

## The American Loyalists - (United Empire Loyalists)

### *The Origins of the American Revolution*

With the British acquisition of New France, including Canada, in 1763, the struggle between the British and French empires in North America came to an end. British North American colonists were thankful for the removal of the threat posed by the French, the Canadians and their Indian allies, who had long raided the frontiers of settlement. The British government, which had borne most of the defence costs during the Seven Years' War (1754-1763), had accumulated a large debt and now felt that the colonists should bear a third of the cost of their protection by British troops. This would be done by introducing a stamp tax on printed materials, like the stamp tax levied within Britain. Unaccustomed to excise taxes, colonists protested the 1765 Stamp Act, which was withdrawn a year later. Parliament withdrew the stamp tax while asserting that it had the right to legislate for the colonies "in all cases whatsoever." Protesters had appealed to the English principle that internal taxes required the population's consent, through its elected representatives, and the Stamp Act had been passed by Britain's parliament, not by the colonial assemblies. Conceding the point of "no taxation without representation," British legislators then approved new customs duties in 1767, knowing that the imperial government had unquestionable authority to regulate overseas trade. The new duties and tighter enforcement of trade regulations against smuggling produced another wave of protests. The British government retreated once again in 1770 and cancelled all but a token duty on imported tea. Removal of the French threat caused some colonists to question their need for dependence upon Britain and radicals asserted a new principle that colonists need only obey laws and pay taxes that they had approved. The radical Patriots acquired an effective organization for future action by taking over the committees of correspondence and protest groups organized to oppose imperial taxation.

The New England port of Boston had been a centre of unrest during the protests. One of the radical leaders there was the merchant John Hancock, who had been convicted of smuggling. British soldiers in Boston, formerly regarded as protectors, now were treated as agents of repression. Troops were publicly insulted and, in March 1770, they were attacked by a stone-throwing mob. In panic, soldiers fired upon the civilians, killing five. The "Boston Massacre" went down in revolutionary lore as an unprovoked crime. At Boston in 1773, protesters destroyed a valuable cargo of tea belonging to the East India Company rather than see buyers pay the one remaining customs duty. More British troops were billeted in private homes and the port of Boston was closed as punishment for its failure to compensate the East India Company for the tea.

In the same year, 1774, the Quebec Act was passed to appease French-speaking Canadians by restoring some of their traditional institutions. The act also extended Quebec's boundaries to the Ohio Valley. The valley had been the flash point for the Seven Years' War in North America and American colonists had expected to see the valley and territories west of the Appalachian Mountains annexed to the old colonies and opened for their agricultural settlement. When the area was reserved for the aboriginal peoples in 1763 and then placed under Quebec's administration in 1774, land-hungry colonists were outraged. Radicals claimed the Quebec Act was an attack on them and falsely asserted that the denial of an elected assembly to Quebec was the prelude for cancelling political rights in other colonies. When British troops from Boston marched inland to seize a militia arsenal, that might be used to arm the radicals, they were opposed at Lexington. This confrontation in April 1775 was the beginning of the revolutionary war.

Britain's old enemies, France, the Netherlands and Spain, entered the war in support of the revolutionaries, providing the arms, ships, training and resources that the rebels lacked. At Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781 a combined British and Loyalist army surrendered to a besieging force, two thirds of which was French, after a French naval squadron cut off all assistance by sea. Foreign help made it possible for the revolutionaries to achieve this decisive victory in the southern colonies. Defeat at Yorktown and war fatigue led to a change in the British

government and the eventual peace settlement of 1783. In the 1783 Treaty of Paris the British government recognized the political independence of thirteen of its seventeen North American colonies. The separated colonies became the United States of America.

