

The Arrival of the Loyalists in Eastern Ontario by Earle Thomas, PhD

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In the summer of 1783 there were probably 7,000 United Empire Loyalists in the old Province of Quebec, but no exact figures exist. Anxious, discouraged, for the most part destitute, they had no idea where they were to go or what was to become of them. Mainly members of colonial regiments, either disbanded or about to be, with their wives and children, they looked into a dark and gloomy future. Driven from their homes in the Thirteen Colonies, they had drifted into Quebec in a steady but swelling stream throughout the years of the Revolution, expecting to return home when the War ended with the defeat of the Rebels. By the summer of 1783 the realization that they would not, could not, be going home gradually found its way into their minds, plunging them into a state of disillusionment, despair, and in some cases, panic.

Allocated in groups to what later became the Province of Lower Canada: Montreal, Sorel, Machiche, Chambly, Lachine, Pointe Claire, and St. Jean, they were completely dependent on Governor Haldimand and his Government for their subsistence, and Haldimand was dependent on the British Government for the funds required, funds which were never forthcoming in sufficient quantity. As a result, the Loyalists suffered and quite understandably complained bitterly and demanded better treatment. In 1783 the Governor's major task was to find land on which the refugees could settle and re-establish themselves. The two major areas finally decided upon were the Gaspé Peninsula and the lands on the north shore of the upper St. Lawrence and the Bay of Quinte. Sir John Johnson was appointed to organize and supervise the movement, and all those bound for the latter destination were ordered to be at Lachine with their families and possessions on 10 April 1784, but it was in fact the latter half of May before they gathered there.

The area for settlement had been laid out in fourteen townships, nine on the St. Lawrence and five beginning at Cataraqui and extending west along the Bay of Quinte. Proceeding upriver from Montreal, the townships along the St. Lawrence were known as the Royal Townships, the first five being settled by the first battalion of the King's Royal Regiment of New York. The Roman Catholics occupied Township No. 1, at present day Charlottenburg; the Presbyterians were given No. 2, modern Cornwall, and a little town, called New Johnstown, sprang up in 1784 on a site chosen by Sir John Johnson. Above the Scots in Townships 3, 4, and 5 settled respectively the German Calvinists, the German Lutherans, and the Anglicans. Nos. 6, 7, and 8 received the majority of the men from Jessup's Regiment and their families. What it appears should have been Township No. 1, the area around modern Lancaster, was deemed generally too wet and low for cultivation; nevertheless, there were about 90 settlers there in October 1784.

The second group, known as the Cataraqui Townships, began at Cataraqui, where Township No. 1 was settled by Michael Grass and his people from New York. No. 2, Ernestown, became the home of the remainder of Jessup's Corps and some of Allan Maclean's 84th Regiment [originally known as Maclean's Royal Highland Emigrants]. Next was Fredericksburg, Township No. 3, with part of Sir John Johnson's second battalion and Major Rogers' King's Rangers. Adolphustown, Township No. 4, was settled by Peter Van Alstine's following and the remainder of Sir John's second battalion. Township No. 5, Marysburg, across the water from Adolphustown, was taken up mainly by disbanded regular soldiers, including a number of Germans under Baron Reitzenstein.

Transporting the Loyalists upstream in a river beset with rapids was a slow and arduous task. There were only so many bateaux available for the job and the Loyalists, wearied with delay and worried over the passing of planting season, were anything but patient travelers. Waiting their turn was frustrating, but in the end everyone's turn came, and in July Sir John Johnson reported that 1,568 men, 626 women, 1,492 children, and 90 servants, a total of 3,776 persons had been distributed in the eleven townships. The October muster of the same year showed 2,065 Loyalists in the Royal and 1,755 in the Cataraqui townships. In other words, close to 4,000 Loyalists settled in the upper St Lawrence and Bay of Quinte regions in 1784.

