

Moving On

*Black Loyalists in the
Afro-Atlantic World*

Edited by
John W. Pulis

MOVING ON

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This collection is dedicated to the memory of Benjamin A. Quarles (1904-1996) whose pioneering work made this publication possible, and to the many as yet unknown Black Loyalists whose stories remain to be told.

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Introduction

The American Revolution set in motion one of the largest migrations or diasporas in the Atlantic World. Known as “loyalists” because they sided with Great Britain, it has been estimated that somewhere between 200,000 and 500,000 Americans (African, European, and Native-American) were evacuated from colonial America and transported to Canada, England, Africa, Germany, and various island-societies in the West Indies during and after the Revolution.¹ The role and plight of the European or “white Loyalists” has received considerable attention. There is a large and extensive bibliography of monographs, edited collections, and popular literature describing their activities in Georgia, Florida, the Carolinas and the life they reconstituted in places like Canada, England, and the Bahamas.² We know a great deal less about their African American counterparts, and it is the role and plight of the “black Loyalists” that constitute the focus of this anthology.³

Like most conflicts, the American Revolution was fought on a number of fronts and arenas, from the military confrontations between the British and Continental forces to a war of words in which the meaning of political slogans was challenged and contested. This war of words was every bit as hard and as bitter as the military conflict in that it extended the strategies and logistics of a battlefield into the households of everyday Americans. The term Loyalist, for example, was deployed as a political appellation to mark and distinguish those Americans who remained loyal and sided with Great Britain from those who declared their independence and were known as “Patriots.” Like muskets and canon, the term was used in a discursive arena—a war of proclamations, declarations, and oaths—and it was not uncommon for families to split over the issue of identity and affiliation.⁴

The importance of proclamations and declarations is perhaps no more evident than in the role that African Americans played in the Revolution. The British seized upon the idea of declarations and drafted a series of proclamations (beginning with Dunmore and continuing with Gage, Howe, and Clinton) in which they offered to emancipate the enslaved toilers of Patriots in return for providing services to the Crown. These were without question some of the most subversive documents drafted during the Revolution. In addition to exposing a contradiction between the theory and practice of freedom, it drove a wedge between and divorced republican ideals and the plight of the Patriots from that of their enslaved and African American counterparts. We must not deceive ourselves into thinking that British proclamations were part of any altruistic or libertarian agenda on the part of the metropole. They were reactionary in design and were intended to disable the Patriots rather than to advance any grand scheme for emancipation. Freedom was not offered to the enslaved toilers of Loyalists (although a good many ran away), nor were such proclamations extended to the West Indies, and we can only speculate as to the fate of black Loyalists had the British succeeded.⁵

Along with subverting republican ideologies, linking freedom to service withdrew the labor power of African Americans from the cause of the Patriots. Black labor had been instrumental in the settlement of colonial America, and this was certainly the case during the Revolution. In addition to military formations such as the Ethiopian Regiment and the Black Brigade, blacks served as “followers of army and flag,” and filled such informal but necessary roles as laborers, teamsters, harbor pilots, and spies, as well as being aides and personal servants to British officers. The war drained close to £500,000 per month in direct military expenditures, and black labor was essential in that along with releasing British units for other duties, it helped defray direct costs to the Exchequer.⁶

Blacks were by no means passive recipients of British proclamation. As Quarles has commented, African Americans declared their independence from slavery, abandoned their former places of abode, traveled to British-controlled areas, and in so doing precipitated what in all probability was the single largest slave revolt in the Americas.⁷ Absolute numbers are difficult to verify with any degree of certainty, but estimates initially proposed by Herbert Aptheker (1941) ranging somewhere between 80,000 and 100,000 have recently been substantiated by Sylvia Frey (1995), suggesting that the number of black

