

The American Revolution: War Of 1812

The Odyssey of the Black Loyalists

by Bob Blythe

An estimated 75,000 to 100,000 black Americans left the 13 states as a result of the American Revolution. These refugees scattered across the Atlantic world, profoundly affecting the development of Nova Scotia, the Bahamas, and the African nation of Sierra Leone. They left for differing reasons. Some had supported the British in the war and had no future in the United States, while others were seized by the British from Patriot slave owners and then resold into slavery in the Caribbean.

The British recognized early on the opportunity to weaken the rebellion by encouraging the slaves of Patriots to run away. Tens of thousands of southern slaves entered the British lines and remained in the British-controlled coastal cities at the war's end. Some were still serving the British as "Black Pioneers" in military units. When the British and their Loyalist allies began to make plans to evacuate in 1782, the African Americans were the last to be provided for. Between 400 and 1,000 free blacks emigrated to London, where they joined an existing Afro-British community of about 10,000. Another 3,500 African Americans and 14,000 whites left New York City in 1783 for the Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. A small number of white and African-American Loyalists also reached Eastern Canada from Florida, which was given to Spain as part of the peace treaty ending the war.

It was British policy to provide allotments of land to Loyalists who settled in Canada. Whites got more land and better land than blacks; some blacks received no land at all. More than 1,500 of the black immigrants settled in Birchtown, Nova Scotia, instantly making it the largest free black community in North America. Without education or property, the black refugees in both London and Canada had a rough time of it. Philanthropists in Britain convinced the government to resettle some of London's black Loyalist population in Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa. In 1787, about 300 refugees took ship once more to found the new settlement. Planning was poor, supplies were inadequate, and the land not as good for farming as hoped. Still, despite defections, the community managed to survive.

In 1790, Thomas Powers, who had settled in Nova Scotia after serving the British as a sergeant in a Black Pioneer unit, carried a petition of protest to London from the Nova Scotia black Loyalists. The British government responded by offering free passage to Sierra Leone to blacks who wanted to leave Canada. With few options other than working as servants or tenant farmers, some 1,200 decided to make the journey in 1792. Entire church congregations emigrated, providing a strong institutional basis for the struggling African settlement. The "Nova Scotians" quickly

came to dominate life in Sierra Leone, which was largely self-governing until 1801.

At times during the Revolutionary War, pro-British planters had left the American South with their slaves to start new plantations in the British Caribbean possessions. Additionally, British forces seized slaves from Patriot owners as contraband of war. Tens of thousands of these enslaved individuals were then sold to new owners in the islands. Most were sold in Jamaica, Britain's largest Caribbean colony. Some also went to the Bahamas, St. Vincent, Bermuda, and Dominica. At the war's end, about 2,000 white Loyalists, their 5,000 slaves, and 200 free blacks left Savannah and Charleston for Jamaica. Among the latter were at least 28 Black Pioneers who, as army veterans, eventually received half-pay pensions from the British government. The Bahamas was the destination for 4,200 enslaved African Americans and 1,750 whites from the southern states. This influx doubled the white population and tripled the slave population of these islands. As a result, the colonial legislature tightened the Bahamian slave code.

We will never have precise figures on the numbers of white and black Loyalists who left America as a result of the Revolution. The war lasted eight years, and not all Loyalists waited for the final British evacuation to leave. It is increasingly clear that at least one-third of the refugees were of African descent. Most of their individual stories are lost to history. Some information is available from pension applications, petitions, and other records. One thing is certain: the modern history of Canada, the Bahamas, and Sierra Leone would be greatly different had the Loyalists not arrived in the 1780s and 1790s.

To learn more:

Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

John W. Pulis, ed., *Moving On: Black Loyalists in the Afro-Atlantic World*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1999.

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http://www.nps.gov/revwar/unfinished_revolution/black_loyalists.html

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