

Slavery in Canada

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The International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024) was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly with three themes: recognition, justice and development. In proclaiming this Decade, the international community is recognizing that people of African descent represent a distinct group whose human rights must be promoted and protected. Around 200 million people identifying themselves as being of African descent live in the Americas. Many millions more live in other parts of the world, outside of the African continent.



Introduction

Despite the efforts of historians and researchers to document nearly 200 years of slavery in Canada, it remains a topic that is little known across the country.

Slavery was practised on Canadian soil during the colonial period mainly in three regions of the country: Quebec, the Atlantic provinces and Ontario. It began in the early days of New France and ended in the early decades of the 1800s.

Servitude among First Nations

Servitude existed among some Indigenous peoples before the Europeans arrived. Generally, it took place in a military context, with the subjugation of those defeated in war. Captives could suffer reprisals from those whose family members had died in combat, or they could be absorbed into the social structure. Servitude among First Nations also served a diplomatic function, acting as a seal on agreements or contributing to the peace process through the exchange of captives. Slavery in this form was not hereditary, and those who survived it could subsequently expect some measure of social mobility.¹

¹ Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance, Indigenous and Atlantic Slaveries in New France* (Williamsburg: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), p. 70.



Panis and Blacks: slavery in New France

The first enslaved person of African descent to live permanently in Canada arrived in Quebec City in 1629, just 21 years after the founding of the French colony. He came from Madagascar, and was about 10 years old when he arrived. Baptised as Olivier Le Jeune, he remained in Quebec City until he died in 1654.

Subsequently, most of the persons who were enslaved in New France were Indigenous people, commonly referred to as Panis. The word was used generically to designate First Nations people who were enslaved, regardless of their geographical origin or nation. Many of them were captured in wars or during raids into territory that is now the American Midwest, and ended up in Detroit, Montreal or Quebec City. The term Panis derives from “Pawnee,” a nation indigenous to the Midwest, when in fact those enslaved also included Sioux, Apache, Mesquaki (Foxes), Attikamek (dubbed Têtes-de-boules in French colonial records), Inuit, Natchez, Shawnee and others.²

² Marcel Trudel, *Deux siècles d'esclavage au Québec* [Two centuries of slavery in Quebec] (Montreal: Éditions Hurtubise HMH, 2004), pp. 76-84.

Where did slaves come from?

Black enslaved persons generally came from the Thirteen Colonies that would eventually form the United States, or from the West Indies, even when they were described as African-born. While most of those who were enslaved under the French regime were of Indigenous origin, among them were also persons of African origin, and their numbers increased with the arrival of the Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution of 1775. The Loyalists settled in Lower Canada (Quebec), Upper Canada (Ontario) and the Atlantic provinces.



Domesticity: Canadian-style servitude

In contrast to the situation elsewhere in the Americas, slavery in the territory that would become Canada was mainly a domestic phenomenon; there were no great tobacco, sugar-cane, cotton or indigo plantations. The result was that slavery did not become a vital economic engine as it did in the southern United States, Brazil, or the West Indies.

Most enslaved persons worked as servants in urban residences. They were also farmworkers or general labourers. Women did not merely perform household tasks: they were also subjected to sexual abuse by their owners.



The trade in human beings

Slave sales were generally conducted in person, and in some cases in public. With the emergence of British rule and the establishment of a written press, some were sold through newspaper advertisements, like this one that appeared in the Gazette de Québec on April 10, 1788:

A VENDRE ENSEMBLE,
UN beau et une belle Nègresse mariés. Le Nègre
agé de 23 à 24 ans, de la hauteur de 5 1/2 à 6 pieds Anglois; la Nègresse âgée de 22 à 23 ans; tous deux d'une bonne constitution. Pour plus ample information, il faut s'adresser au Sr. Pinguet, Marchand à la Basse-ville de Québec.

To be SOLD together,
A Handsome Negro Man and a beautiful Negro
Woman married to one another; the man from twenty-three to twenty-four years of age, between five and an half and six English feet high; the woman from twenty-two to twenty-three years of age; both of a good constitution. For further information, such as may be desirous of purchasing them must apply to Mr. Pinguet, in the Lower-town of Québec, Merchant.

