

## An Interview with Stephen Davidson

Beginning with the September 24, 2006 edition of *Loyalist Trails*, Stephen Davidson has contributed 300 articles to the UELAC's weekly newsletter. Before the Feb. 17, 2013 publication date, *Loyalist Trails* editor, Doug Grant, sat down with Stephen for a virtual interview to talk about the last six and a half years.

**Doug Grant: How do you introduce yourself in a sentence or two?**

Stephen: With great difficulty! It's not easy for a teacher (even a recently retired one) to be brief. I'm someone who likes a good story, and early in life I found that the best stories were the true ones – history.

**DG: What drew you to loyalist history?**

SD: As the son of two New Brunswickers, I grew up aware of my relatives' pride in their loyalist history. Once I started to research the thirteen couples who make up my known loyalist ancestors, I kept tripping over amazing stories of ordinary people who had to endure and overcome extraordinary times. By the time I had finished piecing together the life of one set of ancestors, I had become addicted to learning about the stories of other loyalists, whether they were related to me or not.

**DG: Your first article for *Loyalist Trails* was about Polly Dibblee. An ancestor?**

SD: No, she happened to travel on the same evacuation ship that brought one set of my ancestors to Saint John. But, like Helen of Troy, she launched her own version of "a thousand ships". After her story was published in a New Brunswick newspaper (and *Loyalist Trails*), I was invited to serve as a consultant for two loyalist websites being created by the University of New Brunswick – and I began to contribute to *Loyalist Trails*, using stray stories from my earlier research.

**DG: Were you a UELAC member at the time?**

SD: That came later. In fact, I didn't think that my involvement with *Loyalist Trails* would last very long. You may remember that in April of 2007 I sent you an e-mail saying I wasn't sure how many articles I had left in me. That was after submitting my 18<sup>th</sup> story!

**DG: And then within a few months you were contributing an article to each issue. What changed?**

SD: As I discovered new websites on the internet, one resource would lead to another which would lead to another. Suddenly, I realized that I had access to genealogical records, archives, out-of-print books, and data that would be the source material for exploring every facet of the loyalist experience. Wallace Hale, a public historian in New Brunswick, kindly shared his Fort Havoc archives with me. Trips to used book stores produced treasures of their own. There's been no turning back ever since; stories practically write themselves.

**DG: Do you have a favourite type of loyalist story?**

SD: Any documents that are written by the loyalists themselves (such as diaries, letters, or compensation claims) are always exciting. The people of the era speak for themselves without any of the baggage that historians have added (or the chapters that they have ignored which pertain) to the loyalist story.

**DG: Ignored?**

SD: For generations the story of loyalists has been told as if they were all men of English ancestry. Stories of Africans, women, children and adherents of minority religions were left out, thereby diminishing a very rich tapestry. There is no *one* loyalist experience or story, but a variety of experiences. When the data found in primary sources shatters the old stereotypes, we can see the loyalists for the all-too-human (and very compelling) folks that they were. Their failures and foibles (as well as their perseverance and courage) make them people with whom we can identify.

**DG: Your e-mail address is included at the end of each of your articles. Do you get much reaction from *Loyalist Trails* readers?**

SD: I get at least one letter for each week's article, sometimes many. It depends on the topic. Over the years, genealogists, historians, and re-enactors have all written me, asking further questions or sharing a lost nugget from the past. Sometimes these groups don't connect as directly as they could, and it has been a pleasure to be able to introduce one type of enthusiast with another.

**DG: Can you give some examples?**

SD: Graduate students working on their theses, family genealogists trying to track down loyalist ancestors, and even local historical societies that are developing material for site tours have all been in touch with me. This past summer, a Texan couple took their vacation in the Maritimes after I had shared some data with them about a newly discovered loyalist ancestor. They kindly took my wife and me to supper when they came to Halifax, and I was able to give them a tour of the city. It was an "instant friendship" that all began with their reading a *Loyalist Trails* article.

**DG: Has anyone asked your permission to reprint one of your *Trails* features?**

SD: To date I have given 27 different groups, publications or individuals permission to reprint my *Loyalist Trails* articles. Some groups have reprinted as many as four of my features; it's a great compliment. My research has appeared in newsletters and genealogical magazines in Texas, California, New York, North Carolina, and Maine besides numerous newspapers and UELAC branch newsletters across Canada. A Blue Badge tourist guide in London is using my research in her tours of Westminster Abby; school children in Calgary put on a play based on one of my stories, and two middle school students in Colorado bravely did a history fair project

using my story about Washington's loyalist mother. It shows that once people are exposed to stories of the loyalists, there is a keen audience eager to read more. I'm also pleased that the archives for both Westminster Abbey and the Black Loyalist Heritage Society of Nova Scotia have my articles in their collections.

**DG: Have you been able to share your research in other ways?**

SD: The teacher in me has enjoyed any and every opportunity to stand before a group and retell the loyalist story. To date, I have spoken at the 2008 Dominion UELAC Conference, the Maritime Regional Conference in 2010, and Ontario's Central West Regional Meeting in April of 2011. Meeting fellow "loyalist junkies" is always a hoot. I have also written loyalist features for *Canada's History Magazine* and *R.E.A.L.*, a national children's magazine.

**DG: You retired in September. What's next?**

SD: As you and I established early in our relationship, my articles for *Loyalist Trails* are chapters for a future series of books about loyalist history. In the fall of 2008, my first collection of *Loyalist Trails* research was going to be published under the title *Obnoxious Rascals: Forgotten Stories of the Loyalist Refugees*. However, that was the beginning of the recent recession; my publisher went out of business before the book saw the light of day. Since then I have written hundreds of articles that I would really like to see collected into a book or two. Besides finding a publisher for my historic research, I'd also like to see the manuscript for my young adult novel about New Brunswick's first Black Loyalist child go to print.

**DG: Any chance of 300 more articles for *Loyalist Trails*?**

SD: It's entirely possible! I've got a very large file on my computer packed with "stories-to-do". As long as someone else finds the loyalist era to be fascinating, I'll have a story to share.