



The Loyalists, 1775-1791

Who Were the Loyalists?

The Loyalists were residents of the thirteen American colonies who, for various reasons, took the British side during the American Revolution. In the 1770s, Great Britain had sixteen colonies in North America. These included thirteen “American” provinces along the Atlantic coast from Massachusetts to Georgia, as well as the provinces of Quebec, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. Some Americans disliked how the British governed their American colonies. Other Americans, both native-born and emigrants from Europe, supported the British king. The three northern colonies did not join the thirteen who signed the Declaration of Independence.

Civil War

A bitter civil war started in 1775 and continued for almost eight years. The Loyalists were forced to leave their American homes as refugees. Some men left early in the war to join British forces headquartered in New York City or Québec City. Other families were forced to flee when their neighbours persecuted them or destroyed their homes and property. Large numbers of Loyalists left the new United States after the peace in 1783, preferring still to live under the British Crown.

Many Loyalists fought with the British forces during the American Revolution. They served in the regular British army in the 84th Regiment, and in American units such as the King’s Royal Regiment of New York, the Loyal American Regiment and in Jessop’s and Butler’s Rangers. Some Black Americans were offered their freedom from slavery if they joined the British cause and many joined Black Pioneer units. The Six Nations of western New York were also divided by the Revolution. Many joined British troops in pitched battles and a guerilla campaign against the Patriots, or Rebels.

Peace and the Growth of New Communities

The Treaty of Paris in 1783 acknowledged the independence of the thirteen colonies and their control of land east of the Mississippi River. The British government transported some of the Loyalists back to Great Britain and others to Bermuda, but offered land in Nova Scotia and Quebec to those who wished to remain in America. Close to 35 000 Loyalists settled in the Maritimes, increasing the population by two-thirds and leading to the creation of the colonies of New Brunswick and of Cape Breton (which in 1820 reunited with Nova Scotia). Two thousand Loyalists settled what is now the province of Québec and 7 500 were given land along the north shore of the St. Lawrence, the north shore of Lake Ontario and west of Niagara.

The settlement of the Loyalists created new communities in Canada. As they took up land in little-settled areas, the refugees tried to stay together with their friends. Many Loyalists were assigned land with other soldiers from the same regiment. In Nova Scotia, a large number of Black Loyalists were given poorer land in Birchtown, near Shelburne. Gaelic-speaking Highlanders from New York congregated in what became Glengarry County, in eastern Ontario, while Mohawks and Oneidas received land near the Bay of Quinté on Lake Ontario and on the Grand River, near what is now Brantford, Ontario. New towns were also created. Some older towns, like Saint John, New Brunswick and Cataraqui (Kingston, Ontario) grew

in importance, while Shelburne, Nova Scotia grew to 8 000 inhabitants in 1786 only to fall to 600 by 1815. Over the years other Americans joined the Loyalists in Canada.

In the first years in their new communities, the Loyalists received rations from the government as well as tools and other basic supplies. Slowly the land was cleared, more crops were grown and larger houses built. Children were educated at small, private schools, or apprenticed to a craftsman to learn a trade. After years of war and uncertainty, the Loyalists had established a new home.