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Liberty to Slaves: The Black Loyalist Controversy

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LIBERTY TO SLAVES: THE BLACK LOYALIST CONTROVERSY

By

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B.A. Point Park University, 2016

A THESIS

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Requirements for the Degree of
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Individuals of African descent who arrived in Nova Scotia during and after the War for American Independence have been the subject of extensive commentary by historians. Spurred by the rise of Social History in the 1970s, these individuals have increasingly been identified as a coherent group – particularly by the historian James W. St. G. Walker, whose pioneering 1976 monograph did a great deal to create the term “black Loyalist” as a category of analysis. In Walker’s wake many other researchers have expanded the concept, which now has a prominent place in the public historical memory of Nova Scotia.

However, archivist and historian Barry Cahill warned of the errors in not acknowledging how the institution of slavery impacted this group in an *Acadiensis* article in autumn 1999. Cahill asserted that the ”black Loyalist” concept had been misconstrued to promote contemporary social inclusion with the consequence of misshaping our understanding of late-eighteenth century history. Walker responded to Cahill’s critique in the same issue of the journal and argued that black Loyalists were a significant and widely recognized component of the Loyalist diaspora at the time.

This thesis builds on primary and secondary sources to assess the wartime experiences of these evacuees, their significant post-war migration to Nova Scotia, and their departure for Sierra Leone. Understanding how the wartime roles of enslaved and loyal blacks informed their
progression to freedom via siding with the British and evacuating to Nova Scotia are central to this study. The Book of Negroes, which documented the status of nearly 3,000 black people who evacuated from New York City with the British in 1783, is an especially rich source that carefully chronicled information about black refugees including their legal status. Their individual journeys varied from thankless service to the extraordinary acquisition of freedom. Yet, always, the threat of re-enslavement loomed even after evacuating to post-war Nova Scotia.

The priority here is to understand the people recorded in the Book of Negroes and how the fluidity of status shaped black Loyalists in the context of slavery and racism in the late-eighteenth century. A British military perspective often informs the assessment of black Loyalists adopted in this thesis. Who were the black Loyalists? This thesis supports Walker’s assessment that the black Loyalists were a meaningful group in the period, yet also find value in Cahill’s call that we recognize status variations among black people in Nova Scotia after 1783. The persistence of slavery and the intensification of racism is crucial to understanding black Loyalists, and we should be wary of succumbing to a celebratory Loyalist Myth, whether of black or white Loyalists. Walker rightly defended the black Loyalist concepts because many did acquire their freedom through individual perseverance, sacrifice, and commitment to the British. However, many others, as Cahill acknowledged, had other motives and most never fully escaped slavery and its broadly oppressive influence.
DEDICATION

Thank you Professor Liam Riordan, my committee and the Department of History at the University of Maine.

And, to my mother for always being there.

“Promise me you’ll always remember: You’re braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”

- A. A. Milne
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The American Revolution ushered the British North American colonies into a rebel insurgency and changed many lives forever. Huge numbers of enslaved people responded to wartime opportunities by fleeing their masters and many directly aided the British. A core group of approximately three thousand made it to New York City at the end of the war and would be evacuated by the British. The wartime service of many black Loyalists led to freedom as they were evacuated to London, Australia, Germany, the Caribbean, and, above all, to Nova Scotia.

Graham Russell Hodges’ analysis of the Book of Negroes, a detailed muster roll recorded by the British military of all blacks evacuated from New York City with the British in 1783 provides a precise count of how many people departed and categorized them as belonging to nine distinct groups.

Out of the total 2,997 people of African descent evacuated from New York City, the largest two groups recorded by the British were 1,135 freed by military proclamation and 812 who were categorized as escaped slaves. Since this latter group were evacuated, the British claimed that they had escaped prior to the end of the war and thus were not revel property that would need to be returned to slavery as per the terms of the peace treaty. Additional smaller groups among the evacuees included 371 who were born free; 205 who had been emancipated by their masters; 44 acquired their freedom from their master’s death; 28 had free or unknown status. Among those with unfree status among the evacuees were 366 slaves, 29 who were indentured, and 7 who had been abandoned by their masters. Thus, some 2,595 people found in
the Book of Negroes had free status (87 percent of the total), while some 402 were unfree.¹ This evidence supports Walker’s analysis that there were many black Loyalists, who were far and away the largest single category of persons of African descent who were evacuated by the British from New York City, yet the data also demonstrates the continuing existence of slavery and a ranks of ambiguous status.

While some pioneering research about blacks and Loyalism was completed prior to James St. G. Walker’s The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870 (1976), this monograph examined the experiences of the central cohort of black Loyalists in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone over several generations. Walker argues that freedom was the fundamental motive for black Loyalists rather than narrow political loyalty to the British.² Walker also highlights the numerous ways in which slaves were trafficked by the British during and after the war.

During the post-war evacuation of New York City free people had precedence boarding evacuation vessels, which encouraged some white Loyalist masters to disguise their slaves as free servants.³ Walker follows free black Loyalists as they moved to Nova Scotia and settled in its towns. He estimated that 1,521 black Loyalists lived in Birchtown – the most substantial black settlement in Nova Scotia. Black Loyalists’ social marginalization inhibited prosperity and financial opportunities even as free people. Most had just been freed and possessed little to

³ Walker, The Black Loyalists, 10.
nothing. They also did not receive the full aid that they were promised when arriving in Nova Scotia. In some instances, black Loyalists were re-enslaved in Nova Scotia with the threat of sale elsewhere. When abolitionist John Clarkson came to Nova Scotia in late 1792 to help organize the Sierra Leone migration, many saw his proposal as an exodus of biblical proportions. Most black Loyalists in Nova Scotia, again, risked everything for an improved future for their families via land, independence, and security in Sierra Leone. Once there, they and their descendants would widely be known as the Black Nova Scotians for several generations.

*The Black Loyalists* remains one of the most detailed works on the subject to date and analyzes the influence of black Loyalists over almost a century. It details the parallel reality of slavery existing beside the black Loyalists, and how free people could become enslaved. Walker traced black Loyalists after the Revolution to British territories, and has remained an influential model for later studies. Yet, more research was needed to explain the time before and during the war for those who became black Loyalists, which Walker did consider in an earlier publication.

Walker’s “Blacks as American Loyalists: The Slaves’ War for Independence” examined the war as essential for enslaved people’s path to freedom. It traces how military proclamations made during the war were the greatest opportunities for people of African descent to obtain their freedom. Walker examines early service in Virginia as well as in the British evacuation of Boston in early 1776, both long before General Henry Clinton’s Philipsburg Proclamation of 1779 that promised black freedom in exchange for military service. This later proclamation broadened and formalized the British commitment to enslaved people who challenged Patriot authority and encouraged a boom of black Loyalists.5

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5 Walker, “Blacks as American Loyalists,” 57.
As the main theater of the war turned to the slave societies of the southern colonies after 1778, tens of thousands of enslaved people joined the British to serve in combat and support roles. Black actions were vital to the British across the south from the invasion of Savannah at the end of 1778 to the final major battle at Yorktown in late 1781. At the evacuation of Charleston in 1782 General Alexander Leslie sailed with thousands of black Loyalists and slaves to Jamaica, St. Augustine, New York, London, and Halifax. Walker’s emphasis on the black Loyalist’s liberation was foundational and does document slavery, but does not give enough attention to its gravity.

By questioning the collectivity and political autonomy of black people who sided with the British, critics of Walker, like Barry Cahill, emphasized slavery’s tremendous impact on black Loyalists. Cahill’s article “The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada” questioned how many black refugees should be counted as black Loyalists. For example, if an enslaved person supported the British primarily as a route to personal freedom, Cahill doubted that that should qualify as “loyalism.” For him, the creation of the black Loyalist category in the late-twentieth century was driven by a desire to craft a more inclusive public history and public memory of the Nova Scotian past. Cahill held that Stephen Blucke’s military leadership during the war and his leadership of the Birchtown settlement exemplified the active commitment to the British that people of African descent should meet to attain the full rank of black Loyalists. To him, those who ran away from rebel masters were most likely fugitive slaves rather than fully black Loyalists. In sum, too sweeping a black Loyalist category, in Cahill’s view, mistakenly applies loyalism to a large and varied group of people with complicated backgrounds and mixed motives.6

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Cahill appreciates that the rise of studies of black Loyalists encouraged research into Afro-British history. However, a noticeable proportion of the people found in the Book of Negroes were slaves, as listed on inspection rolls at the time of the evacuation of New York City. Cahill does not accept how British proclamations made during the war were a guarantee for all people of African descent under British lines to be considered black Loyalists. Instead, he insists that many enslaved people who took advantage of such proclamations were fugitive slaves. In a sense Cahill adopts the perspective of slave owners and ignores the viewpoint of the British military, actions of enslaved individuals, and the oaths that were regularly administrated. Cahill is correct in stating the vast majority of Loyalists were white. To Cahill the black Loyalist label obfuscates how slavery developed and persisted in Nova Scotia during its Loyalist era. Cahill’s concerns are understandable, but he mistakes the thrust of Walker’s work and does not fairly reflect the balance of primary source material from the period that show a broad recognition of blacks as Loyalists at the time. However, in addressing the role of slavery, Cahill helpfully assisted that more attention was needed to understand how slavery and persistent racism influenced all black people in Nova Scotia in the late-eighteenth century.

Walker presented an able defense of his work and the black Loyalist label in “Myth, History, and Revisionism: The Black Loyalists Revisited.” It rejected Cahill’s claim that black Loyalists are best conceptualized as fugitive slaves. Walker reviewed a range of evidence to support his case, and he argues that black Loyalist were considered Loyalist by their peers. He also emphasizes that black Loyalists often designated themselves as ‘refugees.’ The identifier was not a reference to being a refugee from slavery, but was a widespread term among Loyalists

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7 Cahill, “The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada,” 5.
as a whole. Walker addresses Cahill’s analysis of proclamations by noting that Clinton’s Philipsburg Proclamation distinguished people who came to the British voluntarily as opposed to those who had been captured, who were either sold or kept as slaves.¹⁰ Such a group is more akin to fugitive slaves than the black Loyalists. Walker admits that his book helped to, “standardize the term ‘black Loyalist,’ which has since come into common usage.”¹¹ However, Walker’s popularization of the black Loyalist does not justify the assertions made by Cahill. There are estimates of 1,200 slaves that arrived with white Loyalist masters in Nova Scotia, which Walker acknowledged.¹² Walker highlights how Cahill’s evidence better supports the claim that fugitive slaves were over-represented participants during the war.¹³ But there is little acknowledgement of the fragile status of free black Loyalists and how the pervasive institution of slavery shaped their existence.

