

Loyalists & the Defeat of Britain in the American Revolution

Selections from Letters, Petitions, Narratives, and Poetry, 1782-1786

Throughout the Revolutionary period, Americans Loyalists were harassed and condemned as traitors, their homes and land confiscated, their lives threatened and sometimes taken by Patriot mobs. While most chose to stay in America, about 10-15 percent fled to Canada, the West Indies, or England. With Britain's surrender in 1781, the Loyalists faced a new challenge—accepting the finality of defeat, envisioning the future of their homeland, and rethinking the rest of their lives. These selections, compiled by historian Catherine Crary, reveal the anguish and anticipation of white American Loyalists in the aftermath of the Revolution.

1782 “*This Country is not yet lost*”

John Hamilton, a Charleston Loyalist, expressed fervent hope for British victory to a friend in England, yet later in the year he left South Carolina to join other Loyalists fleeing to Nova Scotia.¹

This Country is not yet lost. It's to be gain'd still and easier than ever, but the Ministers¹ seem to give all over [give up] at a time when they ought most to Exert themselves and Convince their Enemies that the loss of Lord Cornwallis and 6000 men² is not an object for Britain to mourn for.

Great Britain has more to fear from her internal Enemies than her external ones; it's the Villainy of your great people at home that has Ruin'd the Nation, not your open Foes.

Notwithstanding all our Misfortunes, Great Britain can never, must never relinquish America. The last man and shilling must be expended before she gives America her independence. If she loses America, she loses all her West Indies and must Revert again to her insular Situation, which hardly made her visible on the face of the Earth. . . .

I still flatter myself the war will be carried on with vigor in North Carolina and Virginia and a large reinforcement sent out this season. The inhabitants are tired of their French Connections [alliance] and with the Tyranny of their Leaders which is more conspicuous than ever. It behooves the nation at large to interfere and prevent the Ministry from giving America her independence. Your Salvation depends on Spirited Exertions at present; if not, and America is given up, Britain must become a Province of France and America.

1782 “*their inveterate enemies, the rebels of America*”

Thomas Jones, a Loyalist who fled to England in 1781, described the British evacuation of Loyalists from Charleston as related to him by a British officer.³

To provide in some measure for these poor wretches, the commanders of the garrisons (though contrary to their orders) protracted the evacuations as long as they possibly could without offending the Ministry. Transports [ships] were procured, and several hundreds with their personal property went to St. Augustine, in Florida, the Governor of which granted each family a tract of land upon which they sat down and began the world anew. Numbers went to the Bahama Islands, others to the Summer Islands [Bermuda], to Jamaica, to Nova Scotia, to Newfoundland, and to Canada. But such a number were still left behind that properly to describe their situation upon the evacuations is scarcely possible. There were old grey-headed men and women, husbands and wives with large families of little children, women with infants at their breasts, poor widows whose husbands had lost their lives in the service of their King and country, with half a dozen half-starved bantlings taggling at their skirts, taking leave of their friends. Here

