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Julia Bibko

The College at Brockport

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THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND THE BLACK LOYALIST EXODUS

Julia Bibko, The College at Brockport

Abstract

This paper provides an account of the experiences of Black Loyalists in Nova Scotia, London, and Sierra Leone after the American Revolution. Tens of thousands of North American slaves fled to the ranks of the British army when they were promised freedom in return for service. When the British lost the war, they began the evacuation of both White and Black Loyalists out of the colonies. Black Loyalists were sent primarily to Nova Scotia and England and, to a lesser extent, the Bahamas and West Indies. Yet the Black Loyalists were not content with freedom alone; they actively fought for equality and against discrimination in their new countries. Black Loyalists thus took charge of their own emancipation by fighting for the British and continuing to fight for equality even after their exodus from the colonies. The results of the Black Loyalist exodus were mixed, as shown by letters from the Sierra Leone colonists themselves. Yet the experience of the Black Loyalists is significant because this massive migration of free Blacks had international implications, the founding of the Sierra Leone colony being one example. This narrative also brings into question the concept of the Revolution as a national struggle for independence, in addition to revealing the complexity of Loyalist ideology. [Keywords: American Revolution, Britain, race relations, slavery, emancipation, Loyalists]

Ever since the American Revolution, historians have written and rewritten the Loyalist narrative countless times. Yet within this narrative, the Loyalists are often portrayed as a small, homogenous group. In reality, the Loyalists were highly diverse; there were a significant number of Black Loyalists during the Revolution, most often escaped slaves who fought for the British. They won their freedom after the end of the war, even though they were on the losing side. The 1783 poem, "The Tory's Soliloquy," captures the dilemma that faced all Loyalists after the war's end: "To go - or not to go - is that the Question?"¹ Massive numbers of escaped slaves took this opportunity to leave America as Loyalist refugees for Canada, England, and other various destinations. In this way, the Black Loyalists were able to facilitate their emancipation by fighting for the British and then continued their pursuit of equality after they settled in their new countries. By synthesizing previous research on the black Loyalists, this paper intends to reveal a diverse, but often neglected perspective on the American Revolution. This work challenges the traditional definitions of loyalism, in addition to complicating the concept of the Revolution as a struggle for national liberation.

I. DEFINING LOYALISM

Who were the Loyalists? The historical stereotype is that they were an elite group of wealthy, educated Anglicans that had close ties to Britain. Maya Jasanoff argues that in reality, Loyalists came from all different regions, social classes, races and ethnicities, making them as diverse as their patriot counterparts. As a group, their size is often underestimated. Estimates today claim that Loyalists made up a fifth to a third of the population of the American colonies. These people did not have one unified ideology, but in fact held a wide range of beliefs. Some were loyalists for intellectual reasons, others for economic reasons, and still others preferred maintaining the status quo to all-out revolution.²

Yet defining and analyzing loyalism in the American colonies becomes much more complicated when race is considered. Besides the White Loyalists, there were Indian tribes that decided to support the British. Most relevant to this paper, however, is that there were a large number of Black Loyalists. The British promised freedom to slaves who signed up to fight in their army and, according to Jasanoff, twenty thousand Black slaves took this opportunity.³ Because of these promises, Black Loyalist ideology was different from White Loyalist ideology. Both free and enslaved Blacks seem to have aligned with the Loyalist cause because they firmly believed that a British victory would benefit their race. By becoming Loyalists, slaves believed they were fighting not just for their own personal freedom, but the end of slavery and racial prejudice. American slaves came to see the British as "an enemy to slavery," and the British army was flooded with runaway slaves ready to fight for their emancipation.⁴ Mary Beth Norton argues that there was an irony in slaveholding Patriots arguing for the "equal rights of man" and writing about their fear of being "enslaved" by Britain. Recognizing this paradox, American Blacks flocked to the British cause.⁵

Yet historians still debate whether Black Loyalists should be called Loyalists at all. This debate exists in part because defining loyalism is complex. Jasanoff characterizes Loyalists somewhat simplistically as "colonists who had sided with Britain during the war."⁶ She uses the phrase "black Loyalists" again and again throughout her book, yet she never fully addresses where this group fits within her definition of loyalism. James W. St. G. Walker argues that those Blacks who fought for the British showed an ideological commitment to their cause by doing so, for not all runaway slaves joined the British army.⁷ Yet in an earlier article, Walker writes that the Black Loyalists were "less pro-British than they were pro-Black," suggesting they were risking their lives in pursuit of freedom rather than victory.⁸ These conflicting arguments show the difficulty of examining these former slaves-turned soldiers within the traditional definitions of loyalism. Perhaps the most complete definition can be found in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, which describes Loyalists as "American colonists of varied ethnic backgrounds who supported the British cause during the American Revolution...for highly diverse reasons."⁹ This paper will focus on the Black Loyalists who fought for the British and their resulting exodus. Therefore

they will continue to be referred to as Loyalists, despite their complicated relationship with the British government during and after the Revolution.