Walker concludes by rhetorically questioning the harm done to people of African descent by identifying them with their Loyalist ancestors. He is troubled by the fact that this excluded group is often not considered to be full Loyalists. However, Walker encourages further study to understand the complexity of life for black people in Nova Scotia.¹⁴ While the emphasis focuses on the freedom acquired by black Loyalists, the status of black people in Nova Scotia was not permanent.

This thesis began with the hypothesis that Cahill was largely correct and that many of the people recorded in the Book of Negroes were, in fact, fugitive slaves who managed to escape to

the British only after the end of the war, thus making their status as Loyalists questionable. However, research with accounts from the period and examining how many individuals acquired their freedom as a result of Revolutionary turmoil during the war, it became clear that people of African descent displayed enormous agency in maneuvering across a complicated social terrain that allowed them to seize upon a fragile claim to freedom. The group documented in the Book of Negroes, which includes large numbers of black Loyalists, also records the complicated and continuing legacy of slavery even among the free black evacuees from New York City.

The development of black Loyalist studies by other historians is critical to understanding the precedents that shaped the Walker-Cahill debate in 1999. Wallace Brown’s presentation “The View at Two Hundred Years: The Loyalists of the American Revolution” in 1969 was an early catalyst for historians to investigate the black Loyalists. He identified how U.S. historians lacked a balanced understanding of the Loyalists, and, therefore, minimized an essential component of the overall Revolutionary experience. Brown called on historians to focus on three discounted areas of the Revolution. There needed to be more objectivity to integrate Loyalist history with broader accounts of the Revolution. The most compelling approach, Brown believed, was a comparative one among Loyalists in varied areas including Sierra Leone.15 Before this point, the black Loyalists appeared to lack agency, merely the recipients of liberty as granted by the British army. Instead, Brown emphasized the close bonds that formed during the war between British officers and troops and the black Loyalists as martial allies. Brown’s call for further historical investigation spurred historians to reconsider the black commitment to the British during the American Revolution.

Mary Beth Norton’s “The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution” investigated the place of black Loyalists after their evacuation to London. During the war, Norton argues that slaves recognized the Patriot’s hypocrisy of asserting freedom for some while enslave others.\textsuperscript{16} This knowledge, when coupled with local chaos caused the war, encouraged enslaved people to seek freedom for themselves and their families. However, once they arrived in London, there was little reimbursement for their lost property and few employment opportunities. Abled-bodied individuals who were willing to work, according to Norton, often remained jobless. Countless black Loyalists in London became beggars starving in the streets.\textsuperscript{17}

Post-war London was a challenging place, and the black Loyalists were at a complete handicap in the competition for labor.

The oppressive circumstances that black Loyalists faced in London made many of England’s elite pity their predicament. Norton details how, in 1786, some London businessmen formed the \textit{Committee to Aid the Black Poor} in an attempt to address a dire situation. Their efforts gathered almost £900 that helped open a hospital and provided monetary assistance to the black poor, which included many Loyalists. The charity assisted them, but it did not remedy their lack of employment and their ability to be independent. In February 1786, a month after the \textit{Committee}’s formation, Henry Smeathman offered to help transport many of the black poor to Sierra Leone on behalf of the \textit{Committee}.\textsuperscript{18}

Even given the poor conditions of London’s black poor in the late 1780s, most black Loyalists favored living in London over Sierra Leone.\textsuperscript{19} The resettlement project targeted

\textsuperscript{17} Norton, “The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution,” 406.
\textsuperscript{18} Norton, “The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution,” 408.
\textsuperscript{19} Norton, “The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution,” 409.
convicts and many were coerced to board ships. They departed from London on April 9, 1787, and established the town of Granville along the West African coast. These new colonists were not prepared for colonization and local Temne tribespeople as well as European slavers on nearby Bance Island grew hostile towards the new community. The colony had poor local leadership and insistent squabbling plagued the settlers. These challenges led to the almost complete devastation of this first Sierra Leone settlement. Norton provided new insights about the black Loyalists of London but did not touch on their experiences in wartime North America or post-war Nova Scotia. Yet, this glimpse into the experiences of black Loyalists in London stimulated many further questions for other historians.

Sidney Kaplan’s “The ‘Domestic Insurrections’ of the Declaration of Independence” was published the same year as Walker’s The Black Loyalists. Kaplan’s goal was to understand the ways Dunmore’s Proclamation affected subsequent events in the war. The royal governor of Virginia, Lord John Murray, 4th Earl of Dunmore, made the proclamation and sent the colony of Virginia into open rebellion. On July 6, 1775, the Continental Congress issued Declaration on the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms. The Congress’s call to arms was a reaction to Dunmore’s threat to free rebel’s slaves. Many influential Virginian rebels, like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry, were slave owners and feared a slave revolt. Kaplan’s interpretation of Dunmore’s Proclamation criticized earlier proposals that there were only positive outcomes to the Governor’s actions. The opening to black Loyalists at this early

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21 Hereafter referred to as Lord Dunmore.
phase drive many neutral slave masters in Virginia to wholeheartedly embrace rebellion. In many respects, Dunmore’s Proclamation was a boon to the Patriot movement.

Seven years after Kaplan’s article and Walker’s book, Sylvia R. Frey published “Between Slavery and Freedom: Virginia Blacks in the American Revolution,” which made a major contribution to the analysis of slavery and the American Revolution. There was a high degree of resistance to liberating slaves in the white South, and both Patriots and Loyalists discouraged large-scale black insurrection. Nonetheless, the promise of individual liberty through military service was a motivator for enslaved people to escape captivity. In losing slaves, rebel owners lost a labor supply, monetary investment, and faced a new enemy. Moreover, slaves who abandoned their masters for the British were a visible, moral loss for rebel slave owners and their rhetorical claims to liberty, justice, and virtue.

British Generals and leaders obviously recognized the fundamental weakness of a slave society to wage war from the outset of the conflict. Charles Cornwallis, according to Frey, was seen by General Clinton taking thousands of runaway slaves under him during the war. Frey dismisses Benjamin Quarles’, “Lord Dunmore as Liberator” and J. Leitch Wright Jr.’s “Lord Dunmore’s Loyalist Asylum in the Floridas” by arguing that Dunmore had pragmatic wartime goals and should not be mistaken as an anti-slavery pioneer. Dunmore merely acted in all necessary ways to restore stability and order to Virginia and to punish rebels.

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Many black Loyalists in Virginia died of smallpox. Their role in the British army, according to Frey, was primarily to perform menial labor, not dissimilar to their roles as slaves.\(^{27}\) Black Loyalists also served as servants for British officers during this period. The existence of slavery supposedly justified black Loyalists’ lower social rank, according to Frey, but they were still able to fight for their autonomy. Frey argues that recruitment of blacks aimed to inflict monetary, strategic, and moral damage on the rebels and was not an abolitionist effort.

Woody Holton’s “‘Rebel Against Rebel’ Enslaved Virginians and the Coming of the American Revolution” analyzes how the fear of slave revolt in Virginia propelled the colony towards insurrection. Holton supports Frey’s claim that black liberation by the British terrorized Virginia rebels.\(^{28}\) Around 1,000 runaway slaves had joined Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment in Virginia – igniting suspicions that the British were starting a slave revolt. Holton also highlighted that by war’s end, around three thousand slaves left New York City with the British during their evacuation. Holton views these formerly enslaved actors as conductors of their own fate who spurred revolution in Virginia.\(^{29}\) He recognizes that many black Loyalists originated as slaves and worked under similar conditions even as British allies during the war. The flight of slaves was a significant factor in the revolution, according to Holton.\(^{30}\)

Cassandra Pybus’ “Jefferson’s Faulty Math: the Question of Slave Defections in the American Revolution” reevaluated Jefferson’s estimates of how many slaves ran away during the war. Pybus argues that Dunmore’s Proclamation was the “best-documented incident” of black

\(^{29}\) Holton, “Rebel against Rebel,” 190.
\(^{30}\) Holton, “Rebel against Rebel,” 192.
Loyalists becoming free, but very few of his early recruits survived the long war.\textsuperscript{31} Pybus supports Frey’s assertion that the black Loyalists in Virginia were poorly treated and suffered from high mortality. Pybus suggests that 6,940 black Loyalists evacuated to East Florida, St. Lucia, Jamaica, Nova Scotia, New York, and England during and after the war.\textsuperscript{32} She also showed a new connection between North America and far-flung destinations of black Loyalists. By including their pre-war status as slaves, Pybus stresses the dire hardships that black Loyalists faced.

Pybus subsequent book, \textit{Epic Journeys of Freedom: Runaway Slaves of the American Revolution and Their Global Quest for Liberty} (2006), furthers the promise of her article by following the black Loyalists to Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone, England, and, even to New South Wales (Australia). This global approach built upon Walker’s proposal that black Loyalists’ evolved over time and place. Pybus’ comparative approach stresses the importance of the British Empire for black Loyalists. Many loyal British subjects sought new homes after the war, and the Empire relocated them to its distant territories. The Empire used these refugees as instruments of further colonization.

Still other historians have analyzed the core black Loyalist destination of Nova Scotia and the Canadian Maritimes. When Harvey Amani Whitfield published “Black Loyalists and Black Slaves in Maritime Canada” in 2007, he proposed that historians have focused too much on the freedom of the black Loyalists in a manner akin to Barry Cahill. Slaves who evacuated with Loyalist masters were being ignored due to over emphasis on the black Loyalists. These slaves often lived beside the black Loyalists, married one another, worshiped together, and

\textsuperscript{32} Pybus, “Jefferson’s Faulty Math,” 262.
worked similar jobs. Their lives intertwined, and the neglect towards them revealed a shallow understanding of the black experience in the Canadian Maritimes.\textsuperscript{33} Whitfield’s exclusive attention to race over legal status removed the cloud of Loyalism from the equation and allowed a richer sense of black life in the region.