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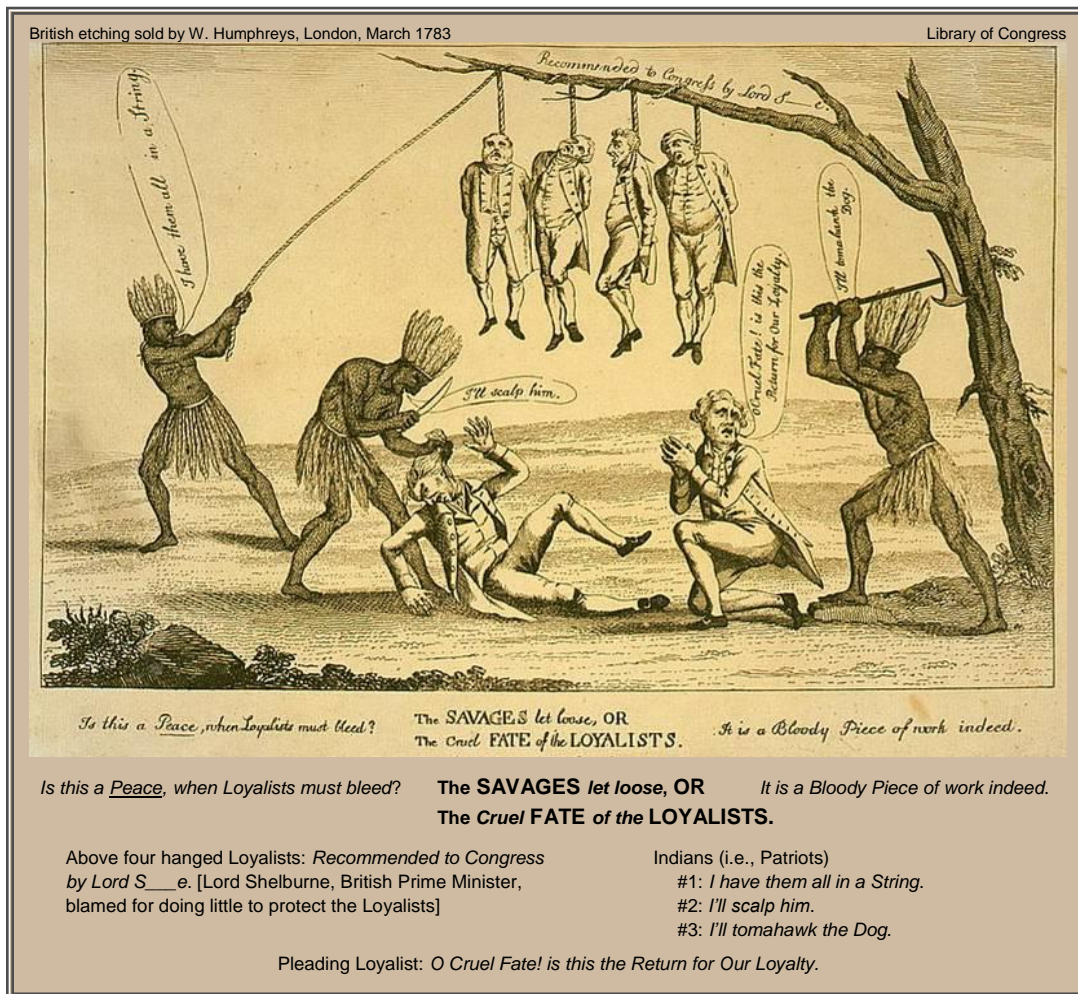
¹ *Ministers*: the British king's cabinet, including the Prime Minister (not referring to clergymen).

² Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown, Virginia, 19 October 1781.

³ Thomas Jones, *History of New York during the Revolutionary War* (New York Historical Society, 1879), vol. II, pp. 235-236.

you saw people who had lived all their days in affluence (though not in luxury) leaving their real estates, their houses, stores, ships, and improvements, and hurrying on board the transports with what little household goods they had been able to save. In every street were to be seen men, women, and children wringing their hands, lamenting the situation of those who were about leaving the country, and the more dreadful situation of such who were either unable to leave or were determined, rather than run the risk of starving in distant lands, to throw themselves upon, and trust to, the mercy of their persecutors, their inveterate enemies, the rebels of America.

Their fears and apprehensions were soon realized. No sooner had the evacuation taken place at Charleston than the rebels, like so many furies, or rather devils, entered the town and a scene ensued, the very repetition of which is shocking to the ears of humanity. The Loyalists were seized, hove into dungeons, prisons and provosts.⁴ Some were tied up and whipped, others were tarred and feathered.⁵ Some were dragged to horse-ponds and drenched till near dead. Others were carried about the town in carts with labels upon their breasts and backs with the word “Tory” in capitals written thereon. All the Loyalists were turned out of their houses and obliged to sleep in the streets and fields, their covering the canopy of heaven. A universal plunder of the friends to government took place, and to complete the scene, a gallows was erected upon the quay facing the harbor, and twenty-four reputable Loyalists hanged in sight of the British fleet, with the army and refugees on board.