The Loyalist cause was attractive to many Blacks because it came to symbolize their liberation. The most famous promise of freedom in return for military service came from Lord Dunmore of Virginia in November 1775. In his proclamation, Lord Dunmore declared that “all indented servants [and] negroes...able and willing to bear arms” in support of the British would be given their freedom for doing so.¹⁰ By making such promises of freedom, the British army attracted tens of thousands of Black recruits over the course of the Revolution. These new loyalists fled from their masters in Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas, before heading north to New York City, where the British army was headquartered. Men of all ages were sorted into Black regiments, guerilla units, or else used as spies, pilots, and wagon drivers. Black women also contributed to the British war effort by working as cooks, servants, and laundry maids.¹¹ It is interesting to note that the slaves of White Loyalists were never offered liberation and in fact there were measures in place to retrieve these slaves if they did escape.¹²

Historians have struggled to pinpoint the exact number of Black Loyalists. Many provide only a wide range, such as Graham Russell Hodges, who estimated that 25,000 to 50,000 fugitives came north to join the British.¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson estimated in 1778 that 30,000 slaves had escaped from Virginia alone - he lost thirty slaves personally - and some historians have used this figure as the basis for their own estimates.¹⁷ Still other historians make different estimates. Maya Jasanoff claims in *Liberty's Exiles* that only twenty thousand American slaves escaped and joined the British cause. Some historians fail to acknowledge Black Loyalists at all in their accounts of the Revolution, mentioning only the slaves of Loyalists. Even if scholars have not reached a consensus about the exact number of Black Loyalists, they have been able to agree on the historical significance of their escape as the greatest emancipation of slaves in North America prior to the Civil War.¹⁸

II. THE AFTERMATH OF THE REVOLUTION

David V. J. Bell writes that with every revolution, there is also “some type of counterrevolution, one aspect of which may involve expatriation.” Bell examines the Loyalists as the “first American expatriates,” and looks at the difficult choices that faced them after the Revolution, the worst being whether to stay or leave. Even after the conclusion of the war, public attitudes toward Loyalists were cold, if not outright hostile. John Adams argued that the Tories should all be fined, imprisoned, and hanged, while George Washington called them “abominable pests of society” and suggested that suicide would be most appropriate. Thomas Paine argued for a distinction between the British soldiers and the American Loyalists that fought with them: “The first are prisoners, but the latter are traitors. The one forfeits his liberty, the other his head.”¹⁹

Because of this pervasive anti-Loyalism, Bell argues that the choice of Loyalists to leave America was hardly voluntary. The situation would have been even more dangerous and complex for Black Loyalists. According to state lists of "disloyal practices," Black Loyalists were guilty on at least two accounts: for enlisting on the "royal side" and also for escaping from their masters. If Loyalists did not sign oaths of allegiance to the new American government, they could face punishments ranging from disenfranchisement to incarceration.¹⁷ Yet it is unlikely that these oaths were offered to runaway slaves. Even if they had the opportunity to declare their allegiance, Blacks still would have had few rights in post-revolutionary America. Upon consideration of these factors, it becomes clear that the Black Loyalists had just two choices after the war. They could stay in America and risk re-enslavement, or they could leave during the British evacuation and hope to find freedom beyond the colonies.

The British made their slave proclamations to attract recruits and support their war effort. Once defeated, however, British officials had to begin evacuation plans and the status of Black veterans had to be addressed. Walker argues that the evacuation of Boston in 1776 set a precedent for including "loyal Blacks" in their retreat.²⁰ Anticipating a patriot attack, Boston was evacuated in March 1776 and British military headquarters were relocated to New York City.

Before leaving Boston, General William Howe issued an order granting free passage to Loyalists who wished to leave the city in the wake of the British army. Approximately eleven hundred civilians left Boston for Halifax, Nova Scotia, making this the first major evacuation of Loyalists.²¹ Although Walker claims that "loyal blacks" participated in this retreat, his account is problematic because it is never explained whether they were free Blacks or in fact the slaves of Loyalists.²²

In 1782, the British began to process claims from Black Loyalists who wanted to leave the colonies. The evacuation of Charleston was addressed first, as it boasted the largest concentration of Black Loyalists. General Alexander Leslie, who was the British commander for Charleston, created a commission that would handle appeals made by former slaves as well as owners. If the runaways had served the British, the stated policy of the commission was to compensate their owners and then recognize these veterans as free Blacks. By June 1782, General Leslie reported that there were 4,000 Black Loyalists wishing to emigrate, as well as 6,000 slaves ready to depart with their White Loyalist masters. Freedmen had boarding priority, but some White Loyalists circumvented this by claiming their slaves were free Black Loyalists in order to gain passage. In the end, over 5,000 Blacks departed from Charleston, the majority of which were likely freed Loyalists. This departure occurred while peace negotiations were still taking place in Paris.²⁵

In a similar manner, other Black Loyalists left from Savannah and later New York City. The main record of this exodus is the register that was kept of Black Loyalists departing from New York City, which became known as "The Book of Negroes." As African Americans were

considered property, the list included their names, ages, former owners, physical descriptions, and other notes; no such record exists of White Loyalist refugees. In spite of its racist undertones, the “Book of Negroes” is an exceptional document that has provided historians with information for 3,000 of the Black Loyalists who left the colonies after 1783.²⁶ Graham Russell Hodges compiled the immigration records known as the “Book of Negroes” into one volume and added later records from England as an appendix, as well as other relevant primary sources. Thumbing through his “Black Loyalist Directory,” one gains a sense of the diversity of the Black Loyalists who left the colonies after the war. Adults and children, men and women, families and lone travelers; the one thing these African Americans had in common was their newly earned freedom.²⁷