In 2010 Whitfield published “Slavery in English Nova Scotia, 1750-1810” and further examined how race shaped people’s lives during the region’s so-called Loyalist era. Whitfield argued that race was a significant line of separation within the Loyalist community that set black Loyalists apart from white ones in profound ways.\textsuperscript{34} Whitfield, here, was interested in the institution of slavery in Nova Scotia to understand how the black Loyalists’ arrival impacted their development. By continuing to probe life for Afro-Britons in Nova Scotia, Whitfield connects slavery in the region to the broader Atlantic world and emphasizes the widespread prejudices against people of African descent.

The social environment in Nova Scotia for black Loyalists was hostile and difficult as described by Carole Watterson Troxler in the “Re-enslavement of Black Loyalists: Mary Postell in South Carolina, East Florida, and Nova Scotia,” which breaks important ground with close attention to gender and marital status as key factors shaping the experience of a black Loyalist woman named Mary Postell. She came from South Carolina with her husband and had obtained a certificate of freedom to settle in Nova Scotia. Yet, when Postell’s husband died, the license went missing, and Jesse Gray became her claimant in Nova Scotia. Horrifyingly, her status was questioned in a 1791 trial that determined Postell and her children to be the property of Gray. It

\textsuperscript{33} Harvey Amani Whitfield, “Black Loyalists and Black Slaves in Maritime Canada,” \textit{History Compass} 5, no. 6 (2007): 1981.
seems likely that Gray abused his social power to oppress a family he had promised to protect. Troxler suggests that Postell had acquired her freedom during the war, only to be enslaved in British territories afterward.\(^{35}\)

Troxler’s work reveals how imperative the documentation of a certificate of freedom was for the black Loyalists, and the power court rooms had to strip away liberty without such positive evidence. Black Loyalists experienced continuous mistreatment during and after the war. They were not guaranteed perpetual freedom, and their liberty’s fragility was a critical component of their experience.

In 2008 Maya Jasanoff examined Loyalism as the vanguard of nineteenth-century British imperialism that could transcend racial boundaries through the inclusive, though hierarchical, embrace of subjecthood. Like Whitfield, Jasanoff considers black Loyalists alongside slaves in the British Atlantic (and even global) empire.\(^{36}\) While there were different levels of citizenship within the empire, Jasanoff argues that there were common bonds between all Loyalists – beyond race – that united their experience.\(^{37}\)

All Loyalists faced the contradictions of being British subjects abroad with little voice in Parliament. While differing in experience, Jasanoff shows what many Loyalists shared in their dreams for the future.\(^{38}\) While the imperial approach was novel and included black Loyalists within the Loyalist collective, it may diminish specific group experiences that had unique historical trajectories. Native Americans and Afro-Britons often allied with the British during the


\(^{38}\) Jasanoff, “The Other Side of Revolution,” 232.
war as Loyalists, but their involvement as groups were distinct from one another and it is worthwhile to assess them apart to appreciate their contributions. Loyalists do share common values and bonds that transcend race, but probing both in each particular instance and in commonality should remain a scholarly priority in the assessment of Loyalism.

Jasanoff’s *Liberty’s Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* continues her prior investigation of Loyalists as imperial actors. Providing a new approach of comparison among different regions around the British Empire exemplifies commonalities among Loyalists. *Liberty’s Exiles* calibrates Walker and Cahill’s arguments and produces a merger that does not ignore any evidence from either. Jasanoff does not deny the existence of differences between slaves owned by white Loyalists, and black Loyalists. These facts, however, are tertiary to the book’s central theme. The motive was to examine Loyalists around the world after the war and compare their experiences with one another. Jasanoff’s unique approach included as many groups as possible. While she notes distinctions between different groups of Loyalists, there are clear connections that unite them as well.39 These commonalities, however, may overlook how slavery influenced black people who evacuated with the British.

The essays collected in *Loyal Atlantic: Remaking the British Atlantic in the Revolutionary Era*, edited by Jerry Bannister and Liam Riordan, provide a variety of perspectives demonstrating recent directions in Loyalist studies. In the volume opening essay Bannister and Riordan argue for more attention to transatlantic commitments, experiences, and consequences of individual Loyalists.40 A helpful suggestion is to examine

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40 Jerry Bannister and Liam Riordan, "Loyalism and the British Atlantic, 1660–1840." In *The Loyal Atlantic: Remaking the British Atlantic in the Revolutionary Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), edited by Jerry Bannister and Liam Riordan, 5. Online at URL:
the impact British military forces had on Loyalism, especially for ordinary colonists and overlooked individuals like enslaved people.\textsuperscript{41} Bannister and Riordan, here, note that there has been a vast amount of research on the free black Loyalists, but little on the demographically larger group enslaved blacks who left the US with Loyalist masters.\textsuperscript{42} The lack of attention to the latter group has continued to stoke suspicion in some scholars about black Loyalists and about Loyalism in general.

Keith Mason argues in “The American Loyalist Problem of Identity in the Revolutionary Atlantic World” that there is a particular Loyalist identity. For Mason, individuals like the Scotsmen James Walker are prime examples of Loyalists. They held characteristics such as an ordinary social orientation, a British cultural background, and a mixture of provincial and imperial perspectives.\textsuperscript{43} Mason does not dismiss how the Revolution constituted an enormous slave rebellion. But he argues that most slaves who sided with the British did so on an individual basis and their ‘principal instrument’ was flight.\textsuperscript{44} Mason’s goal was to describe the experiences of the run-of-the-mill refugee as they resettled in the British Atlantic away from the metropolis.\textsuperscript{45} To do so acknowledges the

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\textsuperscript{41} Bannister and Riordan, “Loyalism and the British Atlantic, 1660-1840,” 17.
\textsuperscript{42} Bannister and Riordan, “Loyalism and the British Atlantic, 1660-1840,” 21.
\textsuperscript{43} Keith Mason, “The American Loyalist Problem of Identity in the Revolutionary Atlantic World.” In The Loyal Atlantic, 45. Online URL:
\textsuperscript{44} Mason, “The American Loyalist Problem of Identity in the Revolutionary Atlantic World,” 42.
\textsuperscript{45} Mason, “The American Loyalist Problem of Identity in the Revolutionary Atlantic World,” 45.
\end{flushleft}
reality that most Loyalists were white and were supported by the British for reasons often strikingly different from black Loyalists.

Yet, within the same essay collection, another historian disagreed. Carole Watterson Troxler’s “Uses of the Bahamas by Southern Loyalist Exiles” discusses how Loyalist perspectives were complex and changing as they relocated after the war. Troxler demonstrates that after the war, the British were not liberators, but opportunistically took advantage of unfree labor. Most of the evacuees from the major Southern cities of Savannah and Charleston were enslaved.\textsuperscript{46} As Loyalists settled in the Bahamas, factions developed around the future of cotton and its demand for slave-based labor. Those in support of the new plantation order used the term “Loyalist” as a partisan tool to exclude some whites and all blacks on the island. These exclusionary attempts, Troxler argues, are similar to those noted by Mason in his essay.\textsuperscript{47} These clear distinctions in who should and should not be considered a Loyalist demonstrates the importance of post-war regional settlement and how time changed perspectives on slavery. These two historians also demonstrate differing opinions about how to assess black people who sided with the British.

The Loyal Atlantic demonstrates a continuing ambiguity about who were Loyalists and the necessity to further understand Loyalists before during, and after the Revolutionary War. There is open debate about how many black Loyalists existed as well as their activities during the war. These differing perspectives are evidence that the study of black Loyalists continues to evolve.

\textsuperscript{47} Troxler, “Uses of the Bahamas by Southern Loyalist Exiles,” 193.
No historian dismisses that black Loyalists existed nor suggests that their story involves wholesale fabrication. What the current scholarship reveals is that the most valuable approach to the black Loyalists is a comparative one that looks closely at different places and times while considering how slavery and slaves influenced free blacks. This approach has evolved from the encouragement of Wallace Brown and was adopted early by Mary Beth Norton and James St. G. Walker. In an attempt to fully understand the black Loyalist experience and evaluate whether recent assessments have downplayed the impact slavery had on black Loyalists, research must continue into primary sources. Only then will the reality of black Loyalists become more visible. Close attention to the people listed in the Book of Negroes supports the view of Walker (and related historians) about the significance and meaning of black Loyalists, while also calling attention to varied motives of people of African descent in this period who constantly faced the possibility of re-enslavement even as free blacks in Nova Scotia.
CHAPTER TWO
THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR, 1775-1783

Black Loyalists were certainly motivated to serve the British in exchange for their freedom. The war and its related chaos are what allowed black Loyalists to emerge as free and independent of their origins and pre-war status. When these crucial moments arose, black Loyalists acted when others did not. That inclination to serve and the ability to survive countless obstacles are critical steps for the black Loyalists. Many people of African descent found themselves under British lines, but it was the black Loyalists who answered the call to fight against their masters to earn their freedom. By assisting the British, they solidified themselves as allies. Had any black Loyalists remained in the United States of America they would have been re-enslaved. Most British officers, soldiers, and even many white Loyalists developed strong ties with black Loyalists during the war and did not retreat from that wartime alliance.

The earliest accounts of the black Loyalists are from Virginia with the rising fears of rebellion. The tensions within Virginia were electric as rumors of rebels and slaves revolting spread through the colony. Virginia’s economy was dependent upon slavery, and there were constant fears of slave revolts. A series of interconnected slave revolts in Jamaica in 1760-61 was likely fresh in many Virginians’ minds, and they were not going to allow such events to transpire there. As the colony ebbed toward rebellion, rumors spread that the British contemplated enlistment of slaves in the colony’s defense.

The speculation proved true when Lord Dunmore, issued a proclamation, now known as Dunmore’s Proclamation, on November 7, 1775 announcing “this most disagreeable, but now absolutely necessary Step declaring martial law.” The Governor’s sense of security was under threat and, in theory, defense preparations were mandatory due to the possibility of an impending
attack. The Governor, “further declare[d] all indentured Servants, Negroes, or others, (appertaining to Rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear Arms, they joining his Majesty’s troops.”