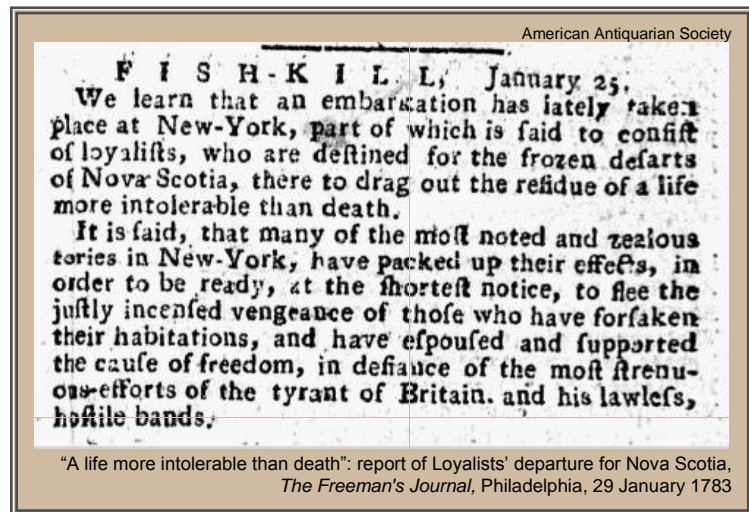
⁴ Provosts: military jails.

⁵ “Tarring and feathering” was an act of humiliation and retribution committed by vigilante groups upon unpopular persons, especially officials of the British administration and, during the revolutionary period, upon Loyalists. The mob would strip the victim to the waist, pour hot tar over his/her body, and roll the person in feathers that would adhere to the tar. Usually the person was paraded about the area on a cart before being released, perhaps, or threatened with further violence. Occasionally the victims died.

1783 “the Mob now reigns”

A New York Loyalist described the predicament of white and black Loyalists during the six-month British evacuation of New York in a letter to a British cabinet official, Lord Hardwicke.⁶

The Rebels breathe the most rancorous and malignant Spirit everywhere. Committees and Associations are formed in every Colony, and Resolves passed that no Refugees shall return nor have their Estates [land property] restored. The Congress and Assemblies look on tamely and want [lack] either the Will or the Power to check [stop] those Proceedings. In short, the Mob now reigns as fully and uncontrolled as in the Beginning of our Troubles, and America is as hostile to Great Britain at this Hour as she was at any Period during the War. From all this, many people conclude that the Army will not be withdrawn from hence this Year, that the British Troops at least will keep Possession of New York as it will be very difficult, if possible, to send off any more than the Foreign Troops, and as it would be highly imprudent to abandon this Place in the present Posture of Affairs. Certain it is that if the whole Army goes away this Year, very few Refugees or Inhabitants within the British Lines will be able to stay behind. Besides those gone to Europe and Canada, upwards of eleven thousand persons have already removed to Nova Scotia and twelve thousand more have given in their Names to be carried to Nova Scotia and other Places. Almost all the principal people here are gone or going; not the tenth part of the Inhabitants will be able to remain if the Army goes this year.



Without the Lines⁷ everything is equally gloomy. Confusion and Discontent prevail. The Load of Taxes is intolerable. Farms in general pay a Tax which is greater than the Rents they paid formerly. Every other Species of Property is proportionally taxed. This, joined to the Insolence of the new Rulers, the unsettled State of Government, and the want of Security for the Persons and Property of Individuals, induce Multitudes to wish for a removal and accordingly have applied to Sir G. Carleton⁸ for the purpose. I am told that upwards of One hundred thousand people without the Lines have already applied to be transported to Nova Scotia and Canada.

