

LOYALIST SETTLEMENT ON PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

Until 1769, the Island of St. John was part of Nova Scotia. The first European settlers were Acadians. In 1767, the island was divided into 67 townships and granted to 17 friends of the Crown, who were supposed to settle the island and pay quit rents to the government. These people and their descendants were the notorious "absentee landlords" who took the blame for the slow development of the island, and for resulting problems islanders hoped Confederation with Canada would solve in 1872.

Orlo Jones states that the population of the island at the time of its separation from Nova Scotia in 1769 was 18 English and 204 French. Cpt. Walter Patterson was the first Governor. In 1776, four companies of Provincials, under the command of Major H. Hurlihy, were sent from New York to defend the island. In 1779, these were the first Loyalists to petition the government for land. Their petition was denied, although five other proprietors were allowed to purchase land in 1781.

In June 1783, the proprietors agreed to relinquish a quarter of their land, amounting to 109,000 acres, to the government so that it could be granted to deserving Loyalists and disbanded soldiers. In October of that year, in the mistaken belief that the British government was going to furnish passage to any Loyalists who wished to come to St. John's Island, Governor Patterson issued the following message throughout British North America:

Whereas the Proprietors of this Island have very generously given up a considerable portion of their estates to be distributed among such of the Refugees, Provincial Troops or other American Emigrants, as are desirous to become its inhabitants, the lands to be granted by the Governor and Council in the same proportion and on the same terms as are offered in Nova Scotia, and to be given out of the different townships by Lot; in the fairest and most equitable manner, according to the quantity assigned for by each proprietor. ...in a few days after [the Refugees'] arrival at Charlottetown, they shall be put in possession of such lands, as they shall be entitled to, free of every expense. That they may depend upon the lands being good, neither mountainous, rocky nor swampy, contiguous to navigable harbours, many ports convenient for the fishery, and in every respect preferable to any lands unoccupied throughout His Majesty's American Dominion.

Shelburne proved woefully inadequate to serve as a centre for settlement, and therefore became a point of departure to other Maritime areas. After the terrible winter of 1783-4, six boatloads (800-1,000 civilian and military refugees) came to the island from Shelburne. Of these, about 600 stayed. From September of 1783 to December of 1785, 208 land grants were made to disbanded troops from the island, as well as others who had disbanded in New York and Rhode Island. Military grants were made according to rank. Most of the disbanded troops clustered in the eastern part of the island, in areas more appropriate for fishing than farming. Although the government gave generous amounts of lumber to the Loyalists, other items like bronze hinges were not practical.

Between June 1784 and November 1785, 153 civilian Loyalists received grants — 500 acres if married, 300 if single. Thomas Hooper brought 12 families from New Jersey to the Bedeque Bay area, and 30 civilian families from the St. John River valley settled near Summerside.

Problems for Loyalists on the island began when proprietors failed to honour their commitments and denied Loyalists legal title to their land; the result was that newcomers had to become tenants or leave. Because of this, there was an outward migration from 1786 to 1795. By the time the government forced the proprietors to recognize Loyalists' titles to land in 1793, many had left.