Lord Dunmore’s proclamation recruited servants, blacks, and others – maybe Native Americans or prisoners – in a desperate attempt to defend the colony. Sheer necessity spawned the proclamation, and it only explicitly included individuals willing and able to carry a weapon. The opportunity of freedom by the British originated in their state of hopelessness, but it also initiated a long and close relationship with black Loyalists.

The insecurity of the colony is apparent in that Dunmore had to sign the proclamation on board the William, while anchored off of Norfolk County. The volatility of Virginia, and the Governor’s flight from Williamsburg, demonstrate the hesitation British officials had in preparing for war. Virginia was in a state of emergency. The British liberation of rebel’s slaves must have been sensational and cataclysmic throughout Virginia and other slave societies of the South. To recruit slaves into the military and provide them with firearms was socially incendiary and left Dunmore indefensible. The result was an even more open and direct challenges to his authority in Virginia as slave owners could not accept his decision.

Dunmore’s Proclamation only applied to slaves who were owned by rebels and willing to become soldiers. A unit that was a direct result of the proclamation was the Ethiopian Regiment. They were reported to have worn shirts embroidered with the declaration ‘Liberty to Slaves,’

which openly stated that they were there to fight for their freedom from their masters.\(^4^9\) The social and political forces imbibed in such actions fueled the zeitgeist of black Loyalists. Although the Ethiopian Regiment was not successful in battle, they stand as an important unit to black Loyalist service.

After rebel forces pushed Dunmore off of Gwyn’s Island, they found his *Morning Reports* of what they referred to as his ‘black banditti.’ The Patriots considered the black Loyalists as fugitive slaves, but they are only one side of the story. The *Morning Reports* mentioned the black Loyalists Grace Thompson, Elizabeth Williams, and Bristol Mitchell. All three are in the *Book of Negroes* – a muster-roll of black Loyalists overseen by Sir Guy Carleton in New York City before the post-war British evacuation in 1783.\(^5^0\)

Thompson and Williams were described in the *Morning Reports* as “Women embarked at Mill Point, May 21, 1776, on board the *Dunluce.*” Thompson, in the later *Book of Negroes* was identified as age 24 in 1783 and from Norfolk County, Virginia. Thus, it is likely she was around 17 years old in the *Reports* and was close to the British line. Thompson successfully evacuated New York for Port Roseway (later known as Shelburne), Nova Scotia, on July 31, 1783, on board *L’Abondence.*\(^5^1\) There is significantly less information on Williams, but she is recorded to have sailed on board a London frigate, captained by Hugh Walls, on July 31, 1783, to Port Roseway. Mitchell was a member of Major Byrd’s company who sailed on the *Dunmore* on May


22, 1776. He was 57 years old in the Book, making him around fifty at the time of the Reports, and also from Norfolk County. He evacuated on the Clinton on July 31, 1783, to Annapolis and St. John.

Mitchell, Thompson, and Williams are all unexpected volunteers to Dunmore’s defense - in that none were men of prime fighting age. Arguably none fulfilled the prerequisites of Dunmore’s Proclamation, but all managed to reach Nova Scotia. Their actions during the war and persistence to ally themselves with the British won their freedom.

The people found in the Reports were “distinguished by their owner’s surnames,” which also allows for insights into how many families remained together in Nova Scotia. While 38 out of the 99 individuals have unique surnames, the remaining 61 share common surnames. The largest of these groups are the fifteen Willoughbys, seven Thorowgoods, and four Boushs. Notably, there are a similar numbers of women (50) and men (49) among Dunmore’s black Loyalists.\(^{52}\) Unlike the opportunism that affords an individual, families anchor their members - requiring them to make decisions that consider everyone. In deciding to find refuge with the British, the entire family became committed to ensuring their liberator’s victory.

Routed from Virginia in 1776, Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment’s activities ceased, but black Loyalists’ actions continued elsewhere. The participation and numbers of black Loyalists only increased as the conflict created opportunities to become free. The Black Pioneers were another black Loyalist unit that served through the war. Their formation was informal at first but soon gained recognition. General Henry Clinton issued the official establishment of the Black Pioneers on May 10, 1776 stating, “having judged it expedient for His Majestys Service that the Negroes found on board the Shipping [Pallissar transport] in this River should be formed into a

\(^{52}\) “Ethiopian Regiment Morning Reports,” August 31, 1776.
company.” Clinton recruited black Loyalists throughout the war, which allowed fugitive slaves in the eyes of the Patriot masters to become free.

George Martin was commissioned to command the Black Pioneers with Robert Campbell as lieutenant and Thomas Oldfield as the ensign. These individuals worked closely with the black Loyalists serving under them. Clinton noted, “I am to inform you that previous to the admission of any Negro you are to take care that the Oath contained in the annexed paper be administered, and that he be properly attest before a Magistrate.” Black Loyalists were placed under oath, endowing them with the knowledge of their actions. In doing so, Clinton and the British were initiating black Loyalists’ freedom. The oath required everyone to, “swear that I enter freely & voluntarily into His Majesty’s Service,” demonstrating their choice to fight and not run.53 Fugitive slaves did not giving oaths to the British during the war but, were captured.

The early and continual need for labor by the British led to a close working relationship with black Loyalists. At the war’s end, their continued service was loyalty. Clinton promised that the Black Pioneers were to be paid for their service. Clinton wanted his subordinates to understand the value of this relationship, and concluded his letter by saying, “I shall rely on you and desire that it may be particularly recommended to the rest of the Officers to treat these people with tenderness & humanity.”54 Clinton understood that both sides needed one another,

and the black Loyalists could run away from both sides. Black Loyalists’ decision to fight for freedom did not, however, separate them from slavery.

Some Loyalist-owned slaves are documented to have joined the British lines undetected. Daniel Manson records his attempt to retrieve his slave that had become a laborer in this manner. Revealing that some fugitive slaves had disguised themselves as black Loyalists, even though they were not fugitives of Patriot masters. After being interrogated onboard Captain Reid’s ship Rose, Manson was able to petition for his slave’s return. As a letter from Alex Innes, dated November 6, 1778 in New York, states, “this Poor Man has found one of his Negroes in the Black Company. The fellow loves his master and would wish to go to him, as [torn] requests I will prefer to his humble [torn] to the General to order him to be restored.” General Clinton responded with, “If the Negro wishes it, I have no objection.”55 While it is unclear whether or not Manson’s slave returned, Clinton was not entirely inclined to force the slave’s return. The General gave Manson’s slave a choice to return to his master. The war created a need for labor that slaves occupied, which the British valued above all else.

However, not all people of African descent served like the black Loyalists. The Royal Artillery Regiment in Virginia published a desertion notice in The Royal Gazette of New York on February 6, 1779, listing four male deserters from 23 to 26 years old. The note alerted that, “Deserted from the Virginia Company of blacks, employed as labourers in the Service of the Royal Artillery,” was a man named, “Ralph Henry, aged 25 years, 5 feet 5 inches, wants one of his fore teeth,” formerly owned by Patrick Henry. In 1783, Ralph Henry was recorded in the

Book as a thirty-year-old passenger onboard James Dunban’s Ranger. Henry was from Gloucester, Virginia, where he ran away in 1776 and had no military service.

By the war’s end, however, Henry’s owner was the Royal Artillery Department again, according to the Book. The 1779 desertion notice states, “It is believed they are gone on board some of the Privateers, or concealed for that purpose; and whoever apprehends or gives information of the above Blacks, shall be handsomely rewarded by making application at the Office of Ordnance.” Henry was a black Loyalist, and being found on the desertion notice implicates him in a crime. However, it appears his return allowed him to continue his service under the Department until they got to Nova Scotia. Henry was not returned to his master and arrived in Nova Scotia, likely earning his freedom along the way. However, in serving the British, he made a binding military contract that the British upheld.

The Memoirs of Boston King detail a black Loyalist’s commitment through experiences during the Siege of Charleston. King was nineteen during the Siege and recounted how, “my master being apprehensive that Charles Town was in danger on account of the war, removed into the country, about 38 miles off. Here we built a large house for Mr. Waters, during which time the English took Charlestown.” Framed for a crime, King recounted, “To escape his [master’s] cruelty, I determined to go [to] CharlesTown, and throw myself into the hands of the English.” In Charleston, King was accepted into the British line, where he remained for the rest of the war. The flight from King’s master is an action enslaved blacks took to receive protection, and some freedom, by the British.

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In Charleston, King served with the British until he contracted smallpox. King states, “all the Blacks affected with that disease, were ordered to be carried a mile from the camp, lest the soldiers should be infected, and disabled from marching.” Black Loyalists were untreated for their illness; however, they continued to prove loyal through the war. They fought and suffered under the belief that their service would earn their freedom. Therefore, they would never have to run away or to be considered slaves again.

King and other sick black Loyalists were left when the British marched to the next camp. If they were not contagious, then King suggests they would have been captured and enslaved by the enemy. The British do not entirely abandon King and the others, and, “Two days after, the wagons were sent to convey us to the English Army, and we were put into a little cottage, (being 25 in number) about a quarter of a mile from the Hospital.” Treatment towards black Loyalists was discriminatory, and may be an example of general acts by the British.

