

A SHORT HISTORY
OF THE UNITED EMPIRE LOYALISTS
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Over two hundred years ago the American Revolution shattered the British Empire in North America. The conflict was rooted in British attempts to assert economic control in her American colonies after her costly victory over the French during the Seven Years War. When protest and riots met the British attempts to impose taxes on the colonists, the British responded with political and military force. Out of the struggle between the Thirteen Colonies and their mother country emerged two nations: the United States and what would later become Canada.

Not all the inhabitants of the Thirteen Colonies opposed Britain. The United Empire Loyalists were those colonists who remained faithful to the Crown and wished to continue living in the New World. Therefore, they left their homes to settle eventually in what remained of British North America.

WHO WERE THE LOYALISTS?

The Loyalists came from every class and walk of life. Some depended on the Crown for their livelihood and status and had considerable wealth and property. Many were farmers and craftsmen. There were clerks and clergymen, lawyers and labourers, soldiers and slaves, Native Americans, college graduates, and people who could not write their own names. Recent immigrants from Europe also tended to support the Crown.

They had little in common but their opposition to the revolution. Their reasons for becoming Loyalists were as varied as their backgrounds. Some had strong ties with Britain: others had simply supported what turned out to be the losing side. Local incidents, fear of change, self-interest, political principles, emotional bonds - one or any combination of these influenced their decision to remain loyal to the Crown. The common thread that linked these diverse groups was a distrust of too much democracy which they believed resulted in mob rule and an accompanying breakdown of law and order. The Reverend Mather Byles mused, "Which is better - to be ruled by one tyrant three thousand miles away or by three thousand tyrants one mile away?" Loyalists believed that the British connection guaranteed them a more secure and prosperous life than republicanism would.

Historians estimate that ten to fifteen per cent of the population of the Thirteen Colonies - some 250,000 people - opposed the revolution; some passively, others by speaking out, spying, or fighting against the rebels.

Because of their political convictions, Loyalists who remained in the Thirteen Colonies during the revolution were branded as traitors and hounded by their Patriot (rebel) neighbours. Such an incident occurred in 1775:

Patriot authorities punished Loyalists who spoke their views too loudly by

stripping them of their property and goods and banishing them on pain of death should they ever return. They coerced others into silence with threats. Throughout the Thirteen Colonies that were under Patriot control, Loyalists could not vote, sell land, sue debtors, or work as lawyers, doctors, or schoolteachers. To be fair, in Loyalist-controlled areas, supporters of the Revolution met with similar treatment at the hands of British authorities. Approximately 70,000 Loyalists fled the Thirteen Colonies. Of these, roughly 50,000 went to the British North American Colonies of Quebec and Nova Scotia.

For some, exile began as early as 1775 when "committees of safety" throughout the Thirteen Colonies began to harass British sympathizers. Other responded by forming Loyalist regiments: The King's Royal Regiment of New York, Skinner's New Jersey Volunteers, The Pennsylvania and Maryland Loyalists, Butler's Rangers, Rogers' Rangers and Jessup's Corps were the best known of some 50 Loyalist regiments that campaigned actively during the war. The signing of the Treaty of Paris (1783), which recognized the independence of the United States, was the final blow for the Loyalists. Faced with further mistreatment and the hostility of their countrymen, and wishing to live as British subjects, Loyalists who had remained in the Thirteen Colonies during the war now were faced with exile. Those who wished to in North America had two choices; Nova Scotia (Maritimes) or Quebec (Ontario-Quebec).

EXODUS TO AN UNKNOWN LAND

Fleeing in panic and confusion, forced to leave behind most of their possessions and burdened with the prospect of building a new life in a new land, the Loyalists faced unpromising beginnings. The lands they were to settle were isolated, forbidding and wild.

"It is, I think, the roughest land I ever saw... But this is to be the city, they say... We are all ordered to land tomorrow and not a shelter to go under", Sarah Frost, a Loyalist from New York wrote in her diary as she contemplated the land that she and her husband were about to settle.

In addition to the anguish of defeat and the trauma of exile, Loyalists had to face isolation and feelings of helplessness. The grandmother of Sir Leonard Tilley, one of the fathers of Confederation, expressed what many Loyalists felt when she wrote:

I climbed to the top of Chipman's Hill (Saint John) and watched the sails in the distance, and such a feeling of loneliness came over me that though I had not shed a tear through all the war, I sat down on the damp moss with my baby on my lap and cried bitterly.

Shortages, harsh living conditions, and worry plagued the Loyalists in the hastily erected refugee camps. Many had to live in tents during the first winter. The wife of a soldier on the Saint John River wrote:

We pitched our tents in the shelter of the woods and tried to

cover them with spruce boughs. We used stones for fireplaces. Our tents had no floors but the ground... how we lived through that winter, I barely know...

Many didn't live through the first winter; many left with the relief fleets when they set sail the next spring. Those who did survive had to deal with delays in completing land surveys and shortages of tools and provision. But the Loyalists' determination and resourcefulness assured the ultimate success of many of the new settlements.

QUEBEC

Although there was some Loyalist migration into what is today the Province of Quebec, by far the greatest numbers came to present-day Ontario.

The majority of the settlers had been frontier farmers before the revolution and they were used to wilderness conditions, but they had lost almost everything they owned when they fled from their homes. The government gave them a limited amount of support with the most extensive reward being in the form of free land. They granted land to the heads of households according to their military rank and extended grants to wives and children born and unborn.

The Loyalists brought with them the tradition of freehold land tenure, British Laws and representative government. They did not want to give up these rights by living under the Quebec Act which guaranteed the seigneurial system of landholding and denied an elected assembly to the people of that colony. Shortly after their arrival,

Loyalist representatives petitioned the government to alter the system of holding land in Quebec to freehold tenure similar to that of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

In 1791, the British Parliament passed the Canada Act, usually known as the Constitutional Act, which provided for the division of Quebec into Upper and Lower Canada. Both colonies were granted an elected assembly and the freehold system of land tenure went into effect in Upper Canada (later Ontario). These laws clearly show the influence of the Loyalists.

THE LOYALIST HERITAGE

Of less practical value than land and supplies, but of more lasting significance to the Loyalists and their descendants, was the government's recognition of the stand that they had taken. Realizing the importance of some type of consideration, on November 9, 1789, Lord Dorchester, the governor of Quebec, declared "that it was his Wish to put the mark of Honour upon the Families who had adhered to the Unity of the Empire...". As a result of Dorchester's statement, the printed militia rolls carried the notation:

Separation in the year 1783, and all their Children and their Descendants by either sex, are to be distinguished by the following Capitals, affixed to their names: U.E. Alluding to their great principle The Unity of the Empire.

The initials "U.E." are rarely seen today, but the influence of the Loyalists on the evolution of Canada remains. Their ties with Britain and their antipathy to the United States provided the strength needed to keep Canada independent and distinct in North America.