At the same time the cool and dispassionate Adherents to Congress are of Opinion that their present System of Government⁹ cannot hold long and that the Powers of congress are utterly inadequate to the Government of this Country. A very sensible Man . . . told me lately that the judicious people among them did not expect their present Form of Government could last longer than four or five Years, if so long; and, on asking him what form would be adopted in its Place, he answered, Monarchy. . . .¹⁰

The only good Tidings I have to send you is that Sir G. Carleton is not leaving us. While he stays I think myself safe; and were he left entirely to himself to manage Affairs as he pleased, with the Army he has, I have not the least Doubt but he would yet bring everything in America to a happy Conclusion. He sees Things in a just Light, has Judgment and Penetration to manage Affairs properly, and will neither be frightened, cajoled, nor diverted by Congress or their Adherents in any Measure he undertakes. He has an Altercation with those People as present about Negroes. An Article of the wise provisional Treaty obliges us to give up all Negroes and, accordingly, the Rebels have claimed all that came within the Lines. But

⁶ Extract of a letter from an American in New York. British Museum, Add. Mss., 35,621, pp. 364-366.

⁷ I.e., beyond the British military lines.

⁸ Sir Guy Carleton: commander of the British forces in America and supervisor of the evacuation of troops and Loyalists.

⁹ Articles of Confederation.

¹⁰ Many made this prediction immediately after the war, but in 1789 the United States instituted a republic under a new constitution.

many Negroes came in Consequence of Royal Proclamations promising them Protection and Liberty. Sir G. thinks that no minister can by a Treaty disannul those Proclamations, and indeed it would be inhuman to the last Degree and a base Violation of Public Faith to send those Negroes back to their Masters who would beat them with the utmost Cruelty. Accordingly, such Negroes as came in by Virtue of those Proclamations are permitted to go wherever they please. If they choose to go to their Masters, it is well; if not, they are transported to Nova Scotia or elsewhere as they desire. Sir Guy Carleton in this, as in everything else, has acted with Openness and Candor. Before any Negroes went off, he desired Mr. Washington to appoint Commissioners to inspect all Embarkations. The Commissioners accordingly came and take Account of all Negroes that go away. The Rebels bluster about this Matter and declare it a Violation of the Provisional Treaty, but Sir Guy goes on deliberately and steadily and refers the Business to future Discussion, that Compensation may be made to the Masters of the Negroes if judged necessary. No Man can be a warmer Friend to the Loyalists than Sir Guy, and perhaps no Man has it so much in his Power to serve them.

1783 “*this country is all confusion*”

Stephen Skinner, a New Jersey Loyalist whose property had been burned or confiscated during the war, described to an English friend the “anarchy and confusion” reigning in the state in spring 1783.¹¹

This country is all confusion. The very Government, said to be established, is tottering — Committees forming in every state and declarations of Resolves from those Committees that no restoration¹² shall be made. The present Government will comply with what the Giddy multitude please to dictate. In short, all at present Anarchy and confusion and must be so for some years to Come.

The letters from your side the water [ocean] congratulate their friends here on the Harmony and good understanding that prevails in this Country but believe me, my dear sir, when I tell you it is the reverse and that no good can happen till the reasonable and thinking part of the Community step forth, men of Character and moderation, for their Rulers, for at present the power is in the Hands of the lowest of the people and they will not easily part with it. This City is crowded with people from without, and every indulgence Granted them that is possible, but Change the scene, and if a Loyalist makes his appearance amongst them, he is sure to be insulted. My resolution is fixed to remain and not stir a Peg, for I think it is time enough to take leave of my Estate when there is no prospect left.

1783 “*the most dreadful anarchy must ensue*”

David Colden, a New York Loyalist, described to his niece in Scotland the anxiety of Loyalists desperate to leave America after Britain's defeat.¹³

We have pass'd a twelve month in the most perplexing state of uncertainty that ever a people did. Long waiting for the articles,¹⁴ expecting they would certainly provide some security for the unfortunate Loyalists, they have only increased our distress and cause of anxiety and to this hour we do not know that they will have the smallest effect in our favor. . . .