### *An American Civil War*

Radical protesters organized the first Continental Congress, which presumed to speak on behalf of Britain's colonies in North America, although only two delegations came from established colonial assemblies. Congress authorized the raising of the Continental Army, under the command of George Washington, to oppose the king's forces. The revolutionaries were a minority as were the active Loyalists. Most colonists preferred to avoid involvement in the conflict and awaited the outcome, passively, if possible. American Loyalists still had faith in the British constitution as the best safeguard for their property and civil rights – rights violated by intolerant radicals – and Loyalists felt that the imperial government would respond favourably to their grievances, as it had done in the past. They regarded rebellion as unjustified and immoral, having pledged their faith to the crown. They saw themselves as the "friends" of King George III and his government; the name "United Empire Loyalists" was not used at this time. Loyalists had various reasons for becoming active opponents of the rebels. Pre-existing rivalries, local incidents, emotional bonds, discrimination, or self-interest – one or more of these factors led thousands of American colonists to resist and take up arms to maintain the existing government and constitution. Some 30,000 men enlisted in about fifty Loyalist provincial corps to aid the British forces, which were helped by other Loyalist militiamen. The opposing Continental Army never enrolled more than 25,000 men and had to be supplemented by its own rebel militia units as well as by foreign forces.

The revolutionaries' destruction and confiscation of opponents' property, censorship, their use of public humiliation and arbitrary arrest led many people to conclude that Congress and the "Sons of Liberty" were greater tyrants than Britain's king and parliament. Loyalists asked how self-proclaimed defenders of private property and personal liberty could be so scornful of others' rights. The rebels used compulsory oaths to support the rebellion and obligatory enlistment in the rebel militia to detect, and then to punish opponents and neutrals. Customs collectors who refused to resign their office, when confronted by a mob, were smeared with hot tar, covered in feathers, and beaten. Captured Loyalist soldiers were sometimes hanged. Loyal Americans were vilified as "Tories" and as traitors to a country that did not yet exist. Their property was routinely stolen. Being less aggressive, Loyalists were slow to react to the rebels and they lacked the organizational unity of their rivals. Many were disarmed before they could do anything and more were intimidated by the revolutionaries' persecution of political opponents.

The aboriginal peoples who fought as allies of Britain's king had more to fear from the revolutionaries than from the crown, whose 1763 Royal Proclamation protected their lands from unscrupulous buyers, speculators and squatters. Leading rebels, such as George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, speculated in native lands and were eager to despoil Indians of their territory.



*Loyalist, his hands and feet tied, is being brushed with tar while the mob shouts and ridicules him.*

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## ***Who were the Loyalists?***

In the past, Patriotic Americans and Loyalist descendants imagined that the Loyal Americans came from the educated and wealthy elite of the colonies. This characterization satisfied their descendants' social aspirations and it sustained the American myth that "Tories" were only protecting a privileged position against the revolutionary "common people." Royal Government officials and Anglican clergymen, whose church had the reigning monarch as its head, were almost uniformly loyal to the crown. They, along with wealthy merchants and university-educated professionals, were prominent among the Loyalists. Such people, however, were less than a fifth of known Loyalists and they preferred to go to the British West Indies or Great Britain rather than become pioneers in the remaining territories of British North America.

It is estimated that over 80,000 people went into exile after the war and that half fled to the colonies that became the Dominion of Canada. A greater number, whose politics were not well known, remained in the United States of America. For some, exile began with the evacuation of Boston in 1775 and, after the 1783 peace treaty, large numbers escaped to the north. Despite a treaty obligation to restore confiscated property, some states, such as Massachusetts, continued the persecution of known Loyalists and appropriation of their property. Most state governments ignored their treaty obligations. Almost 30,000 Loyalists found a refuge in the Old Province of Nova Scotia, while some 7,000 to 8,000 travelled overland to the Old Province of Quebec, doubling the number of "Old Subjects" born under the British crown living amid a French-Canadian majority. Loyalist refugees were not all of English stock; they included immigrants from Scotland and the German states, people of Dutch and Iroquois ancestry, and former African-American slaves. Culturally and racially, they had little in common apart from their political principles and their opposition to the revolution.

Two sources identify the social makeup of the Loyalist exiles in the remaining North American colonies. A 1785 list of the 500 "free men" of the newly-incorporated city of Saint John, New Brunswick, identified half as craftsmen; only 17 per cent were merchants, lawyers and "gentlemen." About 2,600 Loyalists appeared before a British commission that held hearings in Saint John, Halifax, and Montreal to enquire into their losses. Of the 2,600, half were farmers, a fifth were merchants and shopkeepers, another fifth were government officials, professionals, clergymen, and traders, and the remaining tenth were craftsmen. From these examples, it appears that over half of the refugees in what became Canada were farmers or craftsmen and that the exiles were a cross-section of American colonial society.