As the Loyalist diaspora began, freed Blacks sailed toward uncertain futures in foreign lands, leaving family, friends, and all that they knew behind them in America. Free Blacks and slaves traveled together, which increased the risk of confusion and abuse. Some of these Black refugees would move several more times after their initial departure. Yet many still held onto the hope that their lives would be better as British subjects.²⁸

III. BLACK LOYALIST IMMIGRATION TO CANADA

After the Revolution, the choice that faced all Loyalists was not whether to leave America, but where to go. Due to its proximity, emigration to Canada was an attractive destination for all Loyalist refugees. Black Loyalists in particular flocked to Canada by the thousands. Nova Scotia received the majority of Loyalist refugees to British North America in the years after the war. Population surveys conducted in 1784 found that Nova Scotia had gained over 28,000 new inhabitants, which was double the number of settlers who had lived there before the war. By the end of the Loyalist migration, about 30,000 refugees had arrived in Nova Scotia. This estimate includes 3,000 free Blacks, as well as 1,200 slaves brought over by their Loyalist masters. In July 1783, a town was founded near Port Roseway as a settlement for Loyalist refugees. This town was named Shelborne, and by the end of the year it already had almost 8,000 settlers. During this influx of refugees, Nova Scotia Governor John Parr decided that Black Loyalists should have a separate settlement nearby, rather than residing within Shelborne. This neighboring settlement was named Birchtown, after the general who had signed certificates of freedom for the Black Loyalists in New York. By January 1784, Birchtown had become a parallel Loyalist town that was home to 1,485 free Blacks, making it one of North America’s biggest Black settlements.²⁹

Quoting a British traveler, Jasanoff writes that the Shelborne Loyalists were “much at variance with one another,” while the Birchtown Loyalists appeared to be a close-knit group. Land allotments for Blacks were often only a quarter or half acre each, which was much smaller than given to most White Loyalists. Black refugees often had fewer resources as well and struggled to finish their houses before winter. Yet as former slaves, they possessed valuable skills and were better prepared for hard labor than their White counterparts, most of which had

lived in cities in America. A vibrant Christian community also grew up in Birchtown, mainly of the Methodist and Baptist denominations. David George, a Black preacher from Charleston, was responsible for founding Nova Scotia's first Baptist church.³⁰

Although these Black Loyalists had left slavery behind them in America, racial discrimination followed them to Nova Scotia. Wage labor was a foreign concept for freed Blacks, and White Loyalists capitalized on this, hiring them to work for low wages. Other Birchtown Blacks became indentured servants or sharecroppers, working for Whites in Shelburne in a system of quasi-slavery. At the core of these issues were the widespread racial beliefs "connecting servitude and skin color," which greatly influenced how free Blacks were treated in Nova Scotia.³¹ Black Loyalists also faced discrimination during land allotment, as a select few received small, poor quality lots while the majority got none. Free Blacks in Nova Scotia were also not allowed to vote, were subject to discriminatory laws, and were segregated in communities like Birchtown.³²

Despite these hardships and disappointments, scholars like Walker recognize that Black Loyalists received good treatment in Nova Scotia compared to other destination countries. Yet Walker also notes that Black Loyalists in British North America were not content with being free; they also wanted equality. They actively petitioned Britain to end slavery in Nova Scotia, as their Black settlements started to attract the runaway slaves of White Loyalists. Despite their loyalty, Blacks realized that they did not have the full rights of British citizens. The Black Loyalists of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick even sent a representative, Sergeant Thomas Peters, to London to bring their complaints directly to the British government. Walker argues that the "Peters mission" demonstrates the desire for true equality and full citizenship among Black Loyalists.³³

Peters' trip did little to change conditions at home in Nova Scotia, but it did have one significant result. When Peters returned, he was accompanied by John Clarkson, an agent of the recently formed Sierra Leone Company. They began to spread the offer that the British government had made to Black Loyalists of a new life in the colony of Sierra Leone. If the Black Loyalists migrated, they were promised farms, full equality including political rights, the full abolition of slavery in Sierra Leone, and a homeland.³⁴ After experiencing years of poverty and discrimination in Nova Scotia, this proposal was received enthusiastically by many free Black Loyalists. Unlike their White neighbors, Black Loyalists did not have the option of returning to the United States, where their freedom was not guaranteed. Therefore, in January 1792, about 1,200 Blacks left British North America for a new life in Sierra Leone.³⁵ Once there, they encountered other disillusioned Black refugees from London who had arrived years before and together they struggled to establish a settlement for themselves despite countless challenges.

IV. BLACK LOYALIST IMMIGRATION TO BRITAIN

Another major destination for Loyalists after the war's end was Great Britain. This would seem an obvious choice: many Loyalists viewed Britain as a refuge, or even "home."

