The Loyalists in Nova Scotia

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T00619643

After the American Revolution in 1775–1783 many Loyalists left their homes in the United States and migrated from there to different places, including Canada, and Nova Scotia, in particular. This paper will discuss how the Loyalists' relocation to Nova Scotia affected the economics, demographics, etc. of the province. The first point that will be discussed is the changes in the demographics of the province, such as the growth of the population and the cities. The next point will focus on the impact the Loyalists had on the economics which includes the start of several businesses. Last but not least, it will reflect on the changes in the social structure of Nova Scotia (inequality, crime and relationship between the Loyalists).

This topic plays an important role in Canadian history because the Loyalists who migrated to Nova Scotia were the ones who started developing the province despite lots of challenges they faced on their way.

The first and the most obvious change the Loyalists brought was the growth of population and the cities. As the author of “Loyalists and Layabouts” states, “ In less than eight months, Shelburne had become the largest city in what remained of British colonies, and the fourth largest in all of North America. Only New York, Philadelphia, and Boston could boast more than the ‘upwards of 12,000 inhabitants’”[[1]](#footnote-1). In general, “in one year this flood of immigration doubled the existing population of the province”[[2]](#footnote-2).

As the number of people in the province grew so much, they needed to build and develop the cities and make them more habitable. So they had to build new houses and roads: “The coming of the loyalists forced the province to provide new and extended roads to permit trade and communication between the new communities… In 1785 the assembly made its first major appropriation, £1,500, for ‘opening roads from Halifax to Shelburne and from thence to Yarmouth’”[[3]](#footnote-3). They also planned to build the road connecting Shelburne with Annapolis which Ed Winslow told about in his letter to Benjamin Marston: “Dear Marston, -- I find by the instructions which regulate the conduct of General Campbell, that he is desirous to contribute all in his power to facilitate communication between the settlements in Nova Scotia, and to assist the new settlers in making roads, &c., and I know it to be his inclination to comply with his instructions; and I also know that he manifests a kind of partiality, or predilection, or whatever else you please to call it, for your city of Shelburne…Now I shall propose that the General shall immediately employ both these detachments in opening the communication between Annapolis and Shelburne”[[4]](#footnote-4). Not only roads but also many houses were built to accommodate the loyalists in Nova Scotia. For instance, in Shelburne “eight hundred houses are already finished…600 more in great forwardness, and several hundred lately begun upon”[[5]](#footnote-5). Thus, the construction of houses was rapidly developing.

The loyalists made a huge contribution to the development of the economy in Nova Scotia. One of the motives for loyalists to develop quickly was a desire to make their enemy envious of their success in their new place of dwelling[[6]](#footnote-6).

Apparently, when they came to the new land they had to “ensure economic survival”[[7]](#footnote-7). In order to do so, they started several businesses. “Besides the sawmills, there were shipyards and fish companies, bakers, blacksmiths, and shopkeepers. There were even a number of coffee houses, taverns, and inns, not to mention what one observer described as a ‘fashionable promenade’”[[8]](#footnote-8). Many businesses began to use for trade the natural resources that the province offered them. One of those resources, for instance, was fish: “Most of the settlements along the broken Atlantic coast quickly entered the fisheries, at first to augment their provisions but soon after to try to supply the domestic and West Indies market… Marston had little but praise for the economic potential of the fisheries…”[[9]](#footnote-9).

They also started whaling industry: “After a whaler visited Shelburne that spring, weighed down with a cargo of whale oil…a group of local businessmen quickly set up the Whale Fishing Company, while others – including Benjamin Marston’s friend Joshua Watson – fitted out their own ships for the whale trade”[[10]](#footnote-10).

Trade became an indispensable part of the economy in Nova Scotia, and Governor Parr just after his arrival to Shelburne even wrote in his letter to Guy Carleton: “From every appearance I have not a doubt but that it will in a short time become the most flourishing Town for Trade of any in this part of the world”[[11]](#footnote-11).

As the houses were built, another business could have been started – it was real estate: “Real estate had become a booming, if not always lucrative, business as many of the early settlers, who’d built so optimistically that first year, now tried to get what they could…”[[12]](#footnote-12).