## ***Making a New Home***

The exiled Loyalists retained an attachment to their legal and political rights as British subjects and made their wishes known to Britain's government in petitions and letters. Dissatisfaction with the Halifax administration among settlers on the Nova Scotian mainland led to the creation of the Loyalist province of New Brunswick in 1784. Cape Breton too was given its own administration, although it failed to attract more than a few hundred refugees; more were drawn to St. John's Island [future Prince Edward Island], which had been a separate colony since 1769. In western Quebec, Loyalist settlers from New York, Pennsylvania and New England objected to French civil law, the seigneurial landholding system, and the absence of an elected legislative assembly. Their complaints were heeded and, in 1791, the province of Upper Canada was created to satisfy their desire for English laws, representative government, and freehold land tenure. This was the origin of the Province of Ontario, whose Latin motto is "as loyal she began, so she shall ever remain." Resettlement of the Loyalists was aided by land grants, and the British government's provision of rations, seed grain, and farm implements.

Later American settlers in Upper Canada, who had responded to Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe's 1792 offer of free land in return for taking an oath of allegiance to the crown, were mockingly called "late Loyalists." Their professed loyalty to the king was questionable. Some historians have confused the two groups and claimed, erroneously, that the prospect of free land in Canada made many people Loyalists during the revolution. In the 1770s few Loyalists anticipated defeat, exile and the need for land far from their current homes.

Although well-educated refugees filled government positions in New Brunswick, on Cape Breton, and Prince Edward Island, rank-and-file Loyalists acquired few lasting privileges. In Upper and Lower Canada, thanks to Governor-General Lord Dorchester's 1789 decree, their children were entitled to free land grants and were given the distinguishing initials "U.E." in the Land Board's registry and in militia rolls. This was, wrote Dorchester, an allusion "to their great principle: The Unity of the Empire." Because British colonial officials found the Loyalists' manners too American and since the exiles were often critical of government, governors preferred to appoint British immigrants to the legislative and executive councils of the colonies. Loyalists and their descendants were more likely to be employed in the lower levels of government as local Justices of the Peace and as militia officers. Many African-American Loyalists in Nova Scotia resented the reduced benefits they were given and accepted an offer of resettlement in Sierra Leone, Africa. When confronting radical reformers in Upper Canada during the 1830s, administrators appealed to the Loyalists' bitter experience of republican persecution to win support for conservative politicians as the best protection against mob-rule and anarchy.

## ***Canada's Loyalist Heritage***

Loyalist exiles populated regions close to the American border in New Brunswick and Upper Canada. They secured those areas for the British Empire and, eventually, for the Dominion of Canada. Had these areas remained unsettled, they probably would have been colonized by Americans and annexed to the United States. In the War of 1812 Loyalist families provided a core of trustworthy colonists to fight against American invaders. Today, over two million Canadians can trace their ancestry back to these faithful exiles. Their political legacy still marks Canada. Historian W.S. MacNutt said that "because they were Loyalists, we are Canadians." He was referring to the heritage that distinguishes English-speaking Canadians from Americans. Canada is still a constitutional monarchy in a hemisphere dominated by post-revolutionary republics. Canadians believe in political change by peaceful evolution rather than change by armed force. In comparison with the United States and other countries in the Americas, Canada's expansion and development have been accomplished with little violence. International diplomacy and peacekeeping are natural vocations for Canadians. Because fidelity to the crown did not require adherence to one political ideology, Canadian political life accepts a wide range of parties. American citizenship demands allegiance to the revolutionaries' doctrines and the range of political choices is limited. This slows the pace of political evolution. The Loyalists were a people of various faiths and cultures; they were the original "multicultural" Canadians. Although later generations often failed to live up to their example of cultural tolerance, that ideal has now become a central pillar of modern Canadian identity. As a consequence, Canadians have a political, rather than a cultural, nationality. Like the American Loyalists, they value political and legal institutions inherited from Great Britain. Today's Canadian identity is not derived solely from the king's faithful American subjects who found a refuge here, but it was they who laid the foundations of Canada's inclusive democracy under the crown.