

Black Migration In Nova Scotia

The Formation of African Nova Scotian Communities



Black Loyalists: 1783-1785

The single largest group of people of African descent ever to come to Nova Scotia arrived in a two-year period at the end of the American Revolution. These were the Black Loyalists. They were Blacks in the American colonies who opted to side with the British during the United States' war for independence because the British offered protection, freedom, land and rations in return for support. Other Blacks would come to Nova Scotia in the 1780s as the property of white Loyalists. Some were slaves; others were indentured servants, though there was not much difference between the two categories.

When the war ended in 1783 New York was the last British-held port. It became the embarkation point for thousands of Loyalists, Black and White. British officials drew up a detailed list of all the Blacks who were leaving. That list, the "Book of Negroes", stated whether the person was free, a slave or an indentured servant, and what their military service had been.

Between 3000 and 3500 Black Loyalists arrived in Nova Scotia. Roughly half – 1,521 men, women and children—settled at Birchtown (near Shelburne). Birchtown was an instant town, the largest settlement of free Blacks in the world outside of Africa. They received a percentage of the free land and rations as they had been promised, though their land was far from the best. That went to the white Loyalists. The other 1500 or so free Blacks who came to Nova Scotia settled elsewhere, including Annapolis, Digby, Preston, Guysborough, Tracadie and Saint John (in what became New Brunswick). They also were not given the full rations or other assistance they had been promised.

Disappointed by the failure of the British to honour all their promises, especially regarding land and equal status, many Black Loyalists began to wonder if Nova Scotia was where they wanted to be. A new destination, across the ocean in Africa, called out to many.

The Jamaica Maroons: 1796-1800

Just as the end of the American Revolution brought the Black Loyalists to Nova Scotia, so the end of the next major war brought a different group of Black settlers to the province. The second group came from Jamaica. They were known as the Trelawney Maroons after the town from which they came.

The Maroons were a determined group of freedom fighters on Jamaica. For nearly a century and a half, beginning in the 1650s, they had waged an intermittent war with the British administration of the island. They wanted independence. In 1795 the administration in Jamaica decided to remove the Maroons. Three ships brought 543 men, women and children to Halifax in late June 1796.

The Commander-in-Chief for the British at Halifax was Edward Augustus, Duke of Kent (later on, the father of Queen Victoria). Edward was impressed by the proud bearing and military skills of the Maroons. He was pleased to see them join Nova Scotia militia units and he had them work on building projects such as the third Halifax Citadel and Government House (residence of the lieutenant-governor). Lt. Gov. Sir John Wentworth was also impressed by the Maroons. He thought they would be good colonists and selected the Preston area for them to settle. Thanks to a large subsidy from the government of Jamaica, arrangements were made for limited schooling and religious services.

The Maroons, however, rejected the idea of low-paid physical labour. Only a few became farmers: a small number who became Christians and who settled in Boydville in the Sackville area, where there is still a Maroon Hill. Most of the rest of the Maroons, like nearly half of the Black Loyalists a few years earlier, began to wonder if Nova Scotia was a good choice for their new home.

Although the majority of the Maroons left Nova Scotia, there were a few who remained: a census done in 1817 of the Black community of Tracadie in Guysborough revealed that several persons living there were descendants of the Maroons. The Maroons also left descendants in the Preston Area of Halifax County.



The War of 1812 Refugees: 1812-1816

A third wave of Black migration into Nova Scotia came during and after the War of 1812, once again in connection with an international conflict. As had happened during the American Revolution, the British once again issued proclamations aimed at attracting Blacks in the United States to relocate to British colonies. As with the Black Loyalists, a large number of American Blacks once again chose freedom in Nova Scotia over slavery in the United States.

In 1813-1814, approximately 1200 Black Refugees from the Chesapeake Bay area of Virginia and from Georgia arrived in Nova Scotia aboard British ships. Another 800 southern American Blacks came to Nova Scotia at the end of the war via Bermuda. Smaller numbers continued to trickle into the province until 1816.

Though there was a labour shortage in Nova Scotia at the time, the Black Refugees were not welcomed. A number of the Refugees were quarantined on Melville Island, near Halifax, and the local House of Assembly petitioned to end the Black immigration. Lt. Gov. Sir John Sherbrooke dismissed the petition.

Almost 1000 Refugees ended up in Preston. Other areas settled by War of 1812 Refugees were Upper Hammonds Plains, Beech Hill (later Beechville) and Campbell Road (later Africville). Collectively, the newcomers faced discrimination in land grants, jobs and the distribution of supplies. Their situation was made worse by the "year with no summer" followed by the "year of the mice" – a crop-destroying infestation of rodents. There was also an economic recession at the end of the war.

Ninety-five Refugees would not make Nova Scotia their home – opting instead to migrate to Trinidad – but most did remain. They overcame obstacles of poor land and widespread racism to not only survive but to thrive. Some of their customs, language and religious practice are with the African Nova Scotia community to this day.



Caribbean Migrants: 1920

A fourth major migration of Blacks to Nova Scotia – more specifically to industrial Cape Breton – began early in the 20th century. It came in two separate streams, one from Alabama and another from the Caribbean, especially Barbados. These groups came not in a quest for freedom but to obtain good-paying jobs in the newly developing steel and coal industries.

The group that came from Alabama were specially recruited by the Sydney steel plant to come and work in the "boomtown" economy in connection with the new blast furnace. At the time, Black iron workers in the United States were regarded as among the very best. It is unknown exactly how many men relocated from Alabama in 1901 as the Sydney plant began operations, but there were several hundred. Some were accompanied by women and children. The newcomers settled mostly in the Whitney Pier area and they saw to it that they had a church and that their children received an education.