Yet when they arrived in London, the city was both overwhelming and alienating. Many White Loyalists chose to move out to smaller towns, like Bristol and Bath, where the cost of living was lower and life moved a little more slowly. Jasanoff estimates that up to five thousand Black loyalists immigrated to Britain, the majority of them male and former soldiers. Those who were lucky (or unlucky) enough to survive the war now struggled to make a living in England. It soon became common to see Black veterans begging for food on the streets of London.³⁶

Black Loyalists soon realized that they could hardly rely on the British government for aid. In order to be compensated, claimants needed clear proof of their losses, evidence of their freedom, and most importantly, money. Therefore "the illiterate, the poor, and the poorly connected" were routinely marginalized within this system.³³ Only 47 Blacks successfully filed claims for pensions or property compensation from the British government. The result was that just one man was awarded money for his property losses, while three received meager annual allowances and twenty were given small sums that ranged from five to twenty pounds. In contrast, few White Loyalists were totally denied assistance, while the majority of Blacks received nothing. Allowances for even the poorest Whites tended to be higher than those for the wealthiest Blacks and Whites who were given direct compensation rarely collected fewer than twenty-five pounds.³⁷

The discrimination practiced by the commission becomes even clearer in their reports. In cases with Black claimants, the reports include variations of the same key phrase: "he ought to think himself very fortunate in being in a Country where he can never again be reduced to a state of Slavery."³⁸ The commissioners clearly believed that since these Blacks had been given their freedom by the British, they should view that as compensation enough for their loyalty. This attitude resulted in many Black Loyalists being denied relief after reaching England. In the words of the commission itself, claims made by Black Loyalists "hardly deserve[d] a serious Investigation or a serious Answer."³⁹

While Black Loyalists waited in vain to receive their claims, they struggled for survival, many of them homeless and starving. For some Londoners, the sight of poor Blacks begging on their streets only fueled their racist attitudes toward these refugees. However, there were philanthropists like Jonas Hanway who responded differently to the situation, deciding to stand up for London's new arrivals. Together with several of his wealthy friends and fellow businessmen, Hanway decided to form a "Committee for the Relief of the Black Poor" in January of 1786." They started up a collection to help feed the starving Blacks in London and donations soon began to flow in. The fundraising campaign was so successful that by the end of that January, over two hundred poor Blacks began to receive free meals from three soup kitchens funded by the committee. They were also able to give out new shoes and stockings to two hundred and fifty of these people.⁴⁰

The idea behind Hanway's commission was simple: these Black Loyalists had faithfully served Britain, only to end up penniless and hungry on London's streets. These individuals felt that it was unfair that these loyalists were not being compensated and were starving in the streets as a result, just as it was unfair that Black captives were still being sold across the Atlantic as slaves. Abolitionist sentiment was growing in Britain at this time, so it was no coincidence that the committee's largest contribution came from a Quaker abolitionist group. The participation of abolitionists like Granville Sharp would continue to be a significant factor in this relief effort.⁴¹ Yet as the soup kitchen lines got longer and longer, the members of the committee began to realize that their programs could only provide temporary aid. These poor Blacks needed jobs to lift them out of poverty, but the post war depression in England had produced widespread unemployment. With such bleak prospects, some of the "black poor" began to talk of leaving Britain, perhaps for Nova Scotia, where many other Black Loyalists had found refuge. Then word started to spread of another possibility: a much warmer place on the west coast of Africa, called Sierra Leone. Henry Smeathman, an English entomologist, had argued for many years that Britain should colonize Sierra Leone and in 1786 he made his case in front of the Black Poor Committee. He advocated to the philanthropists that London's poor Blacks should be sent down to Sierra Leone as "pioneer colonists," an idea that was met with enthusiasm.⁴²

Smeathman's proposal was quickly approved by the committee as well as the British Treasury, which agreed to allot him 14 pounds per emigrant to Sierra Leone. Yet as Mary Beth Norton argues, "so far neither the Treasury nor the committee had displayed the slightest concern for the desires of the Blacks themselves."⁴³ Greater than any philanthropic motivations was the desire of the committee and the British government to get the black poor off the streets and out of England. The black poor were a nuisance to the English, so the priority during planning was speed, rather than the welfare of the Black refugees. In turn, the black poor seem to have perceived that their only leverage in this situation was threatening not to leave and they used this threat on several occasions.⁴⁴

When Jonas Hanway finally began to discuss immigration with the Black refugees themselves, he was disappointed to find that they were not as enthusiastic as the committee had expected. They refused to set sail for Sierra Leone until they had a written guarantee of their freedom from the British government. Ultimately Hanway had no choice but to surrender, providing the black poor with a formal agreement explaining how the colony would be established and operated. In reality, this agreement promised little; neither the British government nor the committee had committed to protecting the new colony and little was said about the rights the settlers would have. The committee did promise that if the Blacks signed this agreement, they would be committed to immigrate to Sierra Leone. Soon, the situation evolved so that signing the agreement became a requirement for monetary aid. If the black poor wanted to receive their sixpenny daily allowance, they had to sign this legally binding agreement and promise to leave England as soon as the ships were ready.⁴⁵

As the plans for the Sierra Leone colony were evolving, Henry Smeathman died unexpectedly in July 1786. Confusion about how to proceed followed his death, as it was Smeathman who had initiated the whole Sierra Leone scheme. Smeathman was also meant to oversee the Blacks once they landed in Africa, because the committee believed they needed someone to ensure the Black settlers would be “properly trained to labour, and Civil and Religious Government, so as to render them good Subjects.”⁴⁶ But rather than looking for a replacement, the committee started to explore other destinations for the black poor, showing a willingness to abandon the Sierra Leone plan completely. The Black Poor Committee considered first sending them to settle in the Bahamas, but the plan could not be carried out because the Black Loyalists refused to go, seeing the danger in trying to establish themselves as free Blacks in these slaveholding islands. Next the committee explored sending them to New Brunswick, but the Blacks were unconvinced that this was a better alternative to settling in Sierra Leone.⁴⁷

