
Slavery in English Nova Scotia, 1750–1810

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Many historians are familiar with Thomas Peters. His personal story has been told and retold to the point that it can be found in textbooks about United States history.¹ He is worthy of this attention. Peters's well known journey from Africa to America to Nova Scotia and finally back to Africa does not need to be recounted here. Perhaps lesser known are his comments about slavery in Loyalist Nova Scotia. In 1790, Peters petitioned Lord Grenville and argued that "People of Colour" were "injured also by a public and avowed Toleration of Slavery."²

At the other extreme was the view of Nova Scotia slaveholders who seventeen years later petitioned the colonial government in hope of obtaining legal protection for their black property. The petitioners argued that Royal Proclamations and Acts of Parliament "expressly authorize[d] them to bring their Negro Slaves" to Nova Scotia after the Revolutionary War. Although they did not wish to "advocate Slavery as a System," they complained that the local court system had created "certain doubts" about the legal status of slave property. Moreover, black slaves were "daily leaving their service and setting your petitioners at defiance."³

These petitions, one from a former slave and another from slaveholders, open up fundamental questions about slavery. What role did slavery play in Loyalist Nova Scotia society—was it a mere oddity or something much more significant and telling about race relations and the exploitation of black labour? How many slaves came to Nova Scotia after the American Revolution? What do the primary source documents say about black slavery and servitude? Where did slaves and slaveholders come from in the United States? What type of slavery existed in Nova Scotia before the Loyalists' arrival? Where was slavery prevalent? Who owned slaves? This paper provides a preliminary exploration of these questions.

The Loyalist enumerator for the township of Chester wrote that one James Green had "built a large House, [and] made great improvements on his Land." He noted that Green's "three Servants are Slaves," and had helped their owner develop his property.⁴ In noting this fact, the enumerator unwittingly provided the precise status of these three slaves in a small township on the Atlantic Ocean.

Despite such specific comments as the enumerator's, it is impossible to give an accurate accounting of the number of black slaves who came to Nova Scotia during

and after the American Revolution. James Walker stated that 1232 slaves were brought to Nova Scotia.⁵ This number is based on Colonel Robert Morse's return of former soldiers and Loyalists taken during the summer of 1784.⁶ It is problematic for several reasons. First, Morse's return did not include Shelburne where perhaps the most slaves and slaveholders originally settled. Second, the racial identity of those listed as servants in Morse's return rather than slaves is not clear, nor is it indicated that those designated as servants were actually chattel slaves. It is likely that these servants were slaves. There are several examples in Nova Scotia of slaves being referred to as servants in wills or runaway advertisements. The Methodist minister and historian T.W. Smith argued that black servants and slaves were basically one and the same. He had access to people who remembered slavery and offered him oral traditions about the institution. According to Smith:

[S]till-enslaved Negroes brought by the Loyalist owners to the Maritime Provinces in 1783 and 1784 were classed as "servants" in some of the documents of the day. Lists of Loyalist companies bound for Shelburne, made out, it is probable, under the direction of British officers whose dislike to the word "slave" would lead them to use the alternative legal terms, contain columns for "men, women, children and servants," the figures in the "servants" column being altogether disproportionate to those in the preceding columns.⁷

How can we distinguish between slaves and servants in the documentation? Scholars must recognize the ambiguity and subtleties of the terminology used in the primary source material. In a letter about southern Loyalists including Lieutenant James Edward Bossieau, William Shaw mentioned that Bossieau's "servants" had been working on their master's land. Bossieau was from South Carolina and brought five black "servants" with no surnames from the Lowcountry.⁸ These servants were likely slaves. Some masters are listed as possessing servants in colonial musters, but in fact owned slaves. For example, according to the muster of Loyalist settlers in Annapolis County, John Ryerson possessed two servants over the age of ten.⁹ These servants were slaves because in the Book of Negroes (a listing of free and enslaved blacks taken by British officials at the end of the Revolutionary War) three blacks named Priscilla, Tom, and Sam were listed as "John Ryerson's property proved."¹⁰ Without this document, the status of Ryerson's servants would not be clear. Another example is the slaves of John Polhemus who would eventually become one of the largest slaveholders in early nineteenth-century Nova Scotia. According to the Loyalist settlement returns, he had two servants. In the Book of Negroes it is clear that these two servants (Mary and an infant) were the "Property of Capt. Polhemus."¹¹ According to the muster of Loyalists at Dartmouth, Bethaser Creamer

had four black “servants” named Ben, Pompey, Mary, and Sarah. According to the Book of Negroes, Ben, Sarah, and Mary were the “Property of Bethaser Creamer.” Again, on the muster these slaves were listed as servants, but in another document they were designated slaves. On the same muster, under the category of servants, a few such as Thom Webster seem to have been white, but many in the servant category were listed as blacks with no surnames including Bristol, William, Nanny,

Forty Shillings Reward.

