

# VI

## BLACK LOYALISTS

Among those who left the American colonies and came to the Atlantic Region immediately following the Revolution were more than 3000 Black Loyalists. Many had served with the British forces in such units as the Black Guides or the Black Pioneers as well as Loyalist Regiments. Others were servants or slaves of Loyalists and had no choice but to come with their masters. Wallace Brown estimates that approximately 1,200 Blacks came in this way. Some households had at least 20 slaves and advertisements for slave auctions routinely appeared in newspapers. Only one settlement, the Quaker community in Charlotte County at Beaver Harbour, prohibited slaves. At the top of their agreement was written, "No Slave Masters Admitted." The last recorded sale of a slave in New Brunswick was in 1797. By that time masters were beginning to pay wages and slavery was slowly disappearing.

The largest group of Black Loyalists, some 1,500, settled in Birchtown, named after Brigadier-General Samuel Birch who had befriended Blacks in New York. Located across the bay from Shelburne, this was the largest free black settlement outside Africa.

The story of Black Loyalists is one of broken promises. The British had promised the same treatment to Blacks and Whites but the majority of Blacks received no land, and those who did found that grants were smaller than those of Whites, and located on poorer soil. Black farms at Birchtown averaged 34 acres while white farms amounted to 74 acres. Blacks received only a fraction of the promised 3 years provisions and, as a result, slid into chronic poverty.

When Shelburne's population fell, employment opportunities for Blacks decreased. In 1784 race riots broke out in Shelburne as disbanded white soldiers

tried to drive away the Blacks who lived in Birchtown and worked in Shelburne, because they provided cheap labour and competed with Whites for jobs. The bitter winter of 1798 brought terrible famine and death to the Blacks of Birchtown.

It was not uncommon for Blacks to be kidnapped and sold back into slavery or to suffer from the double standard of justice whereby Blacks were given much harsher punishments than Whites for crimes. At least 200 Blacks left the Birchtown settlement for New Brunswick.

In 1785 the government of New Brunswick said that Blacks were to form themselves into Companies and they would then receive 50 acres each near Saint John and additional land when they proved they could develop it. There were no such restrictions on Whites. Eventually 3 large tracts were surveyed: one on the Nerepis River, another on Milkish Creek, and a third near St. Martins.

Blacks faced the same problems as Whites but had the additional difficulties of lack of experience, money, and household goods. As a result, free

Blacks tended to gravitate to towns where they could find work as servants and labourers.

Leadership was provided mainly by such preachers and teachers as Thomas Peters and Boston King. Stephen Blucke was probably the most successful Black Loyalist. He ran a school in Birchtown and owned 200 acres, a fine home, and a pew in Christ Church, Shelburne. A colonel in the militia and protege of Lieutenant-Governor Parr, he tried to persuade the government to stop the movement to Sierra Leone which disenchanted Blacks undertook when they feared that their

future in the Maritimes held little promise.

As a result of the recruitment efforts of Peters



and John Clarkson of the Sierra Leone Company, a total of 1,196 Blacks agreed to resettle in Africa and embarked at Halifax on January 9, 1792. Of these, nearly 600 were from the Birchtown -Shelburne area, 220 from the Preston area, 180 from the Annapolis-Digby area, and 200 from New Brunswick. The fleet of 15 ships got under way on January 15 and arrived in Freetown Harbour between February 26 and

March 9, 1792.

This departure left the remaining Blacks in the region with a leadership vacuum for decades. The sense of community had been established, however, and the unending struggle for fair treatment and equality in which they had been engaged continues to inspire their descendants and those of later migrations to the Maritimes until the present day.

## THOMAS PETERS

Thomas Peters was a runaway slave who had served as a Sergeant in the Black Pioneers, a Loyalist corps formed from slaves who had been given their freedom when they escaped behind British lines and agreed to fight for the king. The Dunmore Proclamation, issued by John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, governor of Virginia stated

*... I do hereby further declare all indentured servants, Negroes or others, (appertaining to Rebels) free, that are able and willing to bear arms, they joining His Majesty troops, as soon as may be, for the more speedily reducing the Colony to a proper sense of their duty, to His Majesty's crown and dignity.*

Peters was one of the leaders who arrived with the Black Pioneers at Port Roseway (Shelburne with the Spring Fleet in 1783, and immediately began clearing land and building barracks. Most Blacks who stayed near Shelburne established their own settlement across the bay at Birchtown. By the summer of 1784, Peters and some of the Black Pioneers mustered at Digby. Although Blacks had been promised the same treatment as white soldiers, they were not treated equally.