Loyalists may have equaled if not exceeded the number of their white counterparts.⁸ If service constituted agency, then that sense of empowerment was carried over to the social and domestic arena as well. Blacks seized upon British proclamations as opportunities to reconstitute families and, although the outcome of the war was by no means a foregone conclusion, they formed communities in the British-controlled areas of New York, Savannah, and Charleston. The New York community expanded from less than 200 prior to the British re-occupation (1776) to close to 4,000 on the eve of the evacuation (1783), transforming it into one of the largest free black communities in the Americas. These were by no means transient communities, but closely resembled the Maroon societies that coalesced in Brazil and the Caribbean. Observers in both New York and Charleston have commented that a distinctly black or “Ethiopian” society developed that enabled African Americans to reconstitute families with both intergenerational and extra-kinship relations.⁹

When compared with other areas of the Atlantic World, the history of the black Loyalists remains somewhat marginal and underdeveloped. The chapters in this collection pick up the story where the classical and pioneering work of Herbert Aptheker, Benjamin Quarles, James Walker, Ellen Wilson, and Mary Beth Norton have left off. Two of the eight are revised and expanded versions of reading drafts presented at the First Annual Meeting of the Institute of Early American History and Culture (1995), and the remaining six were written specifically for this volume.¹⁰

Given that African Americans served and fought in military formations to gain their freedom, it seems fitting to open this collection with a discussion of one such formation. In “The Black Pioneers and Others: The Military Role of Black Loyalists in the American War for Independence,” Todd Braisted discusses how, when, and why this unit was formed and the many roles it performed throughout the war. Unlike the Black Brigade and Ethiopian Regiment, the Black Pioneers were not deployed as a formation, but were broken up into smaller units or “companies,” and were assigned to British and provincial regiments. Drawing on a vast array of primary materials (in Canadian, British, and American repositories), Braisted has focused his attention on individuals, rather than documenting military history in the standard sense of the term. This is a detailed discussion by an independent scholar who has provided us with vivid and striking descriptions of individuals who served as musicians, trumpeters, and servants with no

pay in their quest for freedom. Freedom carried multiple meanings—the case of John Thompson is a good example. Thompson was a member of the free black community on Long Island who left for New York where he enlisted as a Pioneer not long after the British occupation. Long Island was the scene of a protracted and bitter confrontation between Loyalists and Patriots, and British proclamations were translated by people like Thompson to mean freedom of opportunity. Like Moses Baker and other free blacks in colonial New York, Thompson was one of many who envisioned and sought to realize through service a future that differed from a life of servitude among Patriots on Long Island.

Evacuation and transport were the first steps in an exceedingly complex and difficult process of insertion into pre-existing and often hostile societies. In “Hidden from History: Black Loyalists at Country Harbour, Nova Scotia,” Carole Troxler tells a little-known story or chapter in the diaspora. The Loyalists who settled at Country Harbour, unlike those from New York, were evacuated from what was then the colony of East Florida. As the war drew to a close, East Florida became one of several possible locations set aside by the British as a home away from home for Loyalists from the southern provinces. However, when East Florida was exchanged with the Spanish for the Bahamas, a number of white and black Loyalists opted for relocation to Canada, where they settled at Country Harbour, about 100 miles from Halifax, Nova Scotia. As elsewhere, white Loyalists received the best lands and plots in the towns, which left less desirable lands to blacks. As in the Bahamas, whites attempted to indenture (if not re-enslave) free blacks—not for labor on plantations, but to procure additional land and provisions for themselves. Drawing on allotment and provision lists, Troxler has documented a gradual and systematic process by which free blacks became “servants” and hence dependent upon the white Loyalists. Beginning first in Halifax and later in Country Harbour, white Loyalists listed nonfamily members or black Loyalists as servants in order to qualify for extra allotments of land and provisions. Whether dependency was voluntary or not is a moot point because with the best lands allocated to whites there was little that free blacks could do to support themselves. According to Troxler, this process reached a climax in the years before migration to Sierra Leone. The plight of the Country Harbour blacks improved somewhat after their departure and they moved to Halifax, where they joined with those who remained in Canada.