A Return of Negroes employ’d in the Service of the Royal Artillery, signed on April 28, 1780, by Major Peter Traille details the positions many black Loyalists held while working with the regiment. The Return lists, “7 Carpenters, 2 Collar-Makers, 1 Black Smith, 43 Labourers; 15 Small Pox; 12 Sick & Lame,” totaling eighty individuals. Within the transporting schooners were eleven more laborers, and five either infected with smallpox or listed as “Sick & Lame.” Out of the 154 total black men listed, ninety-two were laborers, seven were carpenters, two were collar-makers, and one was a blacksmith. The majority of individuals were laborers, but some had

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artisanal skills. These varying occupations among blacks is an example of their diverse lives before, and likely after the war.\textsuperscript{58}

Cato Rogers appears in the \textit{Muster Roll of the Civil Branch of Ordnance attending his Majesty's Field Train of Artillery at Rhode Island}, signed on July 1, 1779. Rogers, like Ralph Henry, is recorded in the \textit{Book}, as 44 years old in 1783. In 1779, he was likely around the age of forty and was born in Newport, Rhode Island. Rogers ran away from his owner, William Rogers, to be under the new guidance of the Wagon Master General’s Department. Rogers and Henry were with their groups after leaving New York City and arriving in Nova Scotia. These black Loyalists were dedicated members of their units who followed orders. A level of ambiguity that makes it difficult to ascertain between Walker and Cahill is the reality that both slaves and newly free blacks worked together. The possibility of individual status changes dependent upon factors of the war cannot be ignored in attempting to describe loyalties or liberties of the group, the black Loyalists.\textsuperscript{59}

Black Loyalists were instrumental to the British, but their route to freedom was not guaranteed. \textit{The humble Petition of Scipio Handley}, signed January 13, 1784, illustrates how black Loyalists served during Siege of Savannah. During the American-French siege in September and October 1779, everyone was recruited to defend the city. Handley ran grapeshot to redoubts and batteries to rearm soldiers. During a trip through fire, he was struck in his right leg with a musket ball, leading to potential amputation. He never fully recovered from the injury.

\textsuperscript{58} “Royal Artillery Regiment Negroes Employed”, April 28, 1780, University of Michigan, William L. Clements Library, Sir Henry Clinton Papers, Volume 95, item 27. URL: http://www.royalprovincial.com/Military/civil/rar/ rarren1.htm (accessed July 6, 2018)

which “rendered [him] entirely unfit for service.” Handley’s service towards the British resulted in his injury and eventually allowed him to earn his freedom and move to London after the war.\textsuperscript{60}

Another black Loyalist who experienced the Siege of Savannah was David George. George’s account of the siege is similar to King’s since both fled Patriot masters. George’s master fled the region and left him and his family to be captured and placed into a prisoner camp. George recounts that he, “laid there about a month, when Colonel Brown belonging to the British took me out. I stayed sometime in Savannah, and at Yamacrow, a little distance from It, preaching with brother George Liele.” George stayed there for several months before his family moved into Savannah once the siege began. After a cannonball flew through the roof of the stable the Georges inhabited, they moved to a cellar on the Yamacrow bluff. Like King, George contracted smallpox but was cared for by his wife who was a servant of General Clinton’s. George was approached by the Americans as well but remained free and later reunited with his family.\textsuperscript{61}

The prevalence of illness among blacks is visible in George’s descriptions. Nonetheless, black Loyalists answered the need for labor, and they chose to join their fortunes with the British during the war. They had proved to be loyal in the most desperate of circumstances and did not abandon their allies. Interactions, like the siege, fostered personal relationships that became invaluable. In 1783, as the British evacuated New York City white Loyalists vouched for black Loyalists to board British vessels as free people. Black Loyalists were, nonetheless, still not treated as equals within British ranks and faced particular hardships as a result.

\textsuperscript{60} Norton, “The British-Americans: The Loyalist Exiles in England, 1774-1789”.
\textsuperscript{61} David George, \textit{An Account of Life of Mr. David George from S. L. A. given by himself}: Black Loyalists: Our History, Our People. URL: blackloyalist.com/cdc/documents/diaries/george_a_life.htm (accessed April 7, 2019)
A permit on November 19, 1779, from Colonel Maitland, states, “I do hereby Certify that the Bearer Ned a Free Negro, with his Wife and Family have Served in the Employ of Coll. Metland [sic] in getting him Publick Horses for the Space of Eight Months, And do Forwarn all persons not to trouble or Molest said Ned, Wife or Family, as they are Free Negroes and Friends to His Majesty. Given at Savannah” Such permits were given to black Loyalists during the war to avoid possible capture and to protect their freedom from abuse.  

People of African descent were exchangeable during the late-eighteenth century, and free blacks needed as many ways to verify their freedom as possible. These British attempts to prevent the kidnapping and likely enslavement of black Loyalists is a reminder of how easily free blacks could become enslaved in the late-eighteenth century. The British granted these permits in response to the loyalty and support demonstrated by these individuals. But, it will not suffice in the Patriot’s demands to return their slaves.

On December 11, 1779, in Savannah, John Wright lent David George his home and field outside of the city. Wright’s declaration also provides a warning to anyone that disturbs or harms the Georges with the rigor of the law. These warnings by Maitland and Wright are personal defenses of a black Loyalist’s character, which were witnessed repeatedly by British forces and white Loyalists. Black Loyalists were decisive to Loyalist life and activities, and their support was not forgotten by the British.  

Another prominent event in the southern theater with crucial black loyalist participation was the Siege of Charleston, which is well documented in “The Humble Petition of Thomas

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63 Cooper, (Savannah, January 1, 1780), Public Archives of Nova Scotia, RG 1, Volume 170, pages 332-333.
Johnston a Black Man.” Johnston seems to have been born free, but his family worked as servants in John Izard’s home. Izard built Johnston and his family a home seventeen miles from Charleston near his estate at Cedar Grove. Izard rewarded Johnston’s service with ten acres of land, corn, and livestock. Izard and Johnston were bonded together through mutual dependency that makes Johnston’s legal status difficult to determine with certainty.

When Izard joined the British Army in October 1780, Johnston followed but was likely impressed into service, according to his petition. He served as a guide for Lord Cornwallis in the British Legion under Colonel Tarleton. Johnston’s activities were arguably so prolific that Robert Howe, Continental Army General in North Carolina, wanted to hang him. Due to the danger, Cornwallis sent Johnston by ship to New York to rendezvous with the British Legion. Izard in the next year, however, died and left Johnston an inheritance of forty pounds sterling. He was required by the estate’s executor to return to Charleston to receive the inheritance placing his life in jeopardy.

Johnston’s petition was presented through the Commissioners for American Claims in London to seek half of the inheritance. After years of service, Johnston required financial assistance after arriving in England with no resources. His petition describes an individual who believed they were justified in seeking aid after a year of service for the Crown. His time as a guide under Tarleton was such a success that an American general specifically targeted him. As a pathfinder familiar with the terrain, Johnston, and many other black Loyalists, were valuable assets for the British war effort. It is likely that Johnston and his family became destitute like the

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accounts detailed in Norton’s “The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution.”

The status and stability of black Loyalists continually changed throughout the war - volunteering in exchange for freedom and equality as British subjects with the threat of being re-enslaved.

Not all people of African descent within the British Army were volunteer black Loyalists. Similar to the Manson incident in 1778 the discharge of Lymus, a slave owned by Paul Hamilton, demonstrates that blacks of differing statuses all served the British. The discharge was signed in South Carolina by the Captain of the Guides, George Blair. Like Johnston, Lymus served as a guide for the British and was provided discharge papers on May 19, 1780.65 The British kept meticulous records about enslaved and free people to distinguish their service from one another. The discharge is evidence that black loyalists and slaves worked together before they arrived in Nova Scotia. Whitfield’s argument that to understand black Loyalists post-war experience race must transcend legal status in importance can, therefore, extend to this earlier period as well.66

As the British southern campaign expanded black Loyalists increasingly had their freedom declared by British officials. These were opportunities when black Loyalists were able to support the British instead of avoiding the conflict. The willingness to serve is evident by a declaration signed on July 24, 1780, in Savannah by Major General Augustine Prevost. The statement examined the character of Thomas to determine if he, and his family, were Loyalists. Arriving in Prevost’s camp with Colonel Campbell, Thomas continued to find ways to help the


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British in Savannah. The service of Thomas, like other black Loyalists, exemplified traits of a Loyalist and allowed his family protection under British law.

As the British recorded the service of black Loyalists, they also published notices seeking fugitive slaves. Evidence of a British newspaper searching for fugitive slaves during the war appears on September 2, 1780, in the New York City Royal Gazette. Broughton Reynolds was searching for the slave, Fortune, and described the young man. Suffering from smallpox, Fortune had traveled from Georgia ten months earlier with Major Drummond of a New Jersey Loyalist volunteer unit. Reynolds warns anyone against aiding and abetting Fortune with legal punishment, highlighting another attribute of the period. Like the British, it is probable that Patriots were taking or supporting runaway slaves of Loyalists.

Fortune’s opportunities in the war were limited in comparison to black Loyalists in two main ways. Either his owner was a Loyalist, or Fortune did not volunteer his services and was captured by the British. Fortune’s individual situation is an example of the varying statuses black people found themselves in under British lines. Many people of African descent were slaves under the British in the war and worked closely with black Loyalists. The difference between the two, however, is the latter were small in number and empowered while the former were large and oppressed, which, ultimately lead to their diverging post-war fates.

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Countless nameless individuals served with the British as slaves and also dedicated themselves to the Tory cause. Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Brown and John Douglass discuss through a letter dated April 12, 1781, how slave labor was employed. Brown instructed Douglas to use the slaves in preparing Fort Cornwallis’s defenses as fear of imminent attack materialized.\textsuperscript{69} With the fear of a siege on Augusta, Georgia, the British employed everyone capable of helping to defend the city including slaves. Their experiences, likely working closely with black Loyalists, were similar, but they were differentiated by their temporary legal status. The enslaved people’s contributions to the war effort did not culminate in promises of freedom, but their efforts should not go unnoticed in the story of black Loyalists.

In an undated letter around the time of the siege, Brown describes the casualties inflicted on the slaves. After the fort surrendered, one slave, Jesse, was killed and the four others Ness, Hannibal, Venus, Charlotte, and her five-year-old daughter were kidnapped by Patriot forces.\textsuperscript{70} Slaves and black Loyalists likely experienced similar privations of war. The reasons they were serving were understood to be different by the British, but each certainly influenced the other.

Individual accounts of extraordinary service by slaves memorialize their service. Lieutenant Commander James Howe, onboard the Fire Fly, wrote on September 1, 1781, of the death of the riverboat pilot, Trap. The pilot served under Captain William Lyford. Under Howe’s command, Trap worked around the mouth of the Savanah River. Howe wrote profoundly of Trap, swearing, “I do further certify that the said Negro Trap, was born upon the Books of His


Majestys said Gally *Fire Fly* under my command until August following when he died.” Trap’s long service to the British was cherished, and his death ended any possibility of freedom. The British were detailed in their record of free and enslaved black people and did not provide any evidence suggesting they mistook black Loyalists and slaves.