A large proportion of these despondent and impoverished displaced persons were apprehensive about the move into the forest primeval, but their efforts to persuade the Government to make other plans had been in vain. There were three notable exceptions: Michael Grass, Peter Van Alstine, and John Stuart and their families and followers. The story goes that Grass, taken prisoner during the Seven Years War and incarcerated at Fort Frontenac, was greatly impressed by the area. A Loyalist in the city of New York, he drew up a plan with Peter VanAlstine (who, after the defeat of Burgoyne in 1777, had also spent a year in the St. Lawrence valley), to lead groups of Associated Loyalists who wished to settle in British territory into the new land. Grass and Van Alstine arrived in Quebec in 1783 and spent the winter in Sorel. In 1784 Grass and his people settled in Carataqui Township and Van Alstine and his group in Adolphustown. The Reverend John Stuart, formerly missionary to the Mohawks in the Mohawk valley and a friend of the Johnsons, had fled the wrath of the Rebels and opened a school in Montreal. In 1785 he moved with his family to Cataraqui and was the founder and the first rector of St. George's Church [later St. George's Cathedral].

By and large it was too late in the season for the Loyalists to plant crops after they arrived in 1784. After they were distributed in their respective townships, they had to draw lots for the property they were to receive. Winter was approaching, making it necessary to build some sort of shelter to protect them from the weather, and land had to be cleared before anything could be planted. Thus all 4,000 were forced to make do with Government rations. Nevertheless, the new colony thrived.

During the War the garrison had been based at Fort Haldimand on Carleton Island, but the peace treaty drew the boundary in the channel of the St. Lawrence, and Carleton Island was right in the centre of the channel. In 1783 the troops, for the most part, were withdrawn and moved to old Fort Frontenac and put to work retrieving it from its state of decay. Cataraqui also replaced Carleton Island as the centre of transshipment for goods from river bateaux to lake ships. As a result, Cataraqui became the largest centre in what later became Upper Canada. When the Simcoes arrived in July 1792, the town now known as Kingston, boasted some 50 houses and commercial buildings, and its people were astonished to discover that, although he read the proclamation creating the new province and was sworn in along with his executive council at St. George's Church, the new lieutenant-governor had decided on tiny Niagara as his interim capital. Before he left England he had used his map to select for his permanent capital an uninhabited spot in the depths of the forest, the site of the modern city of London.

A large part of the Loyalists settling in what became Upper Canada were members of the loyal Iroquois nations. While the larger part, those from Canajoharie, went with their leader Joseph Brant to settle the Grand River area north of Lake Erie, those from Fort Hunter, led by their chief, Deserontyon, took up lands at Tyendinaga, a few miles west of Cataraqui. Molly Brant, a Mohawk clan mother of great importance, spent the rest of her life in the house in Kingston that the Government had built for her, next to the one erected for her brother Joseph, who rarely visited it.

The Loyalists, accustomed to the freehold system of land tenure, were dissatisfied with the method they found practised in Canada. They were unhappy with "the rigorous Rules, Homages and Reservations, and Restrictions of the French Laws and Customs" in force and complained bitterly and continuously to their leader, Sir John Johnson. Sir John submitted their petition for change to the Government in 1785, and the result was the Constitutional Act of 1791, creating the new province of Upper Canada. The Loyalists of the eastern area were disappointed when Colonel John Graves Simcoe was chosen for lieutenant-governor instead of Sir John.

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For further reading:

The Loyalists of Quebec, 1774-1825 - A Forgotten History [Montreal, Price-Patterson Ltd., 1989]

Kingston Before the War of 1812 [Richard A. Preston ed., University of Toronto Press, 1959, Toronto]

Sir John Johnson; Loyalist Baronet [Earle Thomas, Dundurn Press, 1986, Toronto]

Voyage of a Different Kind: The Associated Loyalists of Kingston and Adolphustown [Larry Turner, Mika Publishing Company, 1984, Belleville]