The spirit of persecution and violence against the unhappy Loyalists does not appear to abate in any degree since the cessation of hostilities. They are not suffered [allowed] to go into the country even to take a last farewell of their relations. Committees are formed throughout the country who publish the most violent resolves against the Loyalists and give instructions to the legislative bodies directly repugnant to the treaty. We are told that these committees have alarmed the people in power who wish to suppress them but know not how. The people have been taught a dangerous truth, that *all power is derived from them*. Nothing can now render the country tolerably happy but the strength and firmness of the Governors [and] the Legislative Bodies, those in whom the Constitution have placed the Power of Governing. The most dreadful anarchy must ensue, should the new Government prove unequal to the Task. An event most devoutly to be deprecated by every good Man!

¹¹ Stephen Skinner, letter to Effingham Lawrence, 11 June 1783. New York Historical Society.

¹² Financial compensation to the Loyalists for the loss of their property.

¹³ Public Records Office, British Archives, UK; *American Historical Review*, Oct. 1919, pp. 82-86.

¹⁴ The initial preliminary agreements in the peace treaty with Britain, announced on November 1782.

General Charlton [Carleton] has informed Congress by letter of the 17th of last month that he has received the King's orders for the final evacuati[on] of New York, but that the infractions of the Treaty and violences committed in the country upon the Loyalists has driven such multitudes of them to apply to him to be removed to some place of security that he cannot say when he shall be able to leave the place, being determined not to leave any Loyalist behind who chooses to go away. Above 30,000 men, women, and children have already been transported to Nova Scotia, etc., and a very large number are still waiting for ships to carry them. Many substantial farmers of Long Island and inhabitants of New York are gone and going, frightened away by indictments and menaces, the fear of taxes, and an abhorrence of a republican government.

1783 "a licentious and bloodthirsty mob"

Loyalist petitions to Sir Guy Carleton, Commander in Chief of British forces in America, reveal the mistreatment and intimidation they suffered at the hands of victorious Patriots, unhampered by the weak civil authority in this period.¹⁵

Prosper Brown: [Brown] did in a civil and honest manner repair [return] to his native place, namely New London [Connecticut], but was immediately secured and dragged by a licentious and bloodthirsty mob and hung up by the neck with his hands tied on board of a vessel laying alongside of the wharf and continued in that posture, the cruelty of which your Excellency can better conceive than his pen can dictate, after which he was taken down, stripped, and whipped with a Cat-and-nine-tails¹⁶ in a most inhuman manner and then tarred and feathered¹⁷ and again hung up at the yardarm¹⁸ as a public spectacle where he continued naked about a quarter of an hour exposed to the shame and huzzas¹⁹ of the most diabolic crew that ever existed on earth, from whence they released him and put him on board of a boat and sent to this City on condition of never returning again to the Continent on pain of death. To conclude and crown his misery they robbed him of the sum of twenty-five Guineas in Gold and your Petitioner has arrived here in a most distressed situation about eight days since.

Isaac Foshay, Philippsburg, New York: His father . . . was very sick, not able to ride or walk. The party [of Patriots] then got a common wood Slide and put his father on it and carried him down to Tarry town. . . Honeywell [a Patriot] then ordered his father out of the Slide and to walk and threatened to whip him if he did not and did drive him a few yards, but the old man was so very weak and low that he could not walk and begged they would spare him. Honeywell then ordered him into the Slide again and ordered his said son William to drive him down to Morrissania, shaking his Sword over said Williams's head to make him drive faster, telling him to drive his Corpse to Nova Scotia. That his Brother William drove on and got about eight miles that night, when his father began to spit Blood and grew worse. The next day he proceeded to Morrissania, that his father died in three days after he got there, always complaining of the hurts and bruises he received from Honeywell and his party by putting him on the Slide and using him in the rough manner they did.

Adam Graves, John Georg Graves, and Nicholas Andrew, Maryland: . . . that they were tried and condemned to suffer death and that during a great part of the time they were confined at Frederick Town their coffins were kept in the place of confinement with them, that their situation might be render'd more distressing by all the terrors of approaching death. That [they] were reprieved the morning appointed for their execution on condition to be transported to France during life . . . That they were accordingly removed on board the *Romulus* in York River and confined in the hold for seven weeks with nothing but the ship's ballast to lie on, and when they had . . . obtained permission to walk the Deck they were obliged to perform the most menial offices and subjected to every species of insult, indignity, and abuse that human nature is capable of sustaining. That [they], preferring instant death to a situation so insupportable, had the good fortune to effect their escape.

