

The United Empire Loyalists – An Overview

I. The American Revolution (1775-1783)

When the Seven Years' War (also known as the "French and Indian War" – 1756-1763) ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Britain began to impose taxes on its colonies in America to help pay for the War and for the ongoing costs of defence. With Canada (the former New France) now in British hands, many colonists saw no reason to pay these taxes, particularly because they had no elected representatives in the British Parliament in London. "No taxation without representation" became a popular slogan, especially in the Thirteen Colonies along the Atlantic seaboard south of Canada.

There were other grievances as well. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 prohibited the colonists from settling west of the Appalachian Mountains, reserving those lands for the First Nations. The Navigation Acts restricted colonial maritime commerce. The Quebec Act of 1774, strongly supported by the Governor of Quebec, Sir Guy Carleton, also outraged many in the Thirteen Colonies. It extended the boundaries of Quebec to the Ohio River, granted toleration of the Roman Catholic religion and preserved the French civil law and seigneurial system of land tenure in the province to the north. In addition, some colonists began to think of themselves as "American" rather than "English", and to dream of independence from Britain.

Protests and boycotts of British goods in the Thirteen Colonies eventually led to civil disturbances (such as the "Boston Tea Party") and then escalated into armed rebellion in 1775, touching off the American Revolutionary War (also known as the "American War of Independence"). The American Declaration of Independence followed in 1776. The conflict was really the first American civil war, pitting the "Patriots" (the rebels) and their pro-independence forces against the forces of the British Crown and many regiments of "Loyalists", colonists who wished to remain loyal to the British Crown within an undivided British Empire. (Hence the term "United Empire Loyalists".)

The "Continental Army" fighting for the revolutionaries captured Montreal in the fall of 1775, but failed in its attack on Quebec City on December 31 of that year, and had to withdraw from Montreal in June 1776. The Revolution eventually became an international war, with France, Spain and the Netherlands supporting the Patriots against Britain (1778 and 1779), leading to the eventual victory of the revolutionaries at the Battle of Yorktown, Virginia (1781). The Treaty of Paris of 1783 recognized the independence of the "United States of America", a new Republic consisting of the former Thirteen Colonies, which became the first thirteen states of the U.S.A.

II. The Loyalists and the American Revolution

The United Empire Loyalists (estimated by historians at about ten to fifteen percent of the population of the Thirteen Colonies, or roughly 250,000 people) came from every class and walk of life. Some were colonial officials or wealthy landowners or prosperous merchants or professionals for whom the British connection was of great personal importance. But the majority were ordinary Americans – farmers, craftsmen, fishers, tradesmen, and volunteer soldiers. They were of many ethnic groups, including German, Dutch, English, Irish and Scots, and of different religious denominations, including Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Roman Catholics and Jews. There were also black slaves who were freed if they took up arms on the side of the Crown, and various Amerindian tribes, particularly the Mohawks, who remained loyal allies of the British/Loyalist forces throughout the War.

The Loyalists opposed the Revolution for a number of reasons. Some believed that the British government had the right to ask the colonies to pay half the cost of their own defence even without having direct representation in the British Parliament. Other Loyalists opposed parliamentary taxation, but did not consider violent opposition justified. Even if they had some sympathy with the revolutionaries, they often became Loyalists out of outrage at the excesses of the "rebels" and the persecutions they suffered for refusing to actively support the rebellion. At the hands of the "Patriot" (i.e. revolutionary) authorities, Loyalists (contemptuously called "Tories" by their enemies), on refusing to swear allegiance to the revolutionary government, faced confiscation of their property, imprisonment, torture and/or execution. Where the Patriots were in power, Loyalists were denied the right to vote, sell land, sue their debtors or work in certain professions or trades. They were also subjected to the tyranny of mob rule. Typical of their attitude was that of Rev. Mather Byles, who mused "Which is better – to be ruled by one tyrant three thousand miles away or by three thousand tyrants one mile away?" During the War, many Loyalists left their homes, often coming north to Canada to join one of 50 or so colonial regiments fighting for the Crown (regiments such as the King's Royal Regiment of New York). They had to endure tremendous hardships in making their escape and in the ensuing struggles. Their wives were often left to manage their farms or businesses and care for their children, with little sympathy from their neighbours, who regarded them as traitors and as real or potential spies for the British. They frequently chose to make their way to Canada, in great distress, to rejoin their husbands. Many Loyalists flocked to New York City, a place of refuge which remained in British hands until the end of hostilities.