Despite the promising beginning, the relocated Alabama community felt less than fully accepted in their new surroundings. Labour strife, local prejudices and unfulfilled promises convinced nearly all to return to the United States by 1904. Many walked back though a few stayed on, finding new ways to make a living in the greater Sydney area.

Over the next decade, many small groups of Blacks from the Caribbean found their way to Cape Breton. They sailed north in the hopes of economic advancement and many ended up working in the coal and steel industries. Whitney Pier was one area they settled but there were other communities as well. The transplanted Caribbean beliefs and customs added a vibrant, new dimension to Cape Breton life.

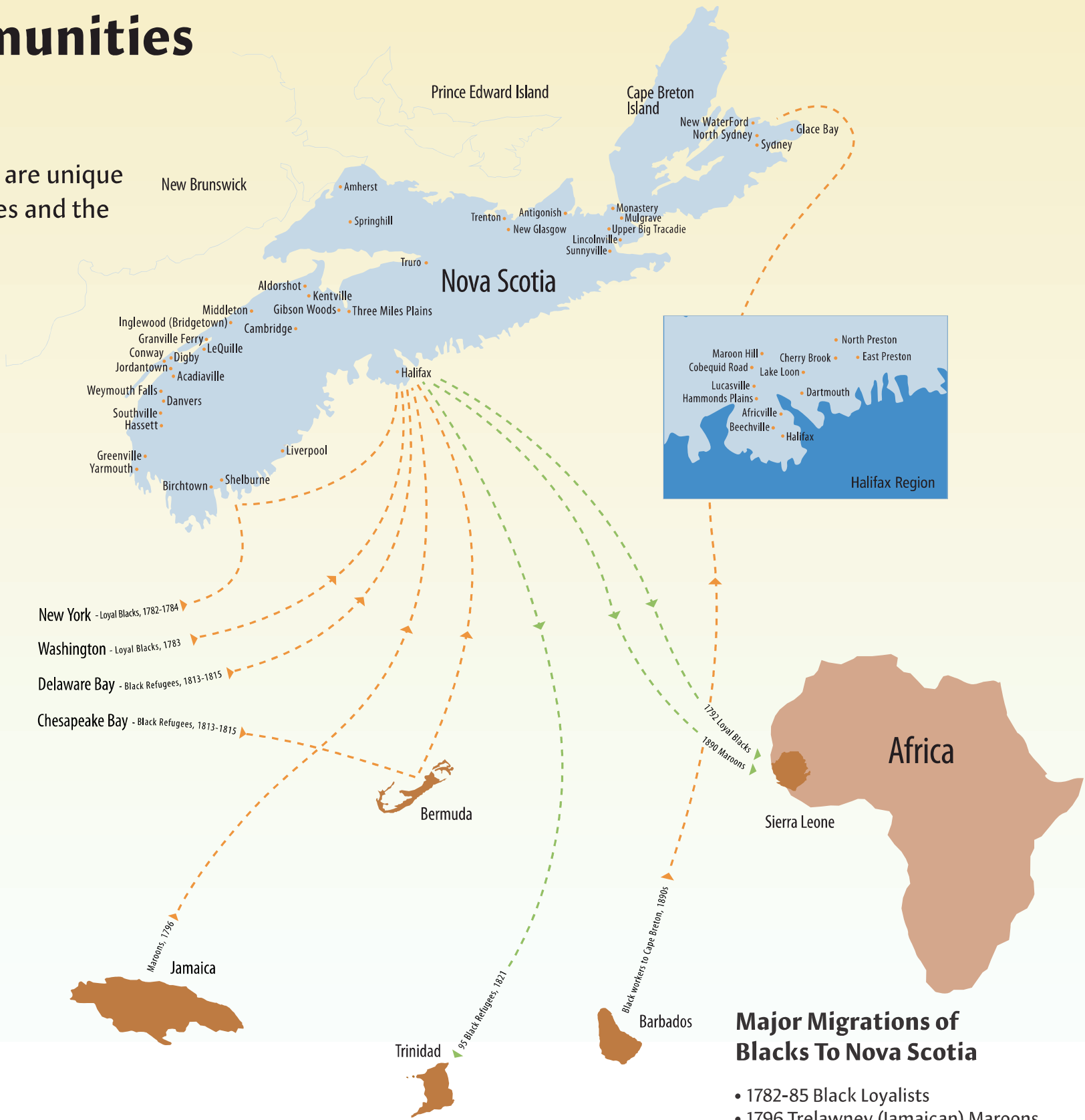
Historical Black Communities and Migration Routes

The historical Black communities of Nova Scotia are unique and vibrant. This map shows the migration routes and the original Black communities of Nova Scotia.



Nova Scotia, the birthplace of Canada's Black community, is home to approximately 20,000 residents of African descent. Our presence traces back to the 1600s, and we were recorded as being present in the provincial capital during its founding in 1749. Waves of migrants came to the Maritimes as enslaved labour for the New England Planters in the 1760s, Black Loyalists between 1782 and 1784, Jamaican Maroons who were exiled from their homelands in 1796, Black refugees of the War of 1812, and Caribbean immigrants to Cape Breton in the 1890s. People of African descent continue to put down roots in Nova Scotia, shaping a unique cultural identity that is ever evolving.

--Text adapted from Cultural Assets of Nova Scotia: African Nova Scotian Tourism Guide



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