

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF JUNE 19<sup>TH</sup> LOYALIST DAY

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The original United Empire Loyalists were colonists living in British North America who left their home and fled to Canada in the aftermath of the American Revolution in the eighteenth century.

The Loyalists, as their name already implies, wished to remain faithful subjects of the Crown and under the legal and legislative institutions that derived from the Crown. They came to Canada so they could continue to live under those same institutions and to escape persecution for their loyalty by the American republicans. Others came to escape slavery.

The Loyalists were of diverse cultural backgrounds and included individuals of Aboriginal, English, French, African American, Dutch, German and other ancestry. The Loyalists were thus Canada's first multicultural immigrants and so reflect profoundly contemporary Canadian society.

The Loyalists settled Ontario and established many hamlets and towns here that later grew into large cities. Ontario universities and colleges, law courts, a system of landholding and the provincial legislature all have their ultimate origin in Loyalist roots and hard work.

The Constitutional Act of June 19th, 1791 created the province of Upper Canada, or Ontario as we know it today, and this law came into being as a direct result of Loyalist influence.

This law secured the protection of the Crown for the cultural, legal and religious rights of the mainly Francophone citizens of Lower Canada, or Quebec, as it is known today. In Upper Canada, it established a system of land tenure as well as a court system modelled on British Common Law that continues in Ontario to this day.

The Loyalists fought against subsequent American invasions into Canada. The Loyalists were instrumental in developing a distinctive national identity that was, and is, uniquely Canadian. They established their own Loyalist tradition that has always been proudly handed down to their Loyalist descendants. Such descendants are privileged to place the letters, "U.E." (meaning, "Unity of the Empire"), indicating their Loyalist lineage, after their surnames.

The Loyalists are so closely connected with Ontario's founding and development that it would be no exaggeration in the least to say that Ontario, as we know it today, would simply not exist were it not for the Loyalists.

This is why Mr. Harry Danford, Member of Provincial Parliament for HastingsPeterborough, himself of Loyalist ancestry, in cooperation with the United Empire Loyalists Association of Canada, developed a Private Member's Bill to declare June 19th , the anniversary of the Constitutional Act, "United Empire Loyalist Day" in the province of Ontario.

Mr. Danford's Bill was given Royal Assent and passed into law in December, 1997 with unanimous, all-party support in the Legislature. June 19th is now an official day formally established by the Ontario Government to commemorate and celebrate our Loyalist heritage.

That heritage is one that belongs to all citizens of Ontario, of all cultural backgrounds, whether their ancestors were Loyalists or not. As the great visionaries and builders of Ontario, the Loyalists worked on behalf of all citizens of this province and country.

As we have seen, the Loyalist heritage is itself a multicultural one that led to the social and political development of Canada with our bilingual, multicultural and regional traditions under the unity of a Constitutional Monarchy and Parliamentary Democracy - both courageously defended and zealously preserved for us by the Loyalists.

We owe much to the United Empire Loyalists. On June 19th , we have an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the heritage and tradition of the Loyalists and express, each in our unique way, our gratitude to their self-sacrificing dedication to Ontario and Canada.

Like so many Canadians today, the Loyalists were immigrants in a new land. We remember them and their descendants for their many ongoing achievements, the most important one being, of course, the great society in which we are all privileged to live.

On June 19th , we celebrate this great, living heritage that continues in the descendants of the Loyalists and which also implies members of succeeding multicultural immigrations to Canada.

Ontario's Coat of Arms has always given silent witness to the importance of the Loyalists heritage in our history and in our contemporary society with the words of the Motto: " Ut incepit fidelis, sic permanet," or, " Loyal in the beginning, loyal remaining!"

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