¹⁵ Carleton Papers, Public Records Office, British Archives, UK.

¹⁶ Cat-and-nine-tails: leather whip of which the end is divided into numerous "tails."

¹⁷ See note 7.

¹⁸ *yardarm*: a horizontal section of the mast structure of a sailing vessel.

¹⁹ *huzzas*: group exclamations of approval, ebullience, etc.

1783 “*To go — or not to go — is that the question?*” Loyalist poem based on Hamlet’s suicide soliloquy, “To be, or not to be,” published in the *New York Morning Post*, 7 Nov. 1783.

To go — or not to go — is that the question?
Whether ’tis best to trust the inclement sky
That scowls indignant o’er the dreary Bay
Of Fundy and Cape Sable’s rock and shoals,²⁰
And seek our new domains in Scotia wilds,
Barren and bare; or stay among the rebels,
And by our stay, rouse up their keenest rage
That, bursting o’er our *now* defenseless heads,
Will crush us for the countless wrongs we’ve done them?
Hard choice! Stay, let me think — To explore our way,
Thro’ raging seas, to Scotia’s rocky coast,

At this dire season of this direful year.
Where scarce the sun affords the cheerful ray;
Or stay and cringe to the rude surly Whigs,²¹
Whose wounds, yet fresh, may urge their desperate hand
To spurn us while we sue — perhaps consign us
To the *kind care* of some *outrageous* mob,
Who for their sport our persons may adorn
In all the majesty of *tar and feathers*;

Perhaps our necks, to keep their humor warm,
May grace a Rebel halter! — There’s the sting!
This people’s, the bleak clime, for who can brook
A Rebel’s frown — or bear his children’s stare
When in the streets they point and lisp “*A Tory?*”
The open insult, the heart-piercing stab
Of satire’s pointed pen, or worse — far worse —
Committee’s rage — or jury’s grave debate
On the grand question: “shall their lives forsooth
Or property — or both — atone their crimes?”
Who’d bear all these calamities, and more
We justly may expect, while Shelburne’s shore²²
Invites us to decide the case ourselves. . . .

Then let us fly, nor trust a war of words
Where British arms and Tory²³ arts have failed
T’effect our purpose. On bleak Roseway’s shores²⁴
Let’s lose our fears, for no bold Whig will dare
With sword or law to persecute us there.

1783 “*Thank God we are no longer in dread*”

Hannah Ingraham, who left New York with her Loyalist family at age eleven to settle in Nova Scotia, narrated her experiences late in life.²⁵

[Father] said we were to go to Nova Scotia, that a ship was ready to take us there, so we made all haste to get ready, killed the cow, sold the beef, and a neighbor took home the tallow and made us a good parcel of candles and put plenty of beeswax in them to make them hard and good. Uncle came down and threshed our wheat — twenty bushels — and grandmother came and made bags for the wheat, and we packed up a tub of butter, a tub of pickles, and a good store of potatoes.

Then on Tuesday, suddenly the house was surrounded by rebels and father was taken prisoner and carried away. Uncle went forward and promised those who had taken him that if he might come home he would answer for his being forthcoming the next morning. But no, and I cried and cried that night. When morning came, they said he was free to go.

We had five wagon loads carried down the Hudson [River] in a sloop and then we went on board the transport that was to bring us to Saint John [Nova Scotia]. I was just eleven years old when we left our farm to come here. It was the last transport of the season and had on board all those who could not come sooner. The first transports had come in May so the people had all the summer before them to get settled. This was the last of September. We had a bad storm in the Bay of Fundy but some Frenchmen came off in a canoe and helped us (piloted us I suppose).

There were no deaths on board, but several babies were born. It was a sad sick time after we landed in Saint John. We had to live in tents. The government gave them to us and rations too. It was just at the first snow then and the melting snow and the rain would soak up in our beds as we lay. Mother got so chilled and developed rheumatism and was never well afterwards.