David George and Boston King are not the only black Loyalists to have recorded autobiographical accounts of their experiences. John Marrant documented his fight in the naval Battle of Dogger Bank on August 5, 1781. The engagement occurred during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War and showed that some black Loyalists were called around the world to defend the Empire. Sailing onboard the eighty-four-gun *Princess Amelia*, Marrant described witnessing six mortalities and three wounded on the deck while operating his weapon. He was injured during the battle but remained at his position until falling from his wounds. Marrant recovered in Great Britain and intended to continue his service in the Caribbean. Crippled by his injuries, and unable to serve, he was discharged from the military.

Marrant stayed in England for an extended time once his injuries healed and likely fared well enough to pay his return trip to North America. The success Marrant found in London anecdotally counters experiences of the black poor. His service had been honored and was able to travel freely under the British.  

The British evacuated black Loyalists and slaves to Jamaica during and after the war. Unlike black Loyalists, fugitive slaves did not possess any documentation officiating their

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presence on the island. Found within the Cornwall Chronicle on November 16, 1781, in the enclave of Montego Bay, Richard Sheen was looking for a fugitive slave named Delia, who came from New York onboard the Emperor. Sheen offered a reward of fifty shillings for information that would lead to her return. Like the advertisement discussed earlier from the New York Royal Gazette, Sheen threatens any person who may be harboring or abetting Delia with punishment. The ad shows that there was no safe harbor for fugitive slaves in British territories, and both Loyalist and American slave owners had the right to recover their property.

Such threats had a direct impact on free black Loyalists who required British assistance for security. Before leaving Savannah, David George obtained a declaration by Lieutenant Colonel Alured Clarke to prove his freedom and ensure his safety. George details his industry in selling pork to pay for his families passage to Charleston where a Major was “very kind” to him. George’s presence, like many black Loyalists, was beneficial to the British, and he was assisted in return as the war continued.

Fugitive slave advertisements appeared throughout the Empire reinforcing the fact that black Loyalists may have been free but they lived during a slave economy. In Jamaica, on October 3, 1782, Pat Smith published an ad in the Chronicle trying to relocate a slave’s owner. A child-slave, James, fled New York onboard the man-of-war, Barfleur, to Jamaica, but did not possess any papers verifying his freedom. Thus, he was considered a fugitive slave by Smith.

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who now sought a reward from any person who could prove James as their property. With no evidence suggesting that the boy was a slave, he was assumed to be, an example how delicate freedom was to people of African descent who evacuated with the British. Black Loyalists confronted this reality and their certificates of freedom were invaluable. While luck was a factor in many black Loyalist’s fate, their clear distinction as free people under British law was widely acknowledged by white Loyalists as well as by British military, political, and legal officials.

Black Loyalists traveling to Jamaica did not witness the completely hostile environment that fugitive slaves encountered there. On October 12, 1782, the Commissioner of Claims, Robert Ballinagall, granted Phillis Thomas a permit vouching for her freedom along with that of Michael Thomas. It is possible that Phillis and Michael were married, and the war had torn them apart. A significant population of black Loyalists found within the *Book of Negroes* were women, and Phillis Thomas’s permit supports how her sacrifices were recorded and acknowledged by the British.

Black Loyalist mobility during the war demonstrates a crucial dimension of their liberty. In a memorial seeking payment, March Kingston detailed his service as a guide under Captain Dennis as a guide, who died in Fort Royal, Jamaica. The ability of black Loyalists to move to other British territories and defend them is an unexplored element of the black Loyalist experience. Memorials issued by black loyalists and certificates given by British officials are evidence that they were appreciated at the time.

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British officers did acknowledge the valuable service that slaves provided beyond menial laborers. Familiar with geography and local communities, slaves, like black Loyalists, were excellent spies and pathfinders. On November 27, 1782, British Major Doyle and quartermaster MacKinnon described such activities of a slave, Harry. A man with the surname Gaillaird owned Harry, but he served Lord Rawdon, Lieutenant Colonel Balfour and the Quarter Master Generals Department in South Carolina. While conducting some surreptitious activity, the Unconventional warfare Patriot commander, Brigadier General Francis Marion, captured Harry and immediately beheaded him.

His head was later found spied near the Greenland Swamp in South Carolina. Marion’s forces exposed the head as a threat to all other spies and pathfinders working for the British. Harry’s activities were likely as destructive to rebel forces as other black Loyalists, but he was unable to obtain freedom because of his status. Slaves like him never were offered their freedom, but cannot be forgotten when considering the black Loyalists experiences during the war.\(^78\)

By 1783, the British had agreed to evacuate the colonies and formally end the conflict with the victorious Patriots. Loyalists of all races gathered in port cities controlled by the British, notably New York City, for protection. On November 10, two officers, Alexander Schaw and Major Molleson, of the Royal Artillery Regiment detailed the assistance that black Loyalists received after the fighting ended. The officers’ encouraged black Loyalists to take advantage of the opportunity to have “the benefit of the Bounty” since they only earned six pence in pay for their service. They also provided clothing to these families (31 children, 43 Men, and 29

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Women) who all had proper certificates of freedom and were prepared to sail to Nova Scotia.\textsuperscript{79} The letter shows a commitment and responsibility towards black Loyalists that did not extend to slaves. Black Loyalists had undertaken a unique transformation over the war that allowed enslaved people to become free.

Black loyalists increasingly gathered in New York City as fighting came to a close and diplomatic issues arose. Fears began to emerge among black Loyalists who had run away from their masters. Boston King describes how these people had served with the British for years and were now being hunted down in the city by people claiming to be their former masters. These incidents of captured slaves by their masters in British territory did not stand for long as British officials made a proclamation declaring all slaves free who had taken refuge behind British lines before the peace. The announcement ensured the security and protection of black Loyalists. Shortly afterward, the commanding officer in New York began to issue certificates of freedom allowing recipients to travel to Nova Scotia.\textsuperscript{80}

This officer, Sir Guy Carleton, began to initiate the evacuation of New York City through published orders on April 15, 1783. Carleton’s language is unmistakable “And His Britannic Majesty shall with all convenient speed and without causing any destruction or carrying away any Negroes or other property of the American Inhabitants, withdraw out His services, provisions and fleets from the said United States.” Carleton warned against stealing human property during the evacuation, which would make those people fugitive slaves. The only people

\textsuperscript{80} King, “Boston King’s Memoir”.

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of African descent who were permitted to evacuate were black loyalists or slaves owned by white Loyalists or British officers.\textsuperscript{81}

Carleton was likely beginning to review all people of African descent as they prepared to leave New York City and to document the validity of their evacuation in the \textit{Book of Negroes}. The \textit{Book} recorded eleven factors for black loyalists, including previous and current legal status. Under those categories, people were either free, indentured, or enslaved. The \textit{Book} also described twelve different ways that a person could have gained their freedom. All pertained to either being born free or separated from their former master.\textsuperscript{82} Its prodigious level of detail reveals that black Loyalists were not mere fugitive slaves. Carleton’s approach was a reliable measure way to prove no slaves were claimed during the evacuations.

Carleton and the British had begun a process that would allow black people found in the \textit{Book of Negroes} through official acts to evacuate the city. Days after Carleton’s order, Major Edward Williams provided John Williams with a certificate of freedom to leave New York City on April 19, 1783. The Major declared in that certificate that Williams was free to travel to Nova Scotia or wherever else he chose. The document describes how Williams’ sided with the British after Generals William Howe and Henry Clinton made proclamations.

A letter from Lieutenant of Engineers William Fyers also vouched for the black Loyalist John Williams. Fyers testifies that he witnessed him join the British lines after General Henry Clinton made the proclamation and expertly served. This letter and his signature upon William’s


certificate were pivotal to his ability to join Fyers Nova Scotia, demonstrating the close bond that some British officers and black Loyalists had to one another.83

John Williams is listed in the Book as a forty-seven-year-old from Charleston, South Carolina. He ran away in 1779 and was under the current ownership of Lieutenant Fyers in 1783, though he was free. Fyers’ regiment sailed to Halifax sometime after April 1783.84 The information within the Book and the certificates are corroborative and describe how Williams became a black Loyalist. After the Philipsburg Proclamation in 1779, Williams was able to serve in an engineering unit and earned his freedom. Black Loyalists, like Williams, were protected under British military law, but how this might extend into the post-war period was uncertain.

General George Washington and Carleton met in May 1783 to discuss the evacuation generally and the status of former enslaved people in particular. Found within a draft by Jonathan Trumbull, Jr., Washington demanded that all black people under the British line be turned over to his control. Carleton opposed this demand because of a British duty to the black Loyalists and possibly due to other diplomatic motives. The British had lost the war but still had diplomatic prowess. As Trumbull recorded, Carleton stated, “he principally insisted that he conceived it could not have been the intention of the British Government by the Treaty of Peace to reduce themselves to the necessity of violating their Faith to the Negroes who came into the British

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Lines under the Proclamation of his Predecessors in Command.” Carleton rejected Washington’s claim that the blacks under his oversight were anyone’s property and asserted that they merited British protection.

The Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783 as a diplomatic agreement to end the war, which also addressed the issue of slaves. The Treaty’s seventh article declared that, “All prisoners on both Sides shall be set at Liberty, and his Britannic Majesty shall with all convenient speed, and without causing any Destruction, or carrying away any Negroes or other Property of the American inhabitants.” The language of the treaty is ambiguous because it suggests the possible return of black Loyalists to their former masters. Yet, on the ground in New York City, Carleton had made plain that black Loyalists who had served the British during the war would not be returned to Patriots. British officials ensured that their vulnerable allies were not abandoned in New York and committed considerable resources to support the evacuation of black Loyalists with British forces as they withdrew from the new United States to Nova Scotia.

