distributed to white settlers, Blacks had to petition the government to receive equal treatment. Contrary to its American electoral heritage, New Brunswick granted the right to vote to all men whether they owned property or not. However, it did not grant the vote to Black men.

Limited in where they could work, frustrated by the small amount of land they could receive and denied the most basic rights of representation, the Black Loyalists were the first of Canada's founders to suffer from systemic racism. And segregation only gained momentum during the first fifty years of Loyalist settlement in New Brunswick.

When a Black Baptist minister from Nova Scotia visited Saint John in 1790, he risked being imprisoned if he did not receive permission to hold religious services from New Brunswick's Anglican lieutenant-governor. In the end, David George received a certificate to "instruct the Black people in knowledge, and exhort them to the practice of the Christian religion". Although George was free to preach to both whites and Blacks in Nova Scotia, the New Brunswick government made a point of segregating the Christian worshippers within its borders.

White ministers could preach to both white and Black congregations, but in the churches that white Loyalists attended, enslaved Blacks typically sat at the back of the sanctuary. This segregation extended beyond death as well, where, whether free or enslaved, Blacks were either buried at the fringes of white graveyards or laid to rest in an African-only cemetery.

While Black Loyalists had access to the process of petitioning for land and could bequeath property through the probate courts, they were always treated as second-class citizens. Appreciated for skills such as manual labour, housekeeping, cooking and fiddle playing, Blacks were never given the opportunity to demonstrate talents for teaching, community protection and leadership, though they would have the opportunity to do so after their resettlement in Sierra Leone.

When Blacks were mentioned in newspapers in the era of Loyalist settlement, it was only to speak of escaping slaves, the sale of Black slaves, or criminal activity. Newspapers did nothing to remind white Loyalists of the presence of free Blacks who shared the same aspirations for success in the new colony.

Despite these negative perceptions of the Black Loyalists, the community bonds they forged during the American Revolution continued to grow stronger. Free Blacks united to seek land and build their own communities in the early days of New Brunswick settlement. Years of slavery had not quashed the will to succeed or stunted the development of community leaders.

Leaders within the Black Loyalist community generally came from two spheres of life. During the final months of the British occupation of New York City, military authorities had given positions of responsibility to Black men to facilitate the evacuation of loyal refugees. These men were known as “captains” — which was not a rank, but an acknowledgment of their leadership. In the years of settlement in New Brunswick, Black families looked to their former captains to speak on their behalf as they sought land grants from the colonial government. Other leaders became spokesmen for their communities after assuming the position of elders within the colony’s Black churches. Seen only as “former slaves,” these Black leaders and their demands for equal treatment were usually regarded with disdain by the governing white establishment.

During the first half-century of Loyalist settlement within New Brunswick, the foundations of Canadian anti-Black racism were slowly and inexorably being laid. Despite their records of service during the American Revolution, despite their deep desire to be contributing members of New Brunswick society and despite their shared experiences with white Loyalists, the Black Loyalists were denied the basic rights of British citizenship and were not treated as equals within New Brunswick society.

Always a minority within the larger white society, people

of African descent were continually thwarted in their quest for justice and equality in the centuries that followed Black Loyalist settlement. The Black Refugees — former American slaves granted their freedom by the British during the War of 1812 — were shuffled off into their own communities on the fringes of white settlements. While the “passengers” on the Underground Railroad who found sanctuary in Canada would no longer be considered slaves, they would not be given the same rights as the white colonists.

An interesting but often ignored fact in the story of the Underground Railroad is that the great majority of the fugitive slaves who had found refuge in what is now Ontario returned to the United States at the conclusion of the American Civil War.

As it turned out, Canada was not the land of liberty Blacks had hoped it would be. Black children attended separate schools, Black women were blamed for a rise in prostitution and Black men were held responsible for a rise in crime. Rather than recognizing the racism that prompted Black fugitives to return to the United States, the whites of Ontario and Quebec attributed the departure of their Black neighbours to their difficulties in coping with the severity of the Canadian climate.

In each succeeding era of Canada’s history, its Black citizens have had to face a variety of hurdles in their efforts to be treated with justice and equality. And these challenges date back to the eighteenth century, when the first contingent of Black Loyalists arrived in Nova Scotia in the fall of 1782, not to the arrival of the passengers of the Underground Railroad in the nineteenth century.

This book is a starting point in recovering the long-neglected stories of these founding settlers of Canada.

Pushed to the margins of eighteenth-century society, the Black Loyalists of New Brunswick have also had their history shunted to one side. Illiterate through no fault of their own, Black settlers left no diaries, letters or memoirs to shed light on their experiences in the founding of New Brunswick.

Outside of petitions to the colonial government that they dictated to others, there are no historical records that reveal the authentic perspective of the Black Loyalists. Instead, historians have had to draw upon resources created by white Loyalists. Newspapers, probate records, christening rolls, victualling musters and a ledger of Black passengers provide all-too-brief accounts that hint at much richer stories.

Of all the men and women spotlighted in this book, Thomas Peters is the most significant character because of his pivotal role in leading over 200 of New Brunswick's Black Loyalists to Sierra Leone. The stories of the other eight Black Loyalists do not represent a cross section of the experiences of Canada's early African settlers. These men and women would have been largely unknown to New Brunswick's general population during their lifetimes.

Rather than being biographies of famous or typical Black Loyalists, these stories represent the handful of accounts that can be pieced together from available historical resources. Nevertheless, by considering the lives of the Black Loyalists featured in this book, the reader can begin to gain a greater appreciation for what hundreds of Black Loyalists endured as the slaves of American colonists, allies of the British army and refugee founders of New Brunswick.

Within the following pages are the accounts of Thomas Peters and Richard Corankapoon, whose wartime experiences during the American Revolution prepared them to be leaders

within New Brunswick's Black Loyalist communities. The reader will also discover how Thomas Hide and others readily appropriated their new rights as British citizens to petition for land, a commodity slaves could never have enjoyed in the United States.

Some Black Loyalists entered into temporary indentures to survive the first difficult years of settlement — an experience that helped establish John Patterson, but proved devastating for Zimri Armstrong. Edward Burr became one of the very few Blacks who acquired enough property to bequeath to his heirs. Facing institutionalized racism and limited opportunities, one Black Loyalist veteran boldly sailed for Britain to seek justice for his people and changed the history of West Africa in the process.

The stories of Black Loyalist women are the most difficult to discover. In the eyes of white society, Blacks were only as valuable as the labour they provided. Not considered equal to whites, their concerns, customs and culture were of little interest to the European majority in North America, whether Patriot or Loyalist. In the eighteenth century, women were generally regarded to have value only as mothers and homemakers. There was little need to educate them beyond the basics as they had no political or economic power and no influence beyond the home. So it is particularly difficult to find accounts of Black women who lived in a society dominated by white men. Beyond references to wives and daughters, this book was able to flesh out the stories of just two Black women: Nancy Mosley, who faced execution for murder, and Cairo Rumsey, an enslaved woman who married a free Black man.

Brief as these biographies may be, they nevertheless outline the challenges and obstacles Black Loyalists confronted in

the opening decades of New Brunswick's settlement. They speak of a people who never stopped seeking justice — the first combatants in a struggle that continues to this day as Canadians come to recognize that Black lives *do* matter.