He was so disenchanted with the poor treatment his people received that, in 1785, he wrote to the government in New Brunswick asking them for a grant for his people. They assured him that "all who would come...would receive land in the same

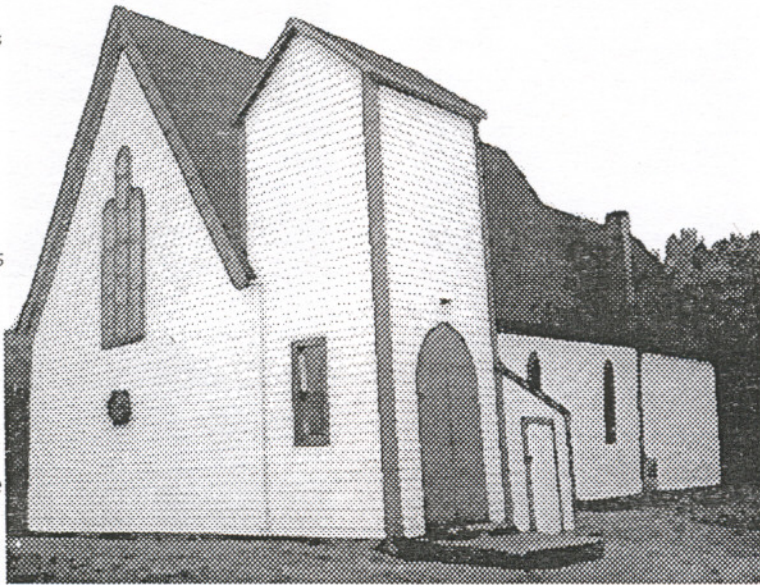
proportion as all Loyalists and disbanded soldiers". On the strength of this promise he and his followers went to Saint John. Although white Loyalists routinely received grants of at least 100 acres, the Blacks received only small town lots or grants of 50 acres.

There were many problems. The Black Loyalists did not have many strong leaders and they lacked experience in making decisions. They were not accustomed to the harsh winters. As a result many of them gave up hope of developing their own land and went to Saint John to act as labourers.

The charter of the City of Saint John (1785) did not include Blacks as eligible to be free citizens and any who were not freemen were limited in their activities. The mayor, however, was empowered to issue special licences to any "people of colour" who were "good, decent, and honest persons" so they could "reside in Saint John and carry on trade or

business." There is no evidence that any such licences were issued.

In 1790, acting as a leader of the black population of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, Peters took a petition to the British government stressing problems they were facing obtaining grants. While there, he learned of the Sierra Leone Company which promised free transportation of Blacks to a British colony in Africa which would be governed by Blacks, and in which there would be no slavery.



This Loyalist church at Birchtown has been restored by the Black Loyalist Society, due to its architectural significance, and is still in use today.

Returning to New Brunswick, Peters began a campaign to organize a group of Blacks from the Maritimes to try to start over again in Africa. As a result

of his efforts many Blacks left New Brunswick for Sierra Leone.

## BOSTON KING

Boston King was born about 1760 on a plantation near Charleston, S.C. He was apprenticed to a carpenter at the age of 16, but ran away to escape punishment, joined the British army, and eventually made his way to the headquarters of General Cornwallis. After the fall of Charleston, he went to New York, where a lack of tools stopped him from working at his trade and so he was forced to do odd jobs. In New York he married Peggy, a freed slave from Wilmington. He went to sea, and, after many adventures, including being returned to slavery temporarily, managed to get back to New York. Here he and Peggy received certificates to support their claim to freedom.

They arrived in Shelburne in August of 1783 with the majority of the Blacks and settled in Birchtown, the area across the bay from Shelburne. There he began to work as a carpenter. There is no record of his receiving any land but it could be that he did not pursue the matter because he had a job, a home, and room for a garden.

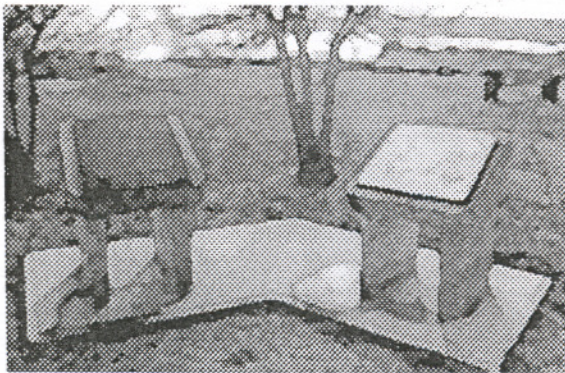
He was much more interested in religion and began preaching in 1785 after he and Peggy had intense religious experiences. When government rations ended in 1786, few Blacks were able to raise enough food for themselves because

they had the smallest and poorest grants. They were forced to hire themselves out as labourers to the whites for whatever they were willing to pay.

King built chests, boats, and worked on fishing boats. In 1791, he and Peggy moved to Preston near Dartmouth across from Halifax and worked for a gentleman and preached. An agent from the Sierra Leone Company arrived presently and the Kings decided, along with virtually all of the other Blacks in Preston, to emigrate to Sierra Leone. In January 1792, 1190 Black Loyalists from Nova Scotia sailed for Sierra Leone from Halifax.

The British government had not made adequate preparation for their arrival and so the settlers had to begin again building homes and becoming established. An outbreak of malaria in April took the lives of many, including Peggy. When the land grants were surveyed and issued the settlers discovered that their grants amounted to 5 acres instead of the promised 20.

King continued to work as a carpenter and to preach. In 1793, Governor Richard Dawes appointed King missionary and school teacher. In March 1794 he went to England to study and preach, returning to Sierra Leone in 1796. It was there that he died about 1802.



This monument erected in July of 1996 to commemorate Black Settlers, overlooks the site of Birchtown.

Artwork on the second plaque depicts the passage to freedom from slavery through the General Birch Certificate. General Samuel Birch befriended Blacks in New York and assisted in the establishment of Birchtown.