After these various setbacks, the committee had no choice but to revisit the Sierra Leone scheme. Joseph Irwin, a former associate of Smeathman, was placed in charge of the colony and the rest of the plans came together quickly. The British Navy Commissioners supplied two ships (and later a third) to hold the 675 people who had been formally contracted to go to Sierra Leone. A Scottish missionary named Patrick Fraser was officially commissioned by the Archbishop of Canterbury to serve as the settlement’s missionary. The Black Poor Committee spread the word that the ships would leave the Thames on October 31, 1786, and there would be no further allowances paid after this date. With the *Atlantic* and the *Belisarius* slowly filling up, everything seemed to be in order. Then in late November, the committee was informed that only 259 people had actually boarded the two ships, although 675 people had signed emigration agreements.⁴⁸

Stunned, the members quickly issued a declaration ordering all the signees to report to the docks as agreed and threatening to use the Vagrancy Act to penalize any who refused. After this declaration, a few hundred more Blacks prepared to leave and they were placed on a third ship, the *Vernon*. The committee never succeeded in sending all 675 out of England, as some Blacks were still unconvinced that they would in fact be free and safe in the new colony. For those waiting on the ships, days and weeks stretched into months as the boarding process dragged on. Conditions on the ships were so poor that 73 of the 259 original passengers counted in November 1786 were unaccounted for three months later, whether because they had died of disease or escaped to shore. After months of delay, the three ships set sail on February 23, 1787, for Sierra Leone.⁴⁹

V. THE SIERRA LEONE COLONY

The British ships caught sight of land on May 5, and five days later the grueling journey to Sierra Leone was finally over. The colonists landed in Frenchman’s Bay, which they soon renamed St. George’s Bay. Thomas B. Thompson, captain of the *Nautilus*, chose the place nearby where the settlement would be built. Thompson, Joseph Irwin, and Patrick Fraser (the

missionary) officially bought the land on June 11 from King Tom, a local Temne chief. Thompson's naval vessel had served as a convoy for the three settler ships on the journey to Sierra Leone and he wanted to see the colony off to a good start before he returned to England.⁴⁷

By the end of July 1787, Thompson had sent both the *Vernon* and the *Belisarius* home, but he remained in Sierra Leone, becoming increasingly pessimistic about the venture. He wrote to the British Admiralty that the Black settlers' "obstinacy and laziness, which neither remonstrance, persuasion, or punishment have yet been able to subdue, do not give me great hopes of their future welfare."⁵⁰ In addition to Thompson's pessimism (which was shared by Fraser), the situation was further complicated because the colonists had landed in Sierra Leone at the start of the rainy season. The poor weather made it difficult for the Black settlers to build huts for shelter, or to plant grain to replenish the stores of food that were brought over on the ships, which were starting to run low. The constant rain also caused "fevers, fluxes, and bilious complaints" among the settlers, according to Thompson. Whatever the sickness being spread, it contributed to the 30 Black settlers between May and July of 1787. Fraser also estimated that of the 330 surviving colonists, about half of them were sick during this time.⁵¹

The situation deteriorated further when Joseph Irwin died. Thompson told his superiors that he believed Irwin had never been fully committed to the experiment in Sierra Leone, but Irwin had nonetheless been given the responsibility of managing the colony. Therefore his death caused great confusion and concern among the colonists, which no doubt contributed to the disorganization and idleness that Thompson had noted. By the time of his next report at the end of August, conditions in the settlement had thankfully improved. Thompson wrote that the colony was finally recovering from its bout of disease and noted that several of the Black settlers were even "possessed of some share of industry," which made him optimistic. By mid-September, Thompson had unloaded the last of the supplies from the *Nautilus* and on September 16, he started his journey back to England at last. He left in his wake the 268 surviving colonists.⁵²

Meanwhile, the Reverend Patrick Fraser continued to have doubts about the venture. Frustrated that the Black settlers had not yet built him a house or a church, Fraser began to spend more and more time on Bance Island, which was home to a slave factory. Here, he lived more comfortably and enjoyed being able to preach regularly to a congregation of "Englishmen and natives." Fraser became so dissatisfied with life in Sierra Leone that he gave up his mission there and returned to England the next spring. Yet Fraser was not the only deserter; by June 1788, the rest of the White men in the colony had "reportedly joined the slavers" on Bance Island.⁵³

All the while, the Black settlement on St. George's Bay continued its struggle for survival. They elected a governor, Richard Weaver, but he soon fell ill and James Reid replaced him. During Reid's term in office, over half of the settlement's arms were strangely lost. Weaver took back over as governor, but it was too late to reverse the damage that Reid had done. Now vulnerable, the settlement experienced losses of both materials and men to local slave traders and chiefs like King Tom. When Fraser reported in spring 1788 on the dismal state of the colony,

Granville Sharp decided to send a “relief expedition” to Sierra Leone. He quickly chartered the *Myro*, filled with supplies and a handful of new settlers, to sail to West Africa. According to Norton, the ship landed in August 1788 and “the settlers later told Sharp that it had been their salvation.”⁵⁴