²⁰ Nova Scotia, on the east coast of Canada. (See map, p. 7.)

²¹ Patriots; victorious Americans.

²² Nova Scotia, in which one Loyalist settlement was named Shelburne.

²³ Loyalist.

²⁴ Port Roseway was another Loyalist settlement in Nova Scotia.

²⁵ Gorham, R. P. ed., *The Narrative of Hannah Ingraham: Loyalist Colonist at St. Anne’s Point, October 1783*, typescript. Archives and Special Collections, Harriet Irving Library, University of New Brunswick, 1933.



We came up the river at least in a schooner and were nine days getting to St. Anne's. . . . We were brought as far as Maugerville in a schooner but we had to get the rest of the way, twelve miles, walking or any way we could because the schooner could not get past the Oromocto shoals. . . .

We lived in a tent at St. Anne's until father got a house ready. He went up through our lot till he found a nice fresh spring of water. He stooped down and pulled away the fallen leaves that were thick over it and tasted it. It was very good so there he built his house. We all had rations given us by the government, flour, butter, and pork. Tools were given to the men also.

One morning when we awoke we found the snow lying deep on the ground all round us and then father came wading through it and told us the house was ready and not to stop to light a fire and not to mind the weather, but follow his tracks through the trees, for the trees were so many we soon lost sight of him going up the hill. It was snowing fast and oh, so cold. Father carried a chest and we all took something and followed him up the hill through the trees to see our gable end.

There was no floor laid, no windows, no chimney, no door, but we had a roof at least. A good fire was blazing and mother had a big loaf of bread and she boiled a kettle of water and put a good piece of butter in a pewter bowl. We toasted the bread and all sat around the bowl and ate our breakfast that morning and mother said: "Thank God we are no longer in dread of having shots fired through our house. This is the sweetest meal I ever tasted for many a day."

1785 *"to leave forever this land of my birth"*

Nancy Jean Cameron, a New York Loyalist, related to a cousin in Scotland her anguish upon departing her home to establish a new life in Canada.²⁶

My dear Margaret, . . .²⁷

At last we are preparing to leave forever this land of my birth. The long weary years of war, followed by the peace years that have been to us worse than the time of fighting, are over.

As soon as it is possible we shall set foot on our travels for a new land of promise. A settlement is to be made on the Northern Shore of the St. Lawrence River, some fifty miles from the town of Montreal.

Our lands are confiscated and it is hard to raise money at forced sales.

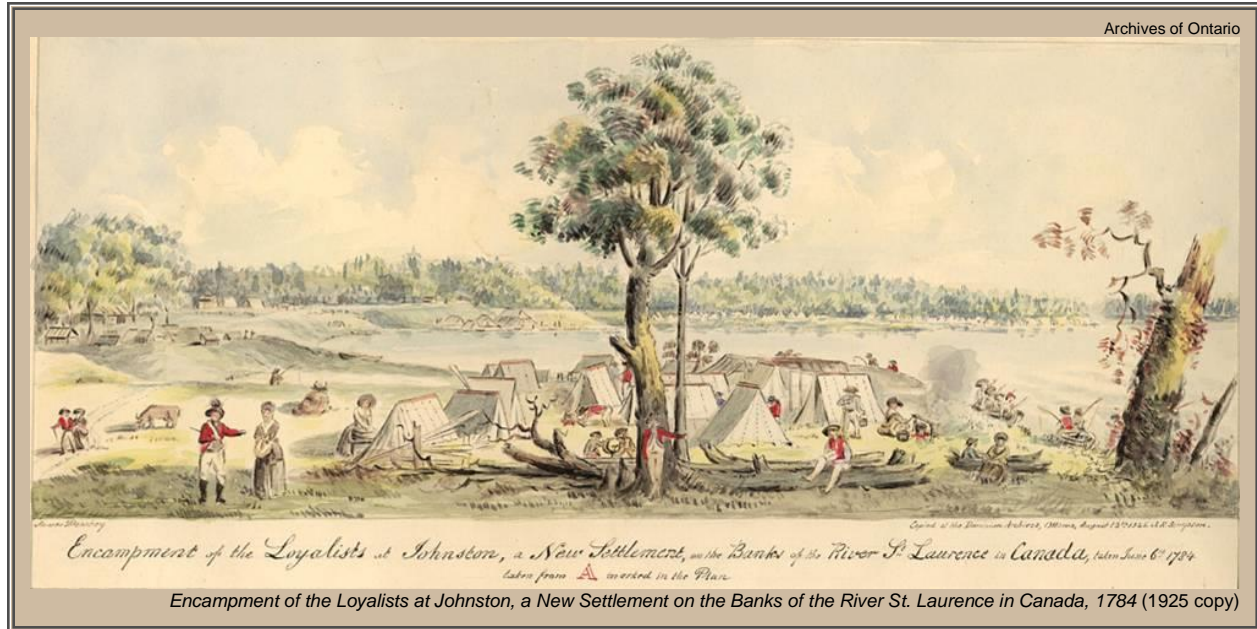
We expect the journey to be long and hard and cannot tell how many weeks we will be on the road. We have four horses and John has made our big wagon as comfortable as he can. Through the forests we must trust to Indian guides.