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CHAPTER THREE

SURVIVING NOVA SCOTIA, 1784-1792

In the evacuation of New York City after the American Revolution, black Loyalists left the United States to establish new lives in the British Empire. Yet challenges arose even before their arrival. Nova Scotia needed land surveys to accommodate the flood of Loyalist refugees. Benjamin Marston was sent to survey the area around Shelburne, Nova Scotia, close to what would become the single most important black loyalist settlement of Birchtown. Fortunately for historians, Marston kept a detailed journal of his time there.

In May 1783 there were few opportunities for employment and growing discontent in Nova Scotia. Loyalists upon arrival were able to obtain housing plots through a lottery system. The bottleneck of surveys for those plots was a direct factor in later instability and conflict. By midsummer, the area was still not prepared for the incoming evacuees. Marston described, “The people here are suffering for wants of a civil establishment, which, to the shame of government, is most scandalously neglected.” 87 The lack of government in Nova Scotia led some individuals to act selfishly to profit on later arrivals.

As fifty-acre plots of land were drawn in a lottery outside of Yarmouth, self-interested land speculators appeared on the scene. 88 By August 28, black Loyalists had arrived in Nova Scotia, and some began acquiring land. Marston met with the black Loyalist Colonel Stephen Blucke, who was examining acreage around Birchtown for the New Jersey Black Brigade. The land given to black Loyalists and white Loyalists, by Marston’s description, were different. The former acquired smaller and more poorly situated plots.

88 Marston, “Marston’s Journal,” July 12, 1783.
The difficulties for black Loyalists increased as more arrived. Samuel Burke had a property dispute with the local government on September 1, 1783. Burke, “was a Native of Charlestown & was freeborn,” who was with Governor Montfort Brown of the Bahamas at the start of the war. Serving under Brown, Burke was captured and imprisoned by Commodore Esek Hopkins, the Commander of the Continental Navy. Hopkins freed Burke who then was able to relocate to New York City. There he spent considerable time and married, acquiring a home and garden. After a year, he was stripped of his home by the Deputy Barrack Master, Sergeant Orchard, and went uncompensated for his property.

Burke was unable to produce a certificate of his freedom until other vouchers appeared from other British officials. In a letter between a Colonel Fanning and a Mr. Allen, the two verified Burke’s ‘Zeal & Loyalty.” Burke later obtained, “very strong certificates received from his Master, [Governor] Brown.” In providing these documents, Burke was compensated £20 for the seized property. The actions of white British and Loyalists in assisting and supporting black Loyalists are individual examples of how some were helped to maintain their freedom.89

The free black Loyalists in Nova Scotia, evidenced through audits in 1784, were also distinguished from unfree people, whether enslaved or indentured servants.90 In Annapolis, Nova Scotia, on June 30, 1784, a muster roll documented 211 black loyalists consisted of 51 children, 93 men, and 67 women in the county consisting of 36 families. Six of these families were headed


by women, which demonstrates black Loyalist women had an active role in shaping Nova Scotia after arriving.

The *Book of Negroes* follows some of these women throughout the war. One of them, Phillis, was likely owned by Willis Wilson in Portsmouth, Virginia, and ran away in 1778. Phillis was listed under the ownership of the Black Pioneers, when she arrived in Annapolis Royal onboard John Blain’s *L’Aigle*. Fanny Brown, another homeowner like Phillis, came to Annapolis onboard the same ship, after running away in 1776 from Robert Gilmore in Virginia. Phillis, though, may have had a spouse in the Black Pioneers who died during the war, but was allowed to continue traveling with the unit.

Daphne Shills, likely Daphne Shields, was another homeowner found in the *Book of Negroes*. Running away from David Shields in Nansemond, Virginia, in 1778, Daphne was 25 years old when she was evacuated onboard Lieutenant Trounce’s *Clinton* to Annapolis. Shield’s journey, like Phillis’s and Brown’s, demonstrates how black Loyalists had varied backgrounds before serving the British. While black Loyalists were legally accepted in Nova Scotia, their social status was always in question.

The lack of employment and the split-labor market formed by the black Loyalists enraged white Loyalists laborers and others into violent action. Benjamin Marston’s account of the Shelburne Riot on July 26, 1784, describes, “The disbanded soldiers have risen against the Free negroes to drive them out of Town, because they labour cheaper than they - the soldiers.” With violence erupting less than a year after the refugees arrived there are clear indications of sharp

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91 Guy Carleton, *Book of Negroes*, British Headquarters Papers (Carleton Papers or American Manuscripts), MG23, B1, M-369, 275; 1912, 125.
social divisions in Nova Scotia. The split-labor market in Nova Scotia after the Loyalist migration is an unexplored consequence of the black loyalist arrival.92

The riot continued for a second day with, what Marston describes, as soldiers ordering black Loyalists to leave the town. These threats led to twenty houses being razed. Marston was seen as a culprit who supported the black Loyalists and was a target for rioters. The surveyor’s life was in imminent danger, which resulted in his fleeing Shelburne for Halifax. The people attacking the black Loyalists were white veteran Loyalists who also suffered in post-war Nova Scotia. The British government’s neglect was a direct catalyst for the riot.

It was not safe for Marston to return to Shelburne for weeks after the riot, and he described the targeting and destruction of black Loyalist homes. Loyalists of all races shared common plights but were divided over race partly due to economic factors. The targeting of Marston was a direct consequence of resentment towards the person who surveyed Birchtown as a black community.93 The transition of the black Loyalists to Nova Scotia did not change the air vulnerable status even as free British subjects.

In the Cornwall Chronicle on July 28, 1785, an advertisement sought the fugitive slave, Sambo. He was the property of “the [Honorable] Charles Pinckney, of Charleston, [South] Carolina,” and had fled to Jamaica in 1784. Pinckney, serving in the Continental Congress, sent the attorney Thomas Millward to Spanish town and Charles Bernard, Jr. to St. James in an attempt to locate Sambo, an elite house slave and chef.

Pinckney’s agents offered a “suitable reward” for Sambo’s location and safe return. The presence of Pinckney’s agents is evidence that the Treaty of Paris was being respected by the

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92 “Marston’s Journal,” July 26 to August 4, 1784.
93 “Marston’s Journal,” August 4, 1784.
British to some extent. By allowing Americans to track down fugitive slaves, the British did not provide runaway slaves with shelter in a slave society. The unaccountability of blacks’ freedom and legitimacy by whites as verification placed all who left with the British under constant risk. People of African descent occupied varied legal categories during the late-eighteenth century with a notable spike in black freedom via Loyalism. However, the ability for the free to become unfree cannot be ignored in assessing that increase in free blacks.

Boston King’s memoir provides rich insights into the lives of black Loyalists after the war. In 1788 a “dreadful famine” spread through hamlets like Birchtown, Chebucto, Annapolis, and Digby. With little food, many black Loyalists sold the few valuables they had for items like flour. Even in selling all of their belongings, many perished due to hunger. The famine was so impactful that people ate cats and dogs, which led King to leave Birchtown to find employment. The famine is another event in the black Loyalist experience that has not been thoroughly examined and seems important in understanding their motives to leave in the 1792 exodus to Sierra Leone.

King was industrious and built chests for corn in a town he referred to as Shlain. A shocking claim by King also reveals the sinister world black loyalists never escaped, forced servitude. King recorded how, “my black brethren at the time, who were obliged to sell themselves to the merchants, some for two or three years; and others for five or six years.” All Loyalists were suffering during this time and the possibility of indenturing oneself was not

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overlooked to survive. The success of King during this time was likely from skills he had acquired previously, but other black Loyalists under these moments may have lost their freedom.

Tax records from 1787 in Shelburne County, Nova Scotia demonstrate a class of black Loyalists paying a variety of taxes. Out of thirty black Loyalists from Roseway, Cape Negro, and Cape Negro Island, all paid their county and poor tax, but none paid the poll tax. Ten of these individuals, Absalom Dickson, Edward Elliot, Hannah Earl, London Ventus, Hester Roberts, James Ray, John Norman, Rich Laughton, Scipio Lucas, and Robert Bridges, owned property in two of the three regions recorded. Clearly, some black Loyalists had acquired, at least, multiple meager lots of land.

Many of these black Loyalist leaders were skilled laborers, occupying positions such as shoemakers, blacksmiths, chimney sweeps, bakers, laborers, and fiddlers. David George was one of the black Loyalists who owned property in Cape Negro Island, and was a minister. Still, he did not pay the poll tax, presumably because British officials opposed the idea that free black should have voting rights. With no evidence suggesting that any black Loyalists paid the poll tax, it is likely that blacks were disenfranchised in Nova Scotia. This, combined with direct violence, such as in the Shelburne riots, poverty, and famine, as well as widespread discrimination must have influenced many to sail to Sierra Leone. It may also represent how a skewed legal system only further disabled black freedom and expression.

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William Dyott’s diary entry from October 1788 offers a clear view of the suffering of black Loyalists. He described black Loyalists as “poor devils” attempting to live in Nova Scotia.

The description is vivid:

Their huts miserable to guard against the inclemency of a Nova Scotia winter, and their existence almost depending on what they could lay up in summer. I think I never saw wretchedness and poverty so strongly perceptible in the garb and the countenance of the human species as in these miserable outcasts. I cannot say I was sorry to quit so melancholy a dwelling.98

There is a level of shock in Dyott’s language, and a certainty that black Loyalists were inevitably going to be destitute.

There is even evidence suggesting that some black Loyalists were able to travel into the United States after the war freely. A letter was sent from Margaret Blucke in New York City to John Marrant on October 12, 1789. She requested that he “let me know what news about Mr. [Stephen] Blucke and the place, as I cannot find out what he is doing. I would take it as a favour if you would enquire after Peter Gray and wife, and please to take notice of him, and let him know his mother is well, (she is my sister).” Not only was Margaret Blucke in New York City after the war, but it is clear there was a network of communication for black Loyalists between the city and Nova Scotia.99

Blucke had evacuated New York City after the war and an entry for her appears in the Book of Negroes. Sailing onboard the H.M.S. L’Abondance on July 21, 1783, Blucke left the city. Her return there six years later demonstrates that free people of African descent were able to

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travel between the two former warring states. While the trip certainly had particular risks for Blucke, one was not the fear of accusations she was a fugitive slave.