Once the *Myro* left, however, the settlement continued to be threatened by the Bance Island slavers as well as passing slave ships. On several occasions, the Black settlers resorted to retaliatory kidnappings of White captains in order to regain those unlucky enough to be captured by the slave traders. Successful or not, this strategy did not help the reputation of the Black settlers in the surrounding areas. But the colony managed to survive into the summer of 1789 and its population stabilized around 120. Yet its future was jeopardized once again when the settlement was caught in the middle of a conflict between a local chief, an American slaving ship, and a British man-of-war. As the conflict escalated, the chief gave the settlers three days to evacuate and then burned their entire town.⁵⁵

When Sharp received word about the incident, he sent another relief expedition under Alexander Falconbridge. He arrived in early 1791 to find that there were only 60 settlers left in Sierra Leone. Falconbridge gathered the survivors together at a new location about six miles away from the old settlement and then he returned to England. The new site was named “Granville Town.” Given the poor state of the colony, British officials gladly permitted the Black Loyalists from Nova Scotia to move to Sierra Leone. The plans moved forward quickly and these new settlers arrived from Canada in March 1792. Curiously, they decided to settle on the original site that was occupied by the old settlers and named it Freetown (now the capital of modern Sierra Leone). Tensions grew up between the “old” and “new” settlers, peaking when the original colonists were ordered to leave the new settlement by John Clarkson, the leader of the Nova Scotians.⁵⁶

The British were quick to offer up explanations for the failure of the first Sierra Leone settlement. Thompson chose to blame the settlers themselves, who he saw as “a worthless, lawless, vicious, drunken set of people.” Sharp also tended to blame the colonists, rather than considering the difficulties they faced because they could not build or plant during the rainy season. Sharp and Thompson did admit that the timing of the expedition was unlucky, but they never gave due credit to the Black settlers for surviving despite these obstacles. Norton argues that only one observer identified the true cause of the colony’s failure. Ottobah Cugoano, who had been a slave in North America, stated that the colony’s advocates in England never had a clear, thought-out plan for establishing a free Black settlement in Sierra Leone. Instead, Cugoano wrote, the British wanted the Black Loyalists “to be hurried away at all events, come of them what would.”⁵⁷ This quote exemplifies the underlying racism that Black Loyalists were confronted with throughout the British Empire. Even with abolitionism on the rise, British notions of paternalism and racial superiority remained strong. Those who survived the war gained their freedom, certainly, but the Black Loyalists consistently suffered as a result of British indifference to their situation.

VI. OTHER LOYALIST DESTINATIONS

Canada and England were not the only destinations for Blacks after the Revolution. Thousands of loyalists, mainly those from the southern colonies, fled to the Bahamas and the West Indies starting in 1782. It is estimated that 3,000 Loyalists came to Jamaica, bringing with them over 9,000 slaves. Records show that 2,000 Loyalists went to the Bahamas, with about 6,000 slaves in tow. The Loyalist exodus had the most dramatic effect in the Bahamas, as it doubled the White and nearly quadrupled the islands' Black population. Life in the Bahamas and the West Indies was difficult, with overcrowding being the most immediate problem. However, life on the islands would have been most difficult for the Black refugees from the former colonies. With the arrival of the Loyalists and their slaves, Whites were outnumbered for the first time, which led to a tightening of control over the Black population. In the disarray of the evacuations, some Loyalists claimed slaves they did not own (which may have been stolen from patriots) and others enslaved Blacks who should have been legally free. Yet contemporary commentators argued that despite this confusion, slavery as an institution in the Caribbean was "comparatively benign."⁵⁸

Most Black Loyalists avoided the Bahamas and the West Indies, likely because they feared re-enslavement. However, some Black Loyalists did come to the islands, the majority as members of British regiments. After being evacuated out of Charleston, five hundred soldiers from Lord Dunmore's Black regiment sought refuge in Jamaica, as did a Black South Carolina corps. This presence of free Blacks in Jamaica raised concern among the White Loyalist population, unhappy with the example this would set for their slaves. As a result, the White Loyalists were greatly relieved when the Black regiment was relocated to the Leeward Islands, where they would fight again for the king during the French Wars. The regiment's departure meant that Jamaica and the Bahamas were no longer home to a sizeable number of free Black Loyalists; however, they still retained their thousands of North American slaves.⁶⁰

Following this discussion of Loyalist havens after the American Revolution, one might ask: why did these individuals settle where they did? The evacuation of East Florida in the early 1780s provides scholars with a clearer understanding of the Loyalist diaspora. Once the Revolution had begun, the St. Augustine garrison attracted Loyalist refugees from Georgia and the Carolinas. The evacuation of this British colony began in early 1782 under the leadership of East Florida's governor, Patrick Tonyn. British ships relocated the East Florida Loyalists - both White and Black - to England, Nova Scotia, and the Caribbean. Carole W. Troxler argues that the evacuation of East Florida reveals a pattern for White Loyalists' immigration: those who owned slaves tended to relocate to the Bahamas and the West Indies, while those who owned few or no slaves at all went to Canada and Europe.⁶¹

After studying Troxler's data closely, one can argue that a similar pattern exists for Black Loyalists as well. Historical evidence shows that the majority of slaves were taken to the Bahamas and the West Indies by their Loyalist masters, as this region maintained a strong slave

trade. In contrast, the vast majority of free Black Loyalists settled in Canada and Europe, where slavery was less common. Even though these evacuations created chaos and confusion, these immigration trends show that the Loyalist diaspora was not in fact a random scattering of expatriates, but an exodus based on the pursuit of self-interest. In the case of Black Loyalists, freedom was the ultimate factor in deciding where they settled.

