

# Early Black Canadian History

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## Introduction

Black Canadian history is very closely connected to African American history. In fact, until very recently, most Blacks came to Canada from the U.S. This module will show how two key U.S. historical events — The American Revolution and the War of 1812 — as well as the Underground Railway movement — form the roots of Black history in Canada.

The aim of this module is to teach students about Canada by connecting the histories of both countries through that of a particular Canadian racial group. Students should also gain a greater understanding of North American and world geography as they actively use maps to find locations and link historical events.

Students will need pencils, paper, and an atlas or wall maps of Canada, North America, and the world. Simple exercises using time lines and maps will be suggested throughout the module.

## What is the difference between “Black Canadian” and “African American”?

In the U.S. most Blacks call themselves African Americans, but in Canada Blacks refer to themselves as Black Canadians. Why is there this subtle difference? The difference in naming has everything to do with the history of immigration in each country. In the U.S. most Blacks were brought directly as slaves from Africa and so prefer to be called African Americans to keep their link to their homeland and heritage alive. Blacks in Canada have a much more diverse history — very few Black Canadians were brought directly from Africa. Most early slaves, refugees, and immigrants were from the U.S. while the majority of recent immigrants are from the Caribbean. Because Blacks have come to Canada from several different countries, Black Canadian is the more inclusive and popular name.

## Until the 1960s almost all Black Canadians migrated from the U.S.

Today the majority of Black Canadians are recent immigrants who have come from either the Caribbean or Africa. These immigrants far outnumber those who have come from the U.S. However, the U.S. immigrants formed Canada’s earliest Black communities and closely link the histories of the two countries.

Though Blacks have immigrated to Canada from the U.S. since the time of the earliest European settlements up until the present, the majority of the early Black immigrants came as a result of three significant American historical events: the American Revolution (1775-1783), the War of 1812 (1812-1814), and the Underground Railway movement (1830-1865).

Have the students draw a time line beginning with 1500 and ending with the year 2000 dividing each century into quarters. At the year 2000 have them write their name and the town or city where they live. Now have them mark the major periods of Black immigration from the U.S. to Canada given above. They might want to assign these historical periods with a particular color so they stand out on the time line.

A total of over 35,000 Blacks immigrated during these three periods: approximately 5,500 came during the American Revolution; 2,000 during the War of 1812; and over 30,000

when the Underground Railway was in operation. Have the students write the appropriate number of Blacks to Canada for each major period of immigration.

### **The historical context of Black history in North America**

A quick overview of Black history in North America will help to place the Black Canadian experience in a larger context. Beginning with the landing of Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean at the end of the 1400s, the New World was opened to European interest and settlement. The very first Europeans to colonize the Americas were the Spaniards who immediately set up sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean. The Spaniards first enslaved the indigenous peoples but when that population was almost disseminated, the Europeans looked to Africa for slaves. The first Africans to the Americas were brought by the Spaniards to be used as slaves in the early 1500s.

Have the students draw lines on their maps linking Spain and Africa to the Caribbean. By the time slavery was abolished in the 1800s, over 10 million Africans had been brought to the New World as slaves. That is approximately one third of the total population of Canada today! The slave trade in the Caribbean was underway for almost 100 years before the English and French started to colonize and settle in what later became the U.S. and Canada.

In the early 1600s the English and French began to establish colonies on the east coast of North America. The English established the first permanent colony at Jamestown in present-day Virginia in 1607; the French established their first permanent colony the following year at Quebec City in today's province of Quebec. Have the students find both early settlement locations on their maps. Jamestown may not be marked but is just up the James River from Norfolk, Virginia. If the students follow the St. Lawrence River into the continent, they will find Quebec City at the place where the river narrows. The English settlements grew until the entire eastern seaboard in the U.S. was inhabited by Europeans. These settlements were called the Thirteen Colonies. During the same period the French established a modest colony called New France. Both colonies started within a year of each other and both went through a major transition less than 200 years later.