Many of Scotch origin will form the band of travellers. The children little realize the days of hardship before them and long to start off.

I love friendship and neighborly kindness, and I am so glad that there will be no more taunting among the elders, no more bickering among the children. Bitter feelings are gone forever. Patriot or rebel, we are what we see is right to each of us, conscience may make cowards.

²⁶ Letter of 15 May 1785; private papers of Mrs. D J. Macpherson, Wales, Ontario, Canada, now in the Public Archives of Canada.

²⁷ Cameron's cousin in Scotland.



When I leave this beautiful Mohawk Valley and the lands that I had hoped we would always hold, I shall hear no more the words “Tory” and “Parricide”.²⁸

The McDonalds have with them their priest, Father McDonald, and hope to found in the new land a new Glengarry. The Glengarry will lack the mountains you see from your home.

Our grandparents little thought when they sought this new land after the rising of Prince Charlie²⁹ that a-flitting would be our fate, but, we must follow the old flag wherever it takes us. It is again “The March of the Cameron Men” and wives and children and must tread the hard road.

We all send our love to you and Kenneth and when I know where we are to live you shall hear from us.

1786 “my attachment to our native Country is so fervent”

James Clarke, a Rhode Island Loyalist who had moved to Nova Scotia, described his continued love of—and fear for—his homeland to a friend in Newport, RI.³⁰

I hope Prospects brighten at Newport and that you begin to realize some of the many Benefits which Independence and a new Constitution were to give you. A whole Continent ruined to get rid of ideal Taxes³¹ — Without a Friend, unconnected with Great Britain, groaning under the severest Burdens, deprived of the Advantages of Commerce, and forsaken by all the World are Evils of so extensive a Magnitude and in their Consequences so Fatal that America must fall under its accumulating Pressure. My Attachment to our native Country is so fervent and sincere that I could freely give up my Life and Ten Thousand more if I possessed them, could I restore dear Rhode Island to its former happy, happy Situation. You will begin to think me a perfect Enthusiast.³²

²⁸ *Parricide*: the murder of one's parents, i.e., the colonies' rejection of their mother country.

²⁹ Prince Charles Edward Stuart (“Bonnie Prince Charlie”): Scottish pretender to the English throne during the failed “Jacobite” uprisings in the 1700s to restore the Stuart kings to the British throne (after the overthrow of James II in the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89). Many Scottish Highlanders emigrated to America during the uprisings, which ended in 1746 with the final defeat of the Jacobite army.

³⁰ Newport [RI] Historical Society.

³¹ “Ideal taxes,” i.e., taxes that would meet colonists' concept of fair taxation with representation in the British Parliament—an unmet ideal.

³² “Enthusiast” here meaning a zealous believer in an unattainable vision.