VII. RESULTS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BLACK LOYALIST EXODUS

After studying the mass migration of Black Loyalists, one final question must be answered: were these individuals better off because they chose to leave the colonies? In other words, did they benefit from becoming Loyalists? When considered in terms of slavery, the obvious answer is yes. African Americans who decided to fight for the British gained their freedom after the war and were able to leave the colonies with their families. These individuals were clearly better off than the African Americans who had stayed with their masters (whether Loyalist or Patriot) and therefore had no immediate hope of being freed. Yet the answer to this question becomes far more complicated when the lives of these Black Loyalists beyond the colonies is considered. They gained their freedom, but then Black Loyalists struggled to survive in their new countries and were forced to work in servitude to Whites or else live in poverty. Evidence shows that some Black Loyalists did not survive the journey to their new homes, while others died of disease and starvation after arriving.

It is clear that life abroad was extremely difficult for the majority of Black Loyalists, despite having escaped slavery. In Nova Scotia, England, Sierra Leone, and the Caribbean, these newly freed Blacks experienced varying degrees of discrimination as well as disappointment. One could argue that they still benefited in the end from siding with the British, but this assumption should not be made without examining the perspectives of the Black Loyalists themselves. Christopher Fyfe published a series of letters and other documents that were written by relocated settlers from Nova Scotia in the 1790s to the Sierra Leone Company officials. These letters provide a glimpse of how these Black Loyalists viewed their own exodus after having moved twice and experiencing hardships in both places. Some of the letters take the form of simple requests, whether for supplies like soap and food or for marriage licenses issued by the colonial government. However, these humble requests should not be mistaken for submission on the part of the Black settlers. In other letters, the settlers made detailed demands regarding how they felt the colony should be run and what rights they were entitled to as British subjects.⁶⁴

Yet the most telling documents are those in which the Black settlers reflect on their life in the colony. In one such document, titled "Settler's Petition," they wrote to colonial officials in London that "we have feeling the same as other Human Beings...[but] here we are afraid that if such conduct continues we shall be unhappy while we live and our Children may be in bondage after us."⁶⁵ Other documents reflect this disillusionment, such as a letter from two settlers who wrote, "We are sorry to think that we left America to come here to be used in that manner,"

referring to perceived misconduct on the part of the colony's governor.⁶⁶ Still other letters contain a degree of hopefulness, like the letter written by Richard Corankeapoan, who reported that there were many dissatisfied settlers, but the situation in the colony was slowly improving.

Corankeapoan remarked that "thear is some of our pepol will not Be Contented with aney thing...but we donot mind wat everey one says."⁶⁷ These letters and documents help demonstrate the complex perspectives of the Sierra Leone settlers and, by extension, the Black Loyalists. These individuals had been granted their freedom, but they were not content with freedom alone. Many promises had been made to the Black Loyalists, and after their evacuation they began to realize that the British government had not been truly committed to fulfilling them.

No matter the results, the significance of the Black Loyalist exodus is undeniable. The sheer size of this mass migration is remarkable. As has been previously stated, an estimated 20,000 escaped slaves fought for the British and were then given the opportunity to leave the colonies after the war was over. Therefore, an unforeseen result of the American Revolution was the emancipation of slaves on a massive scale, not to be witnessed again until the Civil War.⁶⁸ In addition, this was the first voluntary movement of free Blacks out of America. After centuries of slave ships crossing the Atlantic to reach North America, vessels began to take willing Black Loyalists to the far reaches of the British dominion, including West Africa. Black Loyalists were instrumental in the founding of Sierra Leone, a remarkable colonial experiment. In many ways, Sierra Leone helped to inspire the nineteenth-century "back to Africa" movement and the eventual settlement of Liberia by African Americans.⁶⁹

Additionally, research on this subject is significant because it highlights the diversity and complexity of the Loyalist ideology. In the case of Black Loyalists, they chose to fight for the British not for political, but rather personal reasons. By becoming Loyalists, these escaped slaves facilitated their own emancipation in an exceptional way. Despite their motivations, the Black Loyalists became an important asset to the British military and the Loyalist cause itself. For these reasons, the Loyalists should not be studied as a monolithic group, but as a diverse collection of people with a wide range of beliefs and goals.⁷⁰

Furthermore, the experience of the Black Loyalists challenges the fundamental understanding of the American Revolution as a struggle for national independence. Robert M. Calhoun argues that the Revolution was "a special kind of civil war" because it was ultimately a "struggle for national liberation."⁷¹ Yet implicit in this assertion is the irony of the Revolution in regards to African Americans. Crying out for independence from tyrannical British rule, the Patriots wrote of the "equal rights of man," while many of them were in fact slave owners. This irony is noteworthy because as many Americans were fighting to overthrow the British, the Black Loyalists were simultaneously fighting to win independence from their American masters.⁷² Upon closer analysis, then, this commonly held view of the Revolution as a national fight for independence is rather one-dimensional.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Due to their service and loyalty to the British, thousands of escaped slaves were freed after the American Revolution was over. Free Blacks had few prospects in post-revolutionary America and, recognizing this, many of them participated in the British evacuation of the colonies. Black Loyalists traveled all over the British Empire in search of a better life, settling in large numbers in Canada, England, the Caribbean, and eventually Sierra Leone. Though they were often disappointed with life in their new countries, these former American slaves ultimately benefited from their Loyalism because it created the conditions for their emancipation. The Black Loyalist experience had implications both in America and abroad, fueling abolitionism and inspiring other migrations of free Blacks. Yet their journey has been largely ignored by historians, creating a whitewashed account of the American Revolution. Nevertheless, the Black Loyalists deserve to be recognized for their contributions to the war and for their dedication to securing their own liberty at a time when few were truly committed to equality for all mankind.