Records of the final months of the black Loyalists in Nova Scotia, before the Sierra Leone trip fragmented the group, appear within white abolitionist John Clarkson’s journal, which provides valuable insights into understanding the fates of many black Loyalists. Their labor being relatively cheap was highly valued by employers in the region, which led to accelerated hostilities directed towards Clarkson and his assistants, whose actions would help to remove significant source of cheap labor in the colony. Though many people of authority in Nova Scotia used coercion, black Loyalists were desperate for a new opportunity. The years of struggle they had endured led many to seek out more information about the possibility of resettlement in Africa.

Clarkson learned of the difficulties black Loyalists experienced through a memorial presented by black loyalist Thomas Peters on behalf of many Nova Scotia and New Brunswick families in London. Peters described how many had never received their land and those that did had a variety of other problems as a result. A significant area of concern was the distance between residential lots in town and their farming plots over ten miles away. The result was parents who worked in the fields for days while their children raised one another at home alone. Their diet consisted of salted fish, potatoes, and buttermilk, paralleling the struggle for food described by Boston King. Another complaint was that black loyalists had their land seized unjustifiably by the government and without compensation. The black Loyalists felt abandoned
in British North America and had to survive in a hostile environment that threatened their well-being.  

The story of Lydia Jackson in Clarkson’s journal is an example of the fragility of freedom for black loyalists in Nova Scotia. Jackson’s husband abandoned her after their arrival, and she sought work from Henry Hedley of Manchester as a servant. Hedley coerced and deceived Jackson into signing a thirty-seven-year term of indentured service before he sold her to a Dr. Bulman of Lunenburg. There, Jackson was physically and sexually assaulted by Bulman and his servants, leading to her pregnancy.

The abuse continued, and Jackson reported the crimes to attorneys in town, who dismissed her claims. With no legal options and the threat of being sold to the West Indies, Jackson fled Lunenburg for Halifax, where she met Clarkson and shared her harrowing story. Jackson’s experience was not uncommon in Nova Scotia as Clarkson recorded six similar cases in the journal.  

The status of black Loyalists was uncertain and changed over time. To view them as homogenous and unchanging undermines their experiences fighting to maintain freedom after the war.

With hundreds of black Loyalists preparing to leave with Clarkson, those who wished to remain also sought assistance. The black Loyalists had received little except land and began to petition for livestock. In one petition, headed by Stephen Blucke, twenty-two men requested a cow and two sheep per person akin to similar aid for those who prepared to sail to Sierra Leone.

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On November 1, 1791, just months before Clarkson and the black Loyalist fleet sailed for Sierra Leone, the petition was signed\textsuperscript{102}

The most important turning point in the post-war experience of black Loyalists in Nova Scotia was the opportunity to move once again to help settle the free colony of Sierra Leone in the early 1790s. John Clarkson, the lead white recruiter for the exodus from Nova Scotia and then the governor of the colony in the West Africa, kept detailed journals that help us to understand the recruitment and foundation of the colony. The migration of black Nova Scotians to Sierra Leone in 1792 returned to the site of the failed settlement from London five years earlier, which, nonetheless, provided a foundation for later success.

The initial colony’s potential had been overinflated by people like Henry Smeathman and its early leader James Fraser, who soon was forced to return to England after succumbing to disease. Nevertheless, before leaving, he sent letters on July 24 and September 15, 1787, stating that permanent settlement was unlikely due to the rainy season, lack of provisions, and the climate. These conditions proved fatal to fifty people, white and black, in addition to the 140 who died during the trip. Half of the three hundred and thirty survivors were ill. The situation in Sierra Leone was so dire that some considered relocating to the Caribbean. Seeds were unavailable, and the improperly used land led to food shortages. Therefore, the inhabitants only had the energy to build a few well-built homes, but no church. The early settlement of poor blacks, convicts, and black Loyalists from London was more poorly organized and faced even more daunting conditions than the black Loyalists who arrived from Nova Scotia.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{103}Clarkson, \textit{Mission to America}, 52-53.
Some twelve hundred black Loyalists left Nova Scotia in January 1792 to found Sierra Leone. The black Loyalists are a fundamental part of the story in late-eighteenth century Nova Scotia who help to illuminate how a group of former black slaves fought many obstacles to earn and maintain their freedom with the British.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

The black Loyalists were a distinct group during the late-eighteenth century who were recognized by their contemporaries. Their experiences varied dramatically and portrays how black people over time had their statuses changed in the late-eighteenth century. The *Book of Negroes* demonstrates how a sizeable proportion of the people recorded had acquired their freedom over the duration of the war. Still, a noticeable proportion of blacks were unfree when they evacuated New York City in 1783. Through the primary source material examined through the thesis, it is clear that free and enslaved black people could have shared similar experiences serving under the British. These include appearing together in the *Book of Negroes*, their evacuation to Nova Scotia, and ability to continue efforts to acquire freedom and make it meaningful. On an individual basis, however, black people confronted different circumstances during and after the war and only a small group secured freedom with the support of British and Loyalist personnel and military declarations.

Most people of African descent in the colonies remained enslaved and never had the opportunity to become free. To understand the black Loyalists, the slaves who served with them must also be understood. While it is difficult to surmise the personal connections slaves and free black people had with one another, it is clear that the former attempted to earn their freedom. But, unlike the few fortunate black Loyalists, many black slaves did not have any British officer or Loyalist to vouch for them. Without some form of authentication, they remained property. The slave market was a constant threat to black people, and the story of the black Loyalist is a small triumph in sharp contrast to an otherwise grim outcome for so many others. There are shining examples of black Loyalist accomplishments throughout the war, but there are far more
examples of people who only briefly seized opportunities to advance their prospects but fell short of freedom. These struggles later proved valuable. An affirmative commitment to the British in action and in words went a substantial step beyond merely seeking shelter and is an essential factor in categorizing black Loyalists. Many enslaved people pursued similar actions and did not acquire freedom.

After the war both black Loyalists and slaves evacuated with the British. While New York City’s evacuation with Guy Carleton was highly detailed and precise due to the constrictions by the Continental Army, there were also important evacuations from places like Savannah and Charleston. Disorganization in the evacuation process could provide opportunities for enslaved people to escape, evade capture, and possibly become free. But, chaos might also enhance the seizure slaves owned by white Patriots and to transport and sell them into other British slave markets. While some masters were able to trace their slaves across the British West Indies, many others lost by their owners. Slaves were exceptionally expensive and only increased in price as the legal trans-Atlantic slave trade ended in the early nineteenth century. That is why it is so extraordinary that the small group of black Loyalists achieved British supported freedom after the war. But, they too, were imperiled of being re-enslaved in Nova Scotia and elsewhere.

All people of African descent faced the oppression associated with slavery in the late-eighteenth century. Under those conditions, they are a historically significant group who fought for their freedom with the backdrop of the American Revolution. Being a small group that contradicts a tragic story, the emphasis on their freedom has downplayed the impact that slavery had in shaping the black Loyalists’ world.

Historian Barry Cahill used only one chief factor of the black Loyalists as (mostly) former slaves to question whether the category of black Loyalist was a meaningful one. There is
ample primary source evidence to document individual cases who were clearly black Loyalists, but Cahill was not entirely wrong in questioning Walker’s approach. While black Loyalists were officially recognized as free people by the British, they were not deemed so by the Patriots or the peace treaty signed in 1783. George Washington protested the decision to allow the black Loyalists to evacuate with the British and demanded the return of all black people behind British lines. While Guy Carleton ignored Washington’s demands, the treaty highlights significant ambiguity about how black Loyalists were perceived. Also, the existence of slaves in the Book of Negroes, and in Nova Scotia before and during the Loyalist era, suggests that slavery and enslaved people impacted black Loyalists in important ways.

Attention to the persistence of slavery and the fluid status for black people during the late-eighteenth century is an important corrective advanced by Cahill’s work. He concedes that there were some black people who personify Loyalist behavior. However, he argues that there were many others who do not, and those people must be considered in evaluating the black Loyalist experience. Attention to how black racial identity could transcend legal status may help historians to better understand black Loyalists, and why so many in Nova Scotia felt motivated to leave their homes to search for freedom in Sierra Leone.

Historian James St. G. Walker’s defense of the black Loyalist concept responded effectively to Cahill’s rejection of the category. Walker reiterated that black Loyalist were seen as Loyalists by their contemporaries and were not just fugitive slaves. While Walker may have overemphasized the early moments of freedom, his study spanned almost a century to understand the lasting impact of black Loyalists. Walker’s approach remains a valuable one for other historians to further examine black Loyalist experiences. It provides a successful approach to tracking a particular group of people throughout the Atlantic world. While focusing on this
particular group was beneficial to understanding the black Loyalists, less attention was paid to understanding how racism and slavery may have prevented or crippled blacks’ opportunities to become free.

Later approaches have built on Walker’s model and made adaptations to it that have ventured into new regions and topics. Maya Jasanoff’s *Liberty’s Exiles* and Cassandra Pybus’ *Epic Journeys of Freedom* have been the most rewarding recent book length treatments to more fully assess black Loyalists in other regions. Returning to Nova Scotia, Harvey Amani Whitfield’s *North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes* focuses on how slavery developed in the region, especially those slaves owned by white Loyalists. These approaches support Walker, but also compliment Cahill’s emphasis to separate the factors of Loyalism and race for black Loyalists.

Considerable opportunities remain for future research to examine multiple factors of the black Loyalists. Black people in the Maritimes follows a long history that replicates many experiences of the Atlantic world in its own way. The black Loyalists are just a small group in this history that may provide examples of how black people of different statuses were able to influence the world. The generational approach that Walker followed to Sierra Leone may prove valuable to later historians in understanding how Nova Scotia’s black Loyalists related to the captured black slaves from the War of 1812 and beyond.

The black Loyalists highlight both exceptional experiences and broadly shared commonalities among black communities throughout the Atlantic world in the late-eighteenth century. There were levels of ambiguity around race and freedom that was individualistic and difficult to collectivize. The black Loyalists are a specific group, but understanding them must include attention to how slavery shaped their world. By linking the stories of free and enslaved
black people, a richer understanding of black Loyalists can be achieved that better appreciates the complexity of status for black Loyalists in an age of war, revolution, and mobility.
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