III. Loyalist Settlement in Canada

When the War ended in 1783, approximately 70,000 to 80,000 Loyalists left the Thirteen Colonies. Some returned to Britain or settled in the Bahamas. But roughly 50,000 went to the remaining British North American provinces (particularly Quebec, which until 1792 included much of what is now southern Ontario, as well as to Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, the latter province being established in 1784 as a result of political pressure by the Loyalists). Some went overland through the forests, particularly those who had lived in the Mohawk Valley of northern New York. Many others (especially those in New York City) came by ship to places like the St. John River, Halifax and Port Roseway (now Shelburne, Nova Scotia), spending the first period of resettlement in tents in one or other of the refugee camps hastily established by the colonial authorities. Similar refugee camps were located in Quebec, notably in Sorel at the confluence of the Richelieu and St. Lawrence Rivers and Machiche (now Yamachiche) on the shores of Lac Saint-Pierre. Living on rations provided by the military, and facing shortages, illness and the extremes of weather, life in the camps was anything but pleasant for the Loyalists and their families. But they were free from persecution and had the hope of making a new start in a new land under the protection of the British law and constitution which they cherished and desired to preserve.

Eventually, the Loyalists were resettled on lands for which they petitioned the colonial authorities. The petitions are a prime source of information about their individual stories. Most of those who had come to Quebec were granted lands in what became Upper Canada (now Ontario) after the adoption of the Constitutional Act of 1791, especially along the upper St. Lawrence River, the Bay of Quinte, Lake Erie, the Niagara area and on various rivers. In New Brunswick, the principal Loyalist communities were founded along the St. John River. The Mohawk Loyalists were resettled along the Grand River and on the Bay of Quinte in present-day Ontario. A community of black Loyalists settled in Birchtown near Shelburne in Nova Scotia.

Governor Haldimand believed that present-day Quebec was the rightful patrimony of French Canadians, which should be reserved for their future settlement. He wanted to maintain the area immediately north of the U.S. border uninhabited, as a kind of “buffer zone” between the two countries, and he feared that Loyalists settling there would cause renewed hostilities with the Americans and engage in smuggling. Haldimand intended to forcibly remove Loyalists resident in the Missisquoi Bay area, but, after his return to England in 1784, they were permitted to stay by Lt. Col. Henry Hamilton, who was more attentive to their petitions and more open to Loyalist settlement along the border. Beginning in 1792, Loyalists were permitted to petition for and take up land grants in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, where they formed the first permanent white population, although they were soon joined and outnumbered by Americans moving north in quest of cheap land, and later by French Canadians. Some Loyalists remained around Sorel, while another group left Quebec City in 1784 to settle on the south coast of the Gaspé Peninsula.

IV. The Loyalist tradition

The Loyalists and their descendants made notable contributions to Canada in every walk of life. They were noted for their belief in parliamentary government, the rule of law, gradual social change (evolution rather than revolution) and attachment to British institutions. They and their sons played an active role in the defence of Canada during the War of 1812. In Quebec, they advocated the establishment of an elected legislature and their descendants promoted the abolition of seigneurial tenure in the mid-nineteenth century. With their diversity of racial and ethnic backgrounds and religious traditions, they also foreshadowed the emergence of the multicultural Canada of today, a place of welcome for victims of political persecution.

The United Empire Loyalists' Association of Canada, founded in 1914, preserves and celebrates the history and heritage of the Loyalists, operating through some 29 branches across Canada, including three in the Province of Quebec. Individuals who can prove their descent from a Loyalist in either the male or female line can apply for the right to use the letters "U.E." after their names, alluding to the principle of Unity of the Empire for which the Loyalists stood. It is said to be the only hereditary title in Canada.