Some of the loyalists who came to Nova Scotia lost everything they had in the revolution, while others “had arrived… with substantial personal fortunes and proceeded to spend far too much on building and furnishing fine mansions for themselves”[[13]](#footnote-13). That is how another business – catering – appeared in the province: “many of the settlers were in the business of catering to the whims of people spending fortunes they weren’t replenishing. You could decorate your new Shelburne home from local shops supplying everything from fancy Scotch carpet… to imported, brightly flowered calimanco curtains, fluted and plain four-post bedsteads, and brass knobs and locks for your doors…”[[14]](#footnote-14).

The social structure also changed upon the arrival of the loyalists. For instance, black loyalists who hoped to find freedom in Nova Scotia (and who were, actually, promised by Great Britain to find freedom there), suffered from the same attitude towards them as in the United States. “In other parts of Nova Scotia the black refugees suffered a similar fate, being basically segregated and landless”, “There were other pockets of black refugees throughout the province, more than four hundred in Halifax drawn by the labour market…”[[15]](#footnote-15). Stephen Kimber also states that many black loyalists “had traded the uncertainties of their new-found freedom for the often more difficult certainty of life as indentured servants to well-to-do white Loyalists” and “though they technically weren’t slaves, their masters could go to friendly white magistrates who’d order them punished if they disobeyed…they were often sold or traded like chattel by their masters, sometimes even passed along to others in wills when their masters died”[[16]](#footnote-16). Thus, black refugees came to Nova Scotia to face the same problem they were trying to escape, and social inequality was established in the province after the migration of loyalists.

Inequality was not the only change in social life made by the loyalists. With the arrival of a large number of loyalists, the number of crimes committed in the provinces increased as well. That is why it was necessary to establish justice in the growing province. One way to do so was establishing a court: “By the summer of 1784, Shelburne finally had a court – and crime – worthy of its status as a major city. When he’d visited Shelburne the year before, Governor Parr had appointed magistrates and justice of the peace, but there was no actual court of common pleas. Parr approved the legislation in early December 1784, but the courts hadn’t held their first formal sittings until spring.”[[17]](#footnote-17). Another institution that had to be established at the same time as the court, was jail. Stephen Kimber writes: “The problem was that Shelburne had no permanent jail. So one of the court’s first orders of business was to consider how to raise the £300 it would cost to build one.”[[18]](#footnote-18). Thus, the social structure became more complex, and the control over crimes was established.

Moreover, the social structure was also changed due to social contradictions caused by diversity in religion and social status. The author of *This Unfriendly Soil*,for instance, while speaking about the loyalists’ support of the Church of England, says: “It also illustrated another aspect of the clash between the elite and the masses, for Panton’s supporters stressed the “respectability” of their members, and Walter’s followers criticized both Panton’s association with the fifty-five and his supporters’ desire to please the governor.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In general, social relations after the arrival of the loyalists became conflict: “In a land people so quickly and with so few surveyors there were bound to be innumerable conflicts and legal squabbles over boundaries and ownership. These conflicts were widespread, but Shelburne was the major centre of strife…Because of the “Discontents and disturbances having arisen at Shelburne”, the Executive Council was forced to appoint special agents to assign the land and to hear allegations. But if such conflict was inevitable, it was also the source of stress among the loyalists… The pent-up hostility and resentment resulting from their grievances, instead of being channelled to the outside world, turned inward, loyalist bickering with loyalist over questions of property, and the ensuing tension strained the common bond of loyalty”[[20]](#footnote-20). So the loyalists had conflicts with one another over the land ownership, for example, which led to a breakdown in the loyalist “bond”, as the author states.

In conclusion, even though the loyalists in Nova Scotia encountered a lot of failures and difficulties, such as diseases and natural disasters ( “Nature played an important role in the crushing of loyalist hopes…The summer of 1784 had been so dry that the new mills for timber established at Shelburne could not run. The summer of 1786 was even worse with severe drought and fires”, “There was a smallpox epidemic in 1787…”[[21]](#footnote-21)) and many of the loyalists left the province and started a new life somewhere else, they still initiated the development of the province and in many different ways mentioned in this document changed Nova Scotia.

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6. MacKinnon, This *Unfriendly Soil,* p.184 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid*.,* p.137 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Kimber, *Loyalists and Layabouts,* p.161 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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