

The Unsung Founders of Shelburne

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When we think of the founding of Shelburne, we often picture a straightforward tale of loyalists fleeing the American Revolution. We imagine brave settlers building a new life in a new land. But a significant chapter of that story is often left in the shadows—a chapter that is not just a footnote, but an integral part of Shelburne's very foundation. My name is [Your Name], and as the Executive Vice President of the United Empire Loyalist Association, Nova Scotia Branch, and Membership Chairman, I am privileged to share this story. My own connection to this history is not just through my role but through my family lineage, as a direct descendant of Lieutenant Andrew Goudick, a Loyalist settler of the Sand Spits in Fort Roseway. This personal connection has shown me that to tell the full story of Shelburne, we must look beyond our own family trees and acknowledge that the town was not just built **for** them, but that it was, in many ways, built **by** them—and that their contributions were essential to its survival.

To understand the role the Black Loyalists played in building Shelburne, we must first understand the journey that brought them here. It's a story that begins not with hope, but with a radical and life-altering promise. During the American Revolution, Lord Dunmore, the British Governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation offering freedom to any enslaved person who would leave their American masters and fight for the Crown. For thousands of Black men and women, this was an offer of liberation—a chance to seize their own destiny. This promise was documented in what became known as the **Book of Negroes**, a testament to a collective leap of faith. A significant portion of them sailed directly to Nova Scotia. They didn't come as servants or refugees; they came as free people, guaranteed land and provisions by the British government, ready to build the future they had been promised.

When the Loyalist ships arrived in the fall of 1783, Shelburne was little more than a vast, forested wilderness. There were no homes, no roads, and no infrastructure. The land had to be cleared, the timber had to be milled, and the town had to be built from the ground up. And who did this foundational work? It was the Black Loyalists. They were the skilled carpenters, the sawyers, the masons, and the laborers who cleared the dense forests and sawed the lumber for the first homes. They built the docks, the wharves, and the roads that would allow the town to function. Their labor was the engine that built the town. But their contributions were met with hostility and broken promises. Land grants were delayed or never given, and they faced severe discrimination. This tension erupted in the summer of 1784, leading to the infamous Shelburne Riot. It was a stark and tragic reminder that even in their new home, the promise of true equality was still out of reach. Yet, their resolve did not break.

The story of the Black Loyalists in Shelburne is one of immense hardship, but it is also one of incredible resilience. When they were denied the promises of land and equality, many of them did not simply give up. They formed their own community in Birchtown, a place that, for a time, represented their unwavering hope for self-determination. And their legacy didn't stop there. Facing continued discrimination, a significant number of these brave settlers chose to leave Nova Scotia and embark on yet another journey—this time to establish the colony of Sierra Leone. In doing so, they played a foundational role in building what would become the city of Freetown. This incredible journey from Shelburne to Sierra Leone is a testament to their enduring courage and their refusal to be defined by broken promises.

So, where does this history leave us today? It leaves us with a deeper, richer understanding of who we are. Our community's foundation is not a single narrative but a complex tapestry woven from many threads of struggle and triumph. To truly honor the history of Shelburne and Nova Scotia, we must acknowledge every part of that tapestry, especially the threads that have been marginalized for too long. Moving forward together means more than just remembering the past; it means integrating it. It means building a community where all founding stories are celebrated, where the contributions of the Black Loyalists are recognized not as a footnote, but as the essential, foundational element that they were. It means learning from the hardships of the past to build a more just and inclusive future for all.

NOTE: This was prepared for the Black Loyalist Academic Conference of Knowledge, August 7-9, 2025 at the Black Loyalist Heritage Centre in Birchtown, Nova Scotia. For more details, please visit <https://blackloyalistconference.ca/>

Podcast: “[*The Unsung Founders of Shelburne*](#)” (6:55 min), prepared for Deep Dive.