In 1759 and 1760 the English conquered New France and named the four colonies Canada. These included Nova Scotia (which at that time also included New Brunswick), eastern Quebec (initially called Lower Canada), and southern Ontario (initially called Upper Canada). Fifteen years later the Thirteen Colonies fought for their independence from Britain and renamed themselves the United States of America. On the maps have the students outline the two early colonies. New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, eastern Quebec, and southern Ontario can be labelled both "New France" and "Canada". From the Atlantic Ocean inland, almost half way to the Mississippi River, are the Thirteen Colonies.

Have the students mark 1515 on their time lines as the date that the first Africans were brought as slaves to the Americas. Now have the students mark the early European colonies in North America. From 1607 to 1776 have the students color this period and mark it the Thirteen English Colonies. At 1776 they can draw an arrow forward and label it the United States of America. From 1608 to 1760 will be marked, New France and from that point on, Canada.

In North America both Native Americans and Blacks were used as slaves. However, there was a difference between the slave economy in the two countries. The southern U.S., like the Caribbean, had a warmer climate and ability to produce massive crops like cotton. Large plantations could run a very lucrative business if they used slaves. There was no such economy in Canada. The climate was too cold for large crop production. Instead the colonists were involved in the fur trade and tended not to have private slaves. Blacks, and

First Nations peoples (the Canadian term for Native American) were used primarily as servants by the religious orders, the military, and the merchants. In general, due to the nature of the economy in Canada, Black slaves were not treated as harshly or forced to work as hard as in the U.S.

In total, New France had just over 1,000 Black slaves during its time as a colony while the Thirteen Colonies had over a half million Black slaves. Quite a difference in number! Black slaves made up close to 20% of the population in the Thirteen Colonies and less than 2% in New France. On their maps, next to the New France/Canada and the British colonies in the south, have the students write in the respective numbers of Black slaves.

### **The first major immigration of Blacks to Canada was during the American Revolution**

Just before the American Revolution, in 1759 and 1760, the English conquered the French army in New France. This event is commonly known of as The Conquest though the French were not in fact conquered but abandoned by the French army. From that point on New France became Canada. When the English took over in Canada they did not abolish slavery, though the practice was becoming increasingly unpopular.

In 1775 the Thirteen Colonies began to battle against Britain for their freedom and independence. However, not everyone wanted freedom from the mother country. Many Americans wanted to remain a colony because they felt they would be better protected that way. These Americans were called the United Empire Loyalists (or Tories, as they were known in the States). Approximately 30,000 United Empire Loyalists left the U.S. at this time for Canada. These Loyalists brought around 2,000 Black slaves with them. Most settled in Nova Scotia, which included present-day New Brunswick, and some in the Eastern Townships of Quebec or what was then called Lower Canada.

Have the students locate Nova Scotia and New Brunswick on their maps. Now have them locate the area just east of Montreal. This region is called The Eastern Townships because of the practice of awarding land or townships to the Loyalists. Have the students color in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the Eastern Townships and using a legend describe this color as the location of the first substantial immigration of Blacks to Canada. Most of these slaves were freed within the next couple of decades and settled in the local areas. There were an additional 3,500 Blacks, the Black Loyalists, who also came to Canada at this time. These Blacks were allowed freedom in Canada for very political reasons.

Canada has always been a smaller country, in terms of population, than the U.S. Today the population of the U.S. is almost 10 times that of Canada! Because of this, and because of the constant threat of being absorbed by the U.S., Canada has had to employ clever means to protect itself. Like David, in the story David and Goliath, Canada cannot rely on numbers or strength to protect itself against the U.S., but must come up with more creative means. That is just what Canada did during the American Revolution concerning Black slaves.

The American Revolution caused great concern in Canada. Fearful that the independence movement would spread north, Canada promised Black slaves their freedom, land, and provisions if they would desert their masters and fight for the English. Over 3,500 former Black slaves did just that and most were taken to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Unfortunately, while these Blacks won their freedom, the Canadian government was not very generous about the land it awarded the new immigrants. Most of the plots were too small or of such poor quality that the Black families could not support themselves and were forced to work as laborers in the white communities.

Some of these first Black pioneers became so disillusioned with their life in the new country that they took the opportunity to sail back to Africa. In the late 1700s the English paid for the passage of over 1,000 Blacks to Sierra Leone in Africa. Over 50 of the passengers died en route. The rest established the settlement of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone today.