¹ David V. J Bell, "The Loyalists: The First American Expatriates," *University of Windsor Review* 7, no. 2 (January 1972): 70.

² Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 8-9.

³ Jasanoff, 8.

⁴ James W. St. G. Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists: The Slaves' War for Independence," *Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1975): 53-54.

⁵ Mary Beth Norton, "The Fate of Some Black Loyalists of the American Revolution," *The Journal of Negro History* 58, no. 4 (October 1973): 402-403.

⁶ Jasanoff, 6.

⁷ James W. St. G. Walker, "Myth, History and Revisionism: The Black Loyalists Revisited," *Acadiensis* 29, no. 1 (Autumn 1999): 98.

⁸ Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists," 53.

⁹ Walker, "Myth, History and Revisionism," 98.

¹⁰ Library of Congress, "An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadsides and Other Printed Ephemera," *American Memory*, 2008,

[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpe:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(rbpe17801800\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpe:@field(DOCID+@lit(rbpe17801800))).

¹¹ *The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in Exile after the American Revolution*, ed. Graham Russell Hodges (New York: Garland Publications, 1995), xii-xiv.

¹² Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists," 59.

¹⁶ *Black Loyalist Directory*, xiv.

¹⁷ Walker, "Myth, History and Revisionism," 98.

¹⁸ Jasanoff, 8.

¹⁹ Bell, 62-65.

¹⁷ Bell, 65.

²⁰ Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists," 61.

²¹ Jasanoff, 29.

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- ²² Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists," 61.
- ²⁵ Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists," 61-62.
- ²⁶ Jasanoff, 77, 89.
- ²⁷ *Black Loyalist Directory*, xi.
- ²⁸ Jasanoff, 77.
- ²⁹ Jasanoff, 152, 160, 171-172.
- ³⁰ Jasanoff, 172-174.
- ³¹ Jasanoff, 174.
- ³² Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists," 65.
- ³³ Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists," 65.
- ³⁴ Walker, "Blacks as American Loyalists," 66.
- ³⁵ John N. Grant, "Black Immigrants into Nova Scotia, 1776-1815," *Journal of Negro History* 58, no. 3 (July 1973): 256-258.
- ³⁶ Jasanoff, 114-115, 127-128
- ³³ Jasanoff, 132-134.
- ³⁷ Norton, 404.
- ³⁸ Norton, 404.
- ³⁹ Norton, 404.
- ⁴⁰ Jasanoff, 128-129.
- ⁴¹ Jasanoff, 129.
- ⁴² Jasanoff, 129-130.
- ⁴³ Norton, 408.
- ⁴⁴ Norton 409.
- ⁴⁵ Norton, 409-410.
- ⁴⁶ Norton, 410.
- ⁴⁷ Norton, 410-412.
- ⁴⁸ Norton, 412-414.
- ⁴⁹ Norton, 413-417. Scholars have experienced difficulty determining with any certainty how many of these passengers were American, but Norton estimates that "at least half" of the 347 Black passengers on these ships were "ex-slaves from the thirteen colonies."
- ⁴⁷ Norton, 416, 419-420.
- ⁵⁰ Norton, 420.
- ⁵¹ Norton, 420-421.
- ⁵² Norton, 421-422.
- ⁵³ Norton, 422.
- ⁵⁴ Norton, 422-423.
- ⁵⁵ Norton, 422-424.
- ⁵⁶ Norton, 424-425.
- ⁵⁷ Norton, 425-426.
- ⁵⁸ Wallace Brown, "The Loyalists of the American Revolution in the Bahamas and the British West Indies," *Revista/Review Interamericana* 5, no. 4 (December 1975): 639, 642.
- ⁶⁰ Brown, 643.
- ⁶¹ Carole W. Troxler, "Loyalist Refugees and the British Evacuation of East Florida," *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (July 1981): 1-2, 21.
- ⁶⁴ Christopher Fyfe, ed., "*Our Children Free and Happy:*" *Letters from Black Settlers in Africa in the 1790s*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991): 23-26.
- ⁶⁵ Fyfe, 35-37.
- ⁶⁶ Fyfe, 42-43.
- ⁶⁷ Fyfe, 33.
- ⁶⁸ Jasanoff, 8.

⁶⁹ Nemata Amelia Blyden, "'Back to Africa: the Migration of New World Blacks to Sierra Leone and Liberia,'" *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 3 (April 2004): 23-24.

⁷⁰ Jasanoff, 8-9.

⁷¹ Robert M. Calhoun & Timothy M. Barnes. *Tory Insurgents: The Loyalist Perception and Other Essays*. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2012): 371.

⁷² Norton, 402.

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