

INSPIRING HISTORY

INFO SHEET



Source: <https://bccns.com>

The Black Loyalists

Once it was clear the British would lose in the American Revolution, the British Commander-in-Chief issued the Philipsburg proclamation, stating that any Negro to desert the rebel cause would receive complete protection, freedom, and land. Once the Americans had won, the British and their supporters gathered in New York to leave and Sir Guy Clayton, of whom the town of Guysborough in Nova Scotia is named after, refused the demand to return any slaves who had joined the British before 1782. Those who chose to emigrate were evacuated by ship to Nova Scotia, the West Indies, Quebec, England, Germany, and Belgium. The name of any Black person (free or not) on board a vessel was recorded in document called the *Book of Negroes*. There were over 3,000 Black Loyalists enrolled in the document, but there may have been as many as 5,000 who left New York for Nova Scotia.

The Black Loyalists arrived in Nova Scotia between 1783 and 1785. Some were newly-freed slaves, those born free, and disbanded soldiers, while others were indentured servants and slaves to the White Loyalists. Slavery was still legal and enforced in Nova Scotia at this time, it was not abolished until 1834. They settled in Annapolis Royal and the areas of Cornwallis/Horton, Weymouth, Digby, Windsor, Preston, Sydney, Fort Cumberland, Parrsboro, Halifax, and Port Mouton. About 1,500 Black Loyalists, mostly indentured servants and slaves, settled in Shelburne County, Nova Scotia. Many of the free Blacks settled in Birchtown, and formed the largest Black township of the time in British North America.

Resettlement was hard for the Black Loyalists. Nova Scotia was not prepared for the arrival of so many individuals. Many who arrived late in the fall spent the

winter in tents and makeshift huts in the woods. The British had promised free land and rations for three years to the Black Loyalists. Yet, out of 649 Black men, only 187 received land. Many Loyalists could not make a living from farming because they had no land or their land was unsuitable. Those with certain skills as blacksmiths, teachers, boat builders, tailors, military persons, and midwives were in a better position than some, but Black workers were not paid as much as White workers. Many of those who did not have a trade indentured themselves or their children to survive.



At the same time, since Nova Scotia's climate was harsh for a plantation system, many White Loyalists abandoned their slaves because they could not afford to feed them. Poverty, epidemics and suffering were widespread among the Black Loyalists. Harsh winters, sickness, and a lack of micronutrient-rich foods killed many. Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia used the church as a source of security, a social gathering place, an educational institution, and a place for political discussions.

By 1791, Black Loyalists became sure that a Promised Land, with freedom and security for their families, was not going to be a reality. Thomas Peters, sent to represent the settlers in a petition to get what was promised from the British Government, was approached by a business group that had established a colony in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Peters was told that the Black Loyalists would receive free land if they were to settle there, and he returned to Nova Scotia to convince Black Loyalists to leave.

On January 15, 1792, there were 1196 Black Loyalists left Halifax in fifteen ships, for Sierra Leone. This was a little less than one third of Black Loyalists who had arrived in Nova Scotia. Nova Scotian Black Loyalists and their descendants faced a struggle of equality, which is still not a given for African Nova Scotians. The fight for employment, access to education and human rights continues today.