A VENDRE ENSEMBLE

Un beau et une belle négresse mariés. Le Nègre agé de 23 à 24 ans, de la hauteur de 5 1/2 à 6 pieds Anglois, la Nègresse agée de 22 à 23 ans, tous deux d'une bonne constitution. Pour plus ample information, il faut s'adresser au Sr. Pinguet, Marchand à la Basse-ville de Québec

To be SOLD together

A Handsome Negro Man and a beautiful Negro Woman married to one another; the man from twenty-three to twenty-four years of age, between five and an half and six English feet high, the woman from twenty-two to twenty-three years of age; both of a good constitution. For further information, such as may be desirous of purchasing them must apply to Mr. Pinguet, in the Lower-town of Québec, Merchant.



How many enslaved people were there in Canada?



It is difficult to determine exactly how many enslaved people there were in Canada at the time. They do not always appear in contemporary records, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the ethnic origin and status—enslaved or free—of domestic servants. Historian Marcel Trudel has counted 4,185 persons who were enslaved in the province of Quebec, two-thirds of whom were Indigenous and one-third of African origin.³ The Loyalists are thought to have brought between 1,500 and 2,000 enslaved Blacks (or as many as 2,500, according to Harvey Amani Whitfield) to the Maritimes,⁴ and between 500 and 700 to Upper Canada.⁵ However, these are incomplete and approximate figures.

³ Trudel, *ibid.*, p. 90.

⁴ Harvey Amani Whitfield, *North to bondage, Loyalist slavery in the Maritimes* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2016), pp. 119–120.

⁵ Natasha L. Henry, "Chloe Cooley and the Act to Limit Slavery in Upper Canada", in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, article published October 30, 2013, last updated January 5, 2016, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/chloe-cooley-and-the-act-to-limit-slavery-in-upper-canada>, consulted July 9, 2019.



Escape as a means of resistance

Given the small numbers of enslaved people in Canada, resistance mainly took the form of fleeing on foot, rather than the armed uprisings that occurred everywhere else in the Americas. Under British rule, some fleeing slavery were advertised in newspapers, with detailed descriptions of their clothing and appearance, and usually a reward for their capture.

These advertisements provide a useful opportunity to visualize those suspected of fleeing, and to identify their escape strategies: some used forged documents to pass as free people, while others used clothing to change their appearance.

It was not unusual for enslaved people to speak more than one language. Sometimes, this was even used as a selling point, or mentioned as an identifier in a wanted notice. Slaves were advertised as speaking French, German, Dutch, Gaelic or in one case, “English with a Guinean accent.”



Historical invisibility

Slavery is dependent on the dehumanization of those enslaved. As a result, discussion of slavery that does not name people whose lives were assimilated to that of a piece of property serves to perpetuate their historical invisibility.

Jacob was an enslaved person from the Mesquaki (Fox) nation who was killed by soldiers in Montreal in 1728. His killers were acquitted after a six-week trial.⁶

Marie-Joseph-Angélique, enslaved Black person, was accused of starting a fire that destroyed part of Montreal in 1734, and sentenced to death. Her executioner was also an enslaved person of African origin: a Martiniquan named Mathieu Lèveillé.

Peggy and her children, Jupiter, Milly and Amy, were enslaved by Peter Russell of York (the modern Toronto) in the early 19th century; Peggy's husband, a Black freeman, was named Pompadour. In 1806, Russell placed an advertisement to dispose of Peggy and Jupiter. He was asking \$150 for the former and \$200 for the latter, payable over three years.

⁶ Brett Rushforth, *op. cit.*, p. 338.





The end of slavery in Canada

Slavery was abolished on August 1, 1834 in most British colonies in southern Africa, Canada and the Caribbean, but it had begun to disappear in Canada some 30 years earlier.