RUN AWAY, from the Subscriber, on Monday^s
Morning the 25^h of *July*; a Negro Boy Slave^a

Named D I C K,

Aged about Twenty Years, about five feet eight Inches high, pretty well set, full smooth Face, stoops a little in walking, and has lost the first joint of his great Toe of the left Foot, speaks good English, had on when he went away, a gray Jacket and Waistcoat, white duck Trowsers an old pair over them, and a white Shirt.

Whoever will secure the Negro Slave, in any of His Majesty's Goals and give immediate notice thereof, shall receive the above Reward, and if delivered to his Master, shall be allowed all reasonable expences.

☞ All Masters of Vessels, and others, are hereby forbid harbouring, concealing or carrying of said Servant, as they would avoid the Penalty of the Law.

ANDREW REYNOLDS

HALIFAX, August 2, 1790.

Figure 1. This advertisement for a runaway slave appeared in the Royal Gazette (Halifax) 10 July 1790.

Stafford, Collins, Harry, Cesar, and Alexander.¹² It seems fair to assume that Smith is correct in asserting that most listed as servants were black slaves.

There are also documents that show that some of those listed as servants were white and obviously not enslaved. For example, in the return of Belle Vue, there is a column for servants with names such as William Kelly, John Wilson, and Anne

Rogers. These servants were probably white. Significantly, also under the same column for servants is a separate section for “Negroes.” The names of these African Americans included Betty, Joe, Isaac, Sylvia, and Amy Ash.¹³ According to the Book of Negroes, strikingly, Amy Ash was “free born.”¹⁴ As these contradictory examples demonstrate, the most accurate statement about the number of slaves in Loyalist Nova Scotia is to say that we will never know.

The documents about black slavery and black servitude are ambiguous and show the thin line between black slavery and alleged black freedom. At times, free blacks slipped back into a state of slavery or were simply re-enslaved as the court records in Shelburne make abundantly clear. Moreover, as Allen Robertson points out in his article about degrees of un-freedom, bondage and slavery, the line between slavery and freedom in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Nova Scotia was fluid and contingent.¹⁵ As Thomas Peters argued, free blacks “have already been reduced to Slavery without being able to attain any redress from the King’s courts.” Peters continued by pointing out that one man once reduced to slavery “did actually lose his Life by the Beating and Ill Treatment of his Master and another who fled the like cruelty was inhumanly shot and maimed.” It is important to note that these people were free blacks. The situation was even worse for Loyalist chattel “as the poor friendless Slaves have no more Protection by the laws of the Colony.” These observations show that the Black Loyalists and slaves faced the most arduous circumstances regardless of whether they were legally owned or free. The Black Loyalists were only nominally free and could easily slip back into a state of slavery. They were black, like their enslaved brethren, and this racial identity was more significant in deciding their place in society as opposed to whether they were free or not. Free blacks did not enjoy much freedom, and the use of servant or slave to identify blacks and the ambiguity with which these terms were used demonstrates the importance of race rather than their status as free or not.

Loyalist slaves came from various parts of the American colonies ranging from Massachusetts to East Florida, which made Nova Scotia home to an array of American slaveries. These people had diverse backgrounds, traditions, ages, skills, and places of origin. A few examples of Loyalist slaves and slaveholders of differing origins demonstrate the range. John Herbert brought several slaves from his home in Virginia, while James Alexander’s two slaves came to Nova Scotia from Savannah.¹⁶ Bill and Daniel settled in Nova Scotia with their owner William Black who had worked as a cabinetmaker during the war in New York City.¹⁷ The diversity of Loyalist slaves is underlined in an advertisement about runaway slaves in 1784:

HARBOURED, or otherwise CONCEALED. THE following Negroes belonging to the subscriber, viz. Edward Morris, an elderly negro about five feet five inches high, by trade a mason, has a remarkable

wound in his forehead which shews a hole resembling a bullet shot, is a celebrated methodist preacher among the negroes, was bred at Fairfield in Connecticut; also Charity his wife, a half bred Indian of the tribe of Long Island, province of New York, and a small boy about seven years of age, son of the said wench by an Indian father. Andrew Bush, a comely stout negro, remarkable high forwarded, generally called the Widow's Peek, formerly the property of Doctor Bush, in Connecticut, is a remarkable good miller, which practice he has been used all his life to, also his wife Eanus, a yellow mustee [octoroon or a person of mixed ancestry]. And, Peter Cock, a young negro, comely countenance.¹⁸

This one advertisement includes slaves of various ages, skills, sexes, colours and ethnicities. It also shows that local slaves attempted to maintain their families. One of the slaves is also described as a “celebrated methodist preacher” among African Americans. As this document indicates, Loyalist slaves were not a monolithic group.

Despite the diverse origins of Loyalist slaves and slaveholders, the majority