



## Canada's First Refugees and Nation Builders

The United Empire Loyalists were folk living in Britain's Thirteen Colonies in North America who left their homes and came to what is now Canada in the aftermath of the American Revolution of 1776-83. They were people who wished to remain faithful subjects of the Crown and live under the legal and legislative institutions that were derived from it. To their desire was added necessity, the need to escape persecution by American republicans for their loyalty to Britain. And opportunity: some came to escape slavery. These were our nation's first political refugees. They had little in the way of material goods but possessed a strong resolve to settle where they could enjoy the peace, order, and good government they desired.

The Loyalists were of diverse cultural backgrounds and included individuals from Indigenous, English, Scottish, Irish, French, African, Dutch, and German ancestry. Thus, they were Canada's first multi-ethnic immigrants and so reflect our nation's contemporary society.

The transition to this land was not easy for them; indeed it was harrowing. The Loyalists fled in panic and confusion after the revolution, forced to leave behind most of their possessions and to make their way tortuously to territories that were isolated, forbidding, and wild. Shortages, harsh living conditions, and worry plagued them in hastily erected refugee camps. Many had to live in tents during the first winter. The wife of a soldier on the Saint John River wrote: "We pitched our tents in the shelter of the woods and tried to cover them with our spruce boughs. We used stones for our fireplaces. Our tents had no floors but the ground...how we lived through that winter, I barely know." Many didn't make it through the winter; others left with the relief fleets when they set sail the next spring. Those who did endure had to deal with delays in completing land surveys and shortages of tools and provisions. But the Loyalists' determination and resourcefulness assured the ultimate success of many of the new settlements. Within a generation, they

were well enough established that they were able to play a key role in repelling the American invaders in the War of 1812-14.

While the initial Loyalist presence was in what is now eastern Canada, with the building of the national railway and the determined attempt to ensure Canadian settlement of the West in the face of American expansionism, many Loyalist descendants, receiving land grants, came to the prairies to homestead during the 1880's, thus establishing a Loyalist presence in our part of the country.

### **Sharing the Loyalist Story**

One of the goals of the Manitoba Branch of the United Empire Loyalists is to bring together the descendants of families who remained loyal to the British Crown during and after the revolutionary war to learn their history and celebrate their story, but also to share that story with any persons interested in the Loyalist era and early Canadian history.

As part of our educational outreach we participate annually in the Red River Heritage Fair for junior high students and are glad to come to schools to offer presentations geared to the age level of the classes involved. Our presenters are always attired in authentic dress of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

We have also assembled materials that educators can use to develop lesson plans relating to Loyalist history.

We maintain a sizeable archives of Loyalist history at the offices of the Manitoba Genealogical Society and would be pleased to arrange a visit for any teacher who would like to come and peruse them.

To take advantage of any of these opportunities, please send an email to [uelmanitoba@gmail.com](mailto:uelmanitoba@gmail.com) and we will be in touch to discuss possibilities. For further information, please go to our website at [www.uelmanitoba.ca](http://www.uelmanitoba.ca).

A book written for youth that describes the departure from the American states and the trek to the new land is ***With Nothing But Our Courage*** by Karleen Bradford. It is the fictional diary of Mary Macdonald, a Loyalist teen. Though fiction, it gives an extremely accurate picture of the great hardships faced by those exiled from the homes and communities they knew and their extraordinary struggle to try to find a new place to call home. It is available from Amazon. Reviews can be found at Scholastic Canada.

A film that captures the Loyalist world, the story of one family told through the eyes of an eleven-year old, is ***The World Turned Upside Down***. Produced by the National Film Board, you can go to its website to purchase the DVD.