Life in Canada was by no means easy for the black Loyalists. In "Birchtown: The History and Material Culture of an Expatriate African American Community," Laird Niven and Stephen A. Davis have drawn upon the methods of historical archaeology to reconstruct the story of one such community. Named after Samuel Birch, a magistrate in New York who issued the certificates of freedom, Birchtown was one of several townships laid out for Loyalists (both white and black). Unlike in the United States, the legacy of the Loyalists has become part of a folk or popular mythology in Canada, and there is little about their history that is not political. Stories about Birchtown have been told and retold over the years, and it was widely rumored that African Americans lived in caves. Preliminary excavations ascertaining the location of the community were initiated in the summer of 1990 in response to members of the local (black) community who feared that a construction project would obliterate forever all that remained of Birchtown. Initial excavations proved futile, but a test site excavated the following year unearthed what appeared to be artifacts associated with the late eighteenth century. Like all such endeavors, excavation and analysis are ongoing; but the authors have sketched an overview, albeit in somewhat clinical terms, of a house and the remains of what was left behind. As with Martin's Hundred in Virginia, historical archaeology and material culture can open a window on life in Canada and help answer questions such as: How did these people live? What types and styles of houses did they build and why? Whereas it was not uncommon for white Loyalists to dismantle and ship houses along with their contents for reassembly abroad, there was little opportunity for blacks to transport wealth in the form of material possessions, and, if this site is any indication, reconstituting a community in Birchtown must have been nearly impossible for them. These were indeed sparse habitations that measured about 12 by 15 feet, and were literally dug some 10 feet into the ground with a wooden planked floor, a pitched roof, and a trapdoor entrance above. According to the authors, the design and artifact array closely resemble the Carolina slave pattern. While suitable to the temperate climate of the southern provinces, outdoor hearths and living spaces afforded little protection from the harsh Canadian winters, and the meager and thin glacial soils offered even less to those who grew provisions in Georgia and Carolina. Further excavation and analysis will tell us more, but it is not surprising that, when confronted by a harsh climate, a less than sympathetic local

government, and a future based on dependency these people opted to relocate.

Whereas Niven and Davis tell us about material culture, Gretchen Gerzina discusses cultural history and the plight of those who became known as the "Black Poor" in London. Like Florida, New York and Canada, England was one of several ports of disembarkation in what was becoming a diaspora within a diaspora. Along with discussing the plight of about 400 or so black loyalists, Gerzina asks why England and suggests that events such as the Somerset case and the existence of a large black population had an influence on African Americans and their linking of England with freedom. As Fryer and others have documented, England had a sizable black population long before the Revolution, and blacks arrived as servants, sailors, and as students sent to England for an education by wealthy and influential African families. When compared with colonial America, life in England was less restrictive and this was especially so when in 1772 slavery was deemed in violation of English common law. Knowledge of the Somerset case and the relative freedom accorded to blacks circulated through informal networks and had a direct influence on identity formation in colonial America. The choice, Gerzina suggests, was between an Afro-British identity linked with loyalism, freedom, and evacuation to England and an African American identity linked with patriotism, enslavement, and the emergent United States. While England was synonymous with freedom, there were few opportunities in London, and despite the fact that a large number of these migrants were skilled and literate, they became the "black poor," adding an American dimension to what E. P. Thompson has called "the making of the English working class."

