

# A Short History of Slavery in Canada

## The First Canadian Slave

The first black person known to have lived in Canada was a native of Madagascar who was bought at around the age of 7 by the British Commander David Kirke during his invasion of New France and sold to Olivier Le Tardif, head clerk of the French Colony.

When Quebec was handed back to the French in 1632, Le Tardif, who had often collaborated with the British, was forced to flee. He sold his slave to a Quebec resident Guillaume Couillard Lespinaç. The boy was educated in a school established by the Jesuit priest, Father Le Jeune. He was later baptised as Olivier Le Jeune, taking the first name of the French clerk and the surname of the Jesuit priest. He died on May 10, 1654. It is believed that by the time of his death his official status was changed from that of 'domestic servant' to freeman.

## A Common Practice

Slavery became a common practice in New France and the Church became the largest slave owner. Many have asked how could this happen, when in 1435 Pope Eugene IV in his Bull *Sicut Dudum* condemned slavery and those engaged in it, and those who ignore the Bull are excommunicated, ipso facto. In 1537, Pope Paul III issued the Bull *Sublimis Deus* that condemned slavery. Pope Gregory XIV, 1591, Pope Urban VIII, 1639, and Pope Benedict XIV, 1741 also condemned slavery. We can only assume that those Jesuits and religious sisters who owned slaves were automatically excommunicated.

In fact, the ports are the first places where slaves are put to work. This shouldn't be a surprise as the transactions were often conducted at seas and therefore legal.

Next, the first farmers arrived in New France and were faced with a herculean task of being able to clear, build and work their farms in this quasi-inhabitable land. They demanded slaves, even though THEORETICALLY this practice was only legalized around 1689 by edict of Louis XIV, and solidified in New France in 1709 by order of the Intendant Raudeau.

## **Slavery as “Chattel”**

The reason for this was simple: when a slave fled from his home, when he was found, the owner could reclaim his property. The legislation was therefore amended so that the slave would be recognized as “chattel” in front of a notary. “Governor Beauharnois, following the loss to the English forces, wrote to the French Minister of the Navy to inform him that they have capitulated to General Amherst, but the English were allowing them ‘their religion and their negroes’”, wrote Paul Fehmiu-Brown.

## **How Many Slaves in Canada?**

The historian Marcel Trudel has counted 4,092 slaves throughout Canadian history, of which 2,692 were Indians (the favorites of French settlers) and 1,400 Blacks (the favorites of English settlers) owned by approximately 1,400 masters.

The Montréal region dominated with 2077 slaves compared to 1,059 for Québec and 114 for Trois-Rivières. Many were owned by religious orders. Several marriages took place between French colonists and slaves (31 unions with Indian slaves and 8 with Black slaves) which means that a number of Québécois today have slaves somewhere in their family trees.

## **Going Back to Africa**

Historians place some light on how some Canadian slaves were deported to Africa: “1783 and 1784 saw the fight for American independence. When loyalists faithful to the British Crown fled the USA, they settled in the Eastern Townships and along the Lachine Canal. The Canadian government bought some land in Sierra Leone and asked the slaves, who had become very numerous since the arrival of the loyalists, if they wished to return to their ancestral lands. Those who accepted the government offer brought with them, amongst other things, the British judicial system. That is why even today judges wear a white wig when they sit in Sierra Leone.’

This initiative was the inspiration for the United States, which founded Liberia in 1822, through the American Colonization Society, to send freed black slaves there.

## Abolition of Trade

Ironically, it was the British Conquest that brought about the abolition of slavery. At the time of the American Revolution, slaves who fled their American owners were received here with open arms just like the loyalists.

In addition, in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Great Britain was experiencing a movement that saw a return to authentic Christian gospel values known as the **REVIVAL**. This experience was similar to that of other Christian dissident movements in history such as the early Franciscans, the Waldensians, Wycliffe's Lollards, the Anabaptists, the Moravian Brethren, and the Quakers and Diggers.

It was also in the 18<sup>th</sup> century that the very traditional Anglican Church was influenced by this movement deep within its own membership that resulted in this Revival movement reaching a large layer of British society. In this way, the first egalitarian and anti-slavery movement in the history of humanity was born. After having touched the Protestant countries, this breath of the Holy Spirit influenced France and its secular intellectuals in an indirect way.

In Canada, John Graves Simcoe, upon being appointed lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada in 1791, and influenced by this Revival movement, planned to establish a province where slavery was illegal, on the basis that the practice was inconsistent with a free nation.

In 1793, he convinced the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada to adopt the first measures that restricted slavery in the British Empire by banning the importation of new slaves in Upper Canada. This then launched a gradual process of emancipation.

As a result, it also made Upper Canada a safe haven for enslaved Africans in the United States who fled to freedom during the period of the Underground Railroad from 1815 to 1860.

In Lower Canada, the judges refused to clamp down on fugitive slaves, and Louis-Joseph Papineau failed in his attempt to have the ownership rights of masters over the slaves recognized.

Thanks to Simcoe, on March 25, 1807, King George III gave royal assent to a law abolishing the slave trade that marked the beginning of the end of this shameful practice by forbidding British ships from being part of the sale and transportation of slaves.

In fact, the British Parliament's decision to abolish the slave trade was influenced by several factors. These included the work of the anti-slavery society formed in 1787 by Grandville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson; the campaign waged by free Blacks including Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, Thomas Peters, Olaudah Equiano and Ignatius Sancho; and the Haitian Revolution of 1804.

### **Total Abolition**

William Wilberforce persisted in his fight against slavery until 1833 when, on his death bed, he was informed that Parliament had adopted his law completely banning slavery. In 1834, the complete emancipation of slaves throughout the Empire was proclaimed.

By contrast, in France, who first had the desire to abolish slavery at the moment of the French Revolution, it wasn't until 1848 that it was completely abolished.

### **Refuge for American Slaves**

We must also remember those heroes who made Canada a welcoming land at the end of the Underground Railroad. Thanks to their efforts, tens of thousands of American slaves were able to flee and find refuge in British North America where thousands of black loyalists participated in the settling of Nova Scotia.

### **Navy Involvement**

Finally, the role played by the courageous sailors of the Halifax Royal Navy must be mentioned, many of which were based in the port of Halifax. At great risk, and often against their own will, because they were forcibly recruited in Halifax, they helped enforce the ban on the sale of African slaves throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Are There Any Slaves in Canada Today?**

"There are at least 27 million people trapped in various forms of slavery in the world today, and that is more people than were trafficked from Africa 400 years ago," said Jamie McIntosh, executive director of the Canadian branch of the International Justice Mission.

The extent of the crime in Canada remains disputable. RCMP figures say it ranges from 800 to 1,200 victims a year, while non-governmental organizations place the numbers at closer to 15,000. In Toronto alone, the RCMP estimates

that 100 girls are being supplied yearly to the sex trade. They yield around \$5-million for their bosses.

Most of the women trafficked into the country are from the Asia-Pacific region, in particular from the Fujian region of China and South Korea. Within Canada, victims can often come from Aboriginal reserves. In Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic, they mainly are from Eastern Europe.

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