The emotions aroused by the sale of the enslaved woman Chloe Cooley, and her transfer to the United States in 1793, drove the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, John Graves Simcoe, to pass an *Act Against Slavery* in the Legislative Assembly. The purpose of the Act was to prevent any subsequent importation of slaves, and to limit the duration of servitude. From that date, any child born to an enslaved mother was freed at age 25.

However, those who were already enslaved retained that status; the legislation did not prevent slavery or the sale of slaves, but provided for its gradual elimination over time. One of the last sales of enslaved people in Upper Canada was held in 1824.

In Lower Canada, Sir James Monk, Chief Justice for the District of Montreal, refused to punish runaway slaves, given a lack of judicial clarity as to the legality of the practice in that province. His refusal to punish Charlotte, a fugitive enslaved woman, in Montreal in 1798 prompted a series of escapes in which Monk handed down verdicts of acquittal for enslaved persons seeking their freedom. Montreal slaveowners sought legislative measures to protect the practice, but their efforts were unsuccessful.⁷

In Nova Scotia, from the 1790s until the early 1800s, Justices Sampson Blowers and Thomas Strange made life difficult for owners who reclaimed runaway slaves through the courts by requesting the most specific proof possible of their ownership rights, which few were able to supply.⁸

During the same period in New Brunswick, a number of cases of enslaved persons who had run away came before the courts, but each time, the judges found in favour of the owners. The last advertisement concerning someone running away from slavery in that province dates from 1816.⁹

Prince Edward Island gave legal status to enslaved people from 1781 until the law was repealed in 1825.¹⁰

⁷ Frank Mackey, *Done with Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal*, Montréal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010, p. 48-49.

⁸ Barrinton Walker, éd., *The African Canadian legal odyssey*, Toronto, The Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, University of Toronto Press, p. 386-387.

⁹ Harvey Amani Whitfield, *op. cit.*, p. 103-106.

¹⁰ Barrinton Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 395.





Slavery ended in Canada thanks to the resistance of those who refused to accept their enslaved status, their White allies who sheltered them or defended them in court, and the judges who found in their favour. Only in Upper Canada did gradual abolition take place as a result of legislative action.

The decline of slavery was very likely facilitated by the fact that it was not a prime economic factor in Canada. In a number of places, slavery evolved into hiring, as many Canadian landowners saw a financial advantage in hiring workers at low cost, rather than having to support entire families.

Conclusion

The history of the enslavement of Indigenous peoples and those of African descent in Canada should become a permanent part of our national story. However, it is also essential to remember that the presence of Black people in Canada is not exclusively associated with slavery; a number of free people helped to build this country from its beginnings in the 17th century. Mathieu da Costa, the Black Loyalists, Thomas Peters, the Jamaican Maroons, Rose Fortune, Richard Pierpoint, Alexander Grant, refugees from the War of 1812 and the Underground Railroad, Josiah Henson, Mary Ann Shadd Cary, Mifflin W. Gibbs, Sylvia Stark, John Ware, No. 2 Construction Battalion, Viola Desmond and many others are examples of people of African descent from coast to coast whose names should be recorded in our histories and school textbooks.

We have a duty to remember slavery, but it is not an identity, and we cannot let slavery define Black history in Canada.

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Timeline

1608	Samuel de Champlain founded Quebec City.
1629	Olivier Le Jeune arrived in Quebec City.
June 21, 1734	Execution in Montreal of Marie-Joseph-Angélique by the enslaved Martiniquan Mathieu Lèveillé.
1760	Fall of Montreal and the end of New France. Article 47 of the Articles of Capitulation of Montreal stated that "The negroes and panis of both sexes shall remain, in their quality of slaves, in the possession of the French and Canadians to whom they belong."
1783	Arrival of the Loyalists.
July 9, 1793	Following the Chloe Cooley case, John Graves Simcoe secured passage of legislation for the gradual abolition of slavery in Upper Canada.
1798	Charlotte ran away in Montreal, and Justice James Monk refused to convict fugitives.
1790s to early 1800s	Justices Blowers and Strange handed down decisions favouring fugitives in Nova Scotia.
August 1, 1834	Slavery abolished in most British possessions.