Have the students locate Halifax in Nova Scotia and draw a line from there to Freetown, Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa. On their time lines have them mark the date 1792 as the year that four ships carried over 1,000 Blacks from Halifax to Africa.

### **The War of 1812 and Black immigration to Canada**

The War of 1812 is not as well known as the American Revolution, yet there are several very interesting points about the war that are important in U.S. history. First, few people know that Canada and the U.S. have actually warred against one another. In the War of 1812 the Americans declared war on Britain and attacked the closest English colony — Canada. Second, the American National Anthem was written during this war. And third, the second largest immigration of Blacks to Canada occurred as a result of the war. Over 2,000 Black refugees came to Canada in the early 1800s, during the War of 1812.

The events leading up to the War of 1812 are complicated but there are perhaps two main reasons why the Americans declared war on Britain. First, ever since the American Revolution, the English had never fully pulled their troops from the Great Lakes region. This annoyed the Americans. Second, the Napoleonic Wars were going on in Europe at this time and the English, in an effort to protect their economy from French embargoes, took control of the high seas and trade. In several instances they intercepted U.S. ships angering the Americans. Finally, in 1812 the U.S. declared war on Britain attacking Canada.

The Americans were confident that it would be easy to conquer Canada. President Thomas Jefferson said that capturing Canada was, "a mere question of marching." Instead, through clever tactics, Canada captured several U.S. forts including Detroit and managed to burn the White House to the ground. Canada's success was in part due to the Black slaves who were once again promised freedom, land, and provisions if they would leave their masters and support the English. Over 2,000 Blacks did so and were eventually taken to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Once again, Canada did not give all that it promised making survival difficult for the Black community and forcing dependence on the white settlements.

Have the students mark the War of 1812 on their time lines and write in that 2,000 Black refugees came to Canada at that time.

During this second major period of the immigration of Blacks to Canada another key American historical event occurred. During the War of 1812, Baltimore was just a small fort called Fort McHenry. One evening in 1814, a British ship started to attack the fort. On the ship was an American prisoner, a lawyer and poet named Francis Scott Key. Key, emotionally moved by the sight of the American flag still flying strong throughout the bombardment, wrote a poem. The poem was called "The Star-Spangled Banner." On 3 March 1931 the song became the National Anthem. Imagine that "The Star-Spangled Banner" was inspired by a war between Canada and the U.S.!

### **Canada as the "Promised Land" for African Americans**

In 1793 the Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada (today's Ontario), John Graves Simcoe, presented a bill to the government to abolish slavery in Upper Canada. The bill was unanimously passed. Though it was several years before abolition of slavery became law in Canada, nonetheless this was an important date in the history of both countries. From this point on Black slaves saw Canada as a place of freedom and sometimes referred to it as

Canaan, or the Promised Land — the land where Moses lead the ancient Hebrews out of slavery from Egypt. Freedom from slavery was now within reach. The Black slaves just had to get there. Simcoe promised that any Blacks who came into Canada, either as slaves or on their own, would be granted freedom. Canada also refused to comply with the U.S. request that runaway slaves be returned to their masters, nor would Canada allow American slave hunters into the country. Slowly the word got out that Canada was a place of freedom, the Promised Land, where Blacks could live without fear of capture or punishment.

It didn't take long for the plantation owners to realize the threat of Canada either! Because there was little the slave owners could do about Canadian laws, many tried to frighten their slaves into believing that once in Canada all sorts of horrible things would happen to them such as geese plucking out their eyes.

Have the students mark 1793 as the beginning of the abolishment of slavery in Canada. Now have them mark the 1834 as the year the law abolishing slavery in the British colonies went into effect. Finally, have them mark the date 1865 as the year slavery was abolished in the U.S. Beginning in 1793 Blacks started to make their way to Canada, but it was really once slavery was abolished that the exodus from the U.S. went into full swing. Over 30,000 Black slaves came to Canada between 1830 and 1865 seeking freedom. They came via the Underground Railway.

### **The Underground Railway and the largest migration of Blacks to Canada**

The Underground Railway was neither underground nor a railway, but it was inspired by the very first steam-powered trains in North American in the 1830s. Trains were suddenly a way of quick and easy travel and came into use at the same time that Canada abolished slavery. Using the train as an inspiration for travelling to freedom, Black slaves and abolitionists developed an entire secret network for escape based on codes using train lingo.