Life in England was little improved over that in Canada, and it is not surprising that, when presented with the opportunity to relocate once more, many opted to do so. As enslaved Americans who had fought for their own independence, black Loyalists carried the theory and practice of freedom with them, and were well aware through informal networks that creating a new life abroad would be anything other than a hard and difficult task. In "The Black Loyalists in Sierra Leone," Wallace Brown discusses some of the problems the black Loyalists encountered in Sierra Leone. Two cohorts were transported to Africa: the first (known as "Old Settlers") arrived from London in 1787, and the second (known as "Nova Scotians") arrived from Canada in 1792. Unlike the earlier evacuations, these were private undertakings conducted under the auspices of the Sierra Leone Company, a joint

venture underwritten by the British government that was sponsored by abolitionists, evangelicals, and philanthropists such as Thomas and John Clarkson and Granville Sharp. Similar to the East India Company, the Sierra Leone Company was a corporate enterprise, and their recruiting of the London and the Canadian blacks (and later Jamaican Maroons) was designed to produce a profit. Armed with republican ideals and the experiences of life in Canada and England, black Loyalists challenged local hegemony, and Brown discusses some of the problems that unfolded between old settlers and Nova Scotians, between the new arrivals and the indigenous population, and, most importantly, between black aspirations for self-determination and the reality of colonial governance.

Whereas Brown has sketched a general picture, Clegg has focused on the micropolitics of struggle and confrontation between the "Company" and the "repatriates" in the personalities of Thomas Peters, a former Black Pioneer and John Clarkson, the younger brother of Thomas Clarkson, who assumed leadership when the Canadians arrived. Like its East Asian counterpart, the Company held a monopoly (granted by charter) and problems arose over the allocation of lands, the collection of taxes or quit-rents, and laws or "codes" enacted by the Company to curtail black entrepreneurship. Although civil or colonial society was organized into black households ("tythingmen" and "hundredors") and universal suffrage was the norm, the Company was an oligarchy who appointed the governor and a legislative council, reproducing in Africa precisely what the loyalists fought so hard to dismantle during the Revolution. No blacks were appointed to the Council and a struggle ensued, a transfer and continuation of the Revolution to Sierra Leone, that led to the "rebellion of 1800" and a "black declaration of independence" not from England but the Company. Although the revolt was not successful, the issue remained at the fore and accelerated the transition from Company to Crown Colony rule in 1808.

The transfer from Company to Crown Colony status did little to resolve the issue of self-government. While Clegg has focused on the clash between Peters and Clarkson, Blyden has examined the influence the Loyalists wielded on those African Americans who remained in the United States and on "returnees," black Americans who migrated to Sierra Leone in the nineteenth-century. Blyden tells us about Paul Cuffee and David Coker, but the main thrust of her chapter concerns Edward Jones (the son of a free black family in Charleston) and his

interactions, oppositional and antagonistic, with colonial governors. Microhistory and cultural biography are proven methods of historical analysis; thus Blyden documents the who, when, and why of a conflict between Jones and a series of colonial governors in the nineteenth century. What is interesting and insightful is just how powerful and persuasive republican notions remained a half-century after the Revolution and how we can read and explore in the life history of Edward Jones and Thomas Peters the importance of ideals and the way everyday activities constituted politics.

Of the geographical areas discussed in this collection, we know the least about the West Indies. The final chapter takes us back to the New World and discusses the plight of black Loyalists in island-societies such as Jamaica. In "Bridging Troubled Waters," John Pulis discusses individuals such as Moses Baker and George Liele and the life they reconstituted for themselves in Jamaican or Creole society. As elsewhere in the Atlantic World, documenting the history of black Loyalists is often difficult. Drawing on records in Jamaican archives and in the Public Records Office, Pulis estimates that about 200 black Loyalists, some 5,000 slaves (along with an estimated 2,000 white Loyalists), and perhaps as many as 65,000 blacks seized as contraband were transported to the island both during and after the Revolution. Why Jamaica? Unlike England, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone, Jamaica was a slave-based plantation society and constituted precisely what African Americans were striving to escape. A survey of local records reveals that there was no en masse evacuation, as with Canada, and by and large most of those who arrived did so as enlisted personnel and military attaches and as aides and servants to British military officers and governors. The single largest contingent was a company of Black Pioneers ordered to Jamaica to assist in the British invasion of Pensacola and to defend Kingston from a French-Spanish invasion. A slightly smaller number arrived from South Carolina with certificates of freedom issued by Henry Clinton and colonial governors such as William Bull. Although few in number when compared to Nova Scotia, these people were by no means minor actors in local affairs. After documenting what he has called the "Jamaican diaspora," Pulis moves on to discuss the life histories of Moses Baker and George Liele and the social, political, and economic niche they carved for themselves in Creole society. Like Boston King and David George, Baker and Liele were black preachers and became spokesmen for the black community (free and enslaved). They wrote to evangelicals in Europe and America