"Conductors" were abolitionists; "cargo" or "passengers" were those Blacks trying to win their freedom; "stations" were safe houses where the fugitives could stop for food and shelter or destination towns.

Harriet Tubman was one of the most famous "conductors" during this time. In fact, she was so famous and successful that there was a bounty out for her capture. Her station was St. Catherines, Ontario where she lived for a time when her life was most threatened. In all she is said to have brought over 300 fugitives to St. Catherines and to not have lost one "passenger" along the way. Harriet had been a slave until she was 28. At that point she escaped and dedicated the rest of her life to helping her family and other runaway slaves win their freedom.

Have the students locate St. Catherines, Ontario on their maps. It is near Niagara Falls, just north of Buffalo between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. This was a major entry point into Canada. The other major entry point was at Detroit and Windsor on the other side of Lake Erie. These were the two most popular entry points into Canada as they were the furthest south. They were also so narrow that slave hunters hid in the areas and caught many Blacks who tried to make it over the border.

The fugitive Blacks who came into Canada were not given land or provisions by the Canadian government as were the earlier immigrants and refugees. Most settled in and around the Great Lakes Region and worked on local farms, for the railways, or as wage laborers. They formed segregated communities for support and to protect one another against American kidnappers. On a map of Canada have the students locate and highlight the following towns and cities all located between Lake Erie and Lake Huron: Windsor, Chatham, London, St. Catherines, Hamilton, Guelph, Toronto, Barrie, and Owen Sound.

These were the major destination points for the over 30,000 fugitives. In this final major immigration movement, Blacks settled further west and in greater numbers than before. On their time lines have students locate the period of the Underground Railway and write that around 30,000 Blacks came to Canada during those years.

### **Blacks in Canada today**

In 1865 slavery was finally abolished in the U.S. At that point thousands of Blacks who had come to Canada either on the Underground Railway or earlier, returned to the States. Many had family or friends that they'd left behind and others simply missed home. This wasn't the end of Black immigration to Canada. Hundreds of immigrants still came north as a result of prejudice and violence in the U.S. At the turn of the century approximately 1,000 Blacks immigrated from Oklahoma to Alberta to flee discrimination.

It wasn't until the 1960s that Black immigrants began to come to Canada from other countries. This is because the Canadian immigration policy had biases against non-whites making it difficult for those groups to gain entry into the country. These new immigrants quickly outnumbered the original Black population. Today there is a significant Caribbean community in Toronto and in Montreal. Those Blacks from English-speaking Caribbean countries settled in Toronto while those from French-speaking countries went to Montreal where the official language is French. Have the students locate the Caribbean on their maps drawing a line between Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago and Toronto; and Haiti and Montreal.

### **Conclusion**

Today less than 2% of the Canadian population is Black. The community there is far smaller than in the States where almost 13% of the population is African American. Because of both the early settlement history and the later immigration from the Caribbean, the majority of Black Canadians live in the East in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Ontario.

Though Canada has been a historical destination point for Blacks fleeing slavery and violence in the U.S., Canada is not without racism. There has always been discrimination in Canada and today it still exists particularly against visible minorities. It is something that the government, the schools, and activist groups are working on constantly. There is also much strength and solidarity in the Black community. Once again, a major historical movement in the U.S. had an enormous impact on Black Canadians — the Civil Rights Movement. Beginning in the 1960s, and with the inspiration of the Civil Rights movement in the U.S., Black Canadians began to identify and work against institutional racist practices and blatant discrimination as well as to revive Black culture and pride. In 1996 an elementary school in Nova Scotia became the first school in Canada to incorporate black studies into its entire curriculum. The school is now 100% Afrocentric. "If it is successful," reported the Halifax News recently, "the students will enter other schools secure in the strength that comes from knowing their heritage."

As is evident with Black Canadian history, Canadian history is closely linked to that of the U.S. Early Black history in Canada links Canadian history to the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Underground Railway. It was these events that saw the migration of thousands of Blacks from the U.S. to Canada in the name of freedom. Today, many Black communities in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Ontario have their roots in U.S. history linking our two countries firmly together.