protesting the passage of antipreaching laws by the Jamaica Assembly, and in so doing laid the basis for the practice of Afro-Christianity on the island.

In conclusion, the removal and settlement of the black Loyalists was accompanied by at least two earlier and not so insignificant evacuations that were constituent parts of the larger diaspora. The first was the movement of resident populations of enslaved blacks from America to the West Indies. It was not uncommon for Americans to have holdings in the West Indies as well as in North America, and enslaved blacks were frequently shifted from one location to another. When it became apparent that the Patriots might just succeed, planter-politicians such as William Bull (governor of South Carolina) began to remove the enslaved populations from the mainland to islands such as Jamaica, where they toiled on estates acquired before, during, and after the Revolution.¹¹ A second and much larger movement occurred as a result of the seizure and removal of enslaved blacks as contraband or "movable property." As Frey and Morgan have noted, both sides seized blacks in retaliation for houses and lands that were confiscated and destroyed during the war. Exact numbers are hard to determine, but Thomas Jefferson had estimated that Virginia lost 30,000 slaves, and it has been suggested that the enslaved population of the southern provinces plummeted by tens of thousands. A number of these people were transported in a lively but illicit traffic in contraband to the West Indies. As the Revolution expanded from a colonial into a global and multinational conflict, it disrupted the African labor trade and the West Indies became a destination for African Americans with *entrepôts* forming in the British Virgin Islands for their sale and re-export to islands like Jamaica. As with the black Loyalists in general, the plight of these people remains a mystery, and their influence on the formation and transformation on Creole or West Indian culture remains to be documented.¹²

NOTES

1. The term "diaspora" is one of the most frequently used metaphors associated with expatriate communities that share a tradition of dispersal, migration, and exile. As with all such constructs, it evokes the dual processes of connection and integration, disarticulation and rearticulation, and reconstitution and hybridity based on commonly shared experiences such as among those who

sided with Great Britain. For a recent survey of the term and its uses see, James Clifford, "Diaspora's," *Cultural Anthropology*, 1994, vol. 9, pp. 302-38.

2. The literature concerning Loyalists is voluminous and no bibliographic compilation is attempted here. Referred to as Tories, the good Americans, American Loyalists, black Loyalists, and/or refugees, the exodus of North Americans has attracted the attention of various scholars who have documented Loyalist communities in Canada, London, and Africa. See Mary Beth Norton, *The British-Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1972); Christopher Moore, *The Loyalists* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1984); Wallace Brown, *The King's Friends* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1965); and *The Good Americans* (New York: William Morrow, 1969); see Wilbur Siebert, *The Legacy of the American Revolution in the West Indies* (Boston: Gregg, 1972 [1913]) and Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, *Islands in the Stream* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1992), for overviews, estimates, and aggregate numbers.

3. See the pioneering work of William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots* (Boston: Robert F. Walcott, 1855); Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943); Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996 [1961]); James W.S.G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1976); Ellen Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1976); Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); Sylvia Frey, *Water from the Rock* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Graham R. Hodges, *The Black Loyalist Directory* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996) for African Americans and black Loyalists in the revolution.

4. For language, discourse, and a war of words, see J.C.D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970); Theodore Draper, *A Struggle for Power* (New York: Random House, 1996); and Pauline Maier, *American Scripture* (New York: Knopf, 1997); and see Sheila L. Skemp, *Benjamin and William Franklin: Father and Son, Patriot and Loyalists* (Boston: Bedford Books) for an overview of Patriots, Loyalists, and divided families.

5. See Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, Chap. 8, and Frey, *Water from the Rock*, Chap. 5 for Dunmore's proclamation. See Library of Congress, Broad-sides, January 4 and 11 for Campbell's Proclamation, and March 4, 1779, for Prevost, Parker, and Campbell's joint proclamation (Savannah, 1779); and see CO 5/181, pp. 122-59.

6. The British housed; provided rations, fuel, and candles for, and supported (via monies and remittances from their war chest) a “distressed” community of close to 40,000 African and European Loyalists. Remittances to the European community alone cost £7399.17.6 every 3 months. See British Headquarter Papers (hereafter BHQ) document numbers 6473 for salaries to loyalists; 6578 and 7970 for rations per diem; numbers 7258, 7729, 8252, and 8258 for quarterly remittances; see number 5505 for a pay scale of black carpenters in New York; and numbers 6582 and 10302 for “returns of the state of the military chest” and a balance sheet of £449,140 per month.

7. See Benjamin Quarles, “The Revolutionary War As a Black Declaration of Independence,” in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, *Slavery and Freedom* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1983), pp. 284-301; Gary B. Nash, “Forging Freedom,” in *Slavery and Freedom*, pp. 284-301; and James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Blacks, 1700-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

8. See Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts*, Chap. 2, and Frey, *Water from the Rock*, Chap. 7.

9. For the role of blacks in New York City and the formation of the black Loyalist community, see Graham Hodges, “Introduction,” *The Black Loyalist Directory* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. xi-xl; for Ethiopian balls and black culture in New York, see Thomas Jones, *History of New York during the Revolution*, 2 Vols. (New York: Arno Reprints, 1972 [1879]) and Thelma Foote, *Black Life in Colonial Manhattan, 1664-1786*. (Ph.D., Harvard University, 1992). For Charleston, see McCowen, *British Occupation*, p. 103-4; for Maroon communities, see Richard Price, *First Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1982).

10. See Vincent Carretta, *Unchained Voices* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1996) for an overview of black or Afro-British narratives; and see W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) for black mariners and informal networks of communication.

11. See BHQ, number 7213 (1) and (2) letter from John Cruden to Major C. Nesbit for Tortola; and numbers 5575 and 5924 for an exchange between General Alexander to Sir Guy Carleton in which Alexander proposes sending blacks off to St. Lucia where they can perform public service to pay for the cost of their transport. He adds that, “If they are valued here [*sic* St. Lucia], they will come very high, from the numbers already gone off.” See also numbers 4827, 5025, 10002, and 10473 for Wright and Georgia Loyalists against evacuation, especially number 10002 for “advantage in Jamaica”; number 4827 for slaves as “movable property”; number 5104 for request for shipping and 5268

(3), page 214, "list of transports to Jamaica"; number 8000 for extra tonnage; and 6877 and 6878 for cost. The British government paid approximately £647.7.6 to reimburse Lt. Governor John Graham of Georgia to hire six additional transports to remove the 1,560 negroes belonging to Wallace, Wright, Graham, and Knox to Jamaica.

12. See MS-17, photocopy of British Library, Papers, Tracts, and History Relating to Jamaica collected by Charles Edward Long, Add. Mss, 12435, 18 269-75, 18959-63, in the Special Collections, Elsa Goveia Library, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica. Edward Long was one of several planter-historians who maintained records and diaries about life and society in Jamaica. See Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution*, Chap. 6; Frey, *Water From the Rock*, Chap. 4. and p. 173; and Morgan, "Black Society in the Lowcountry, 1760-1810," in *Slavery and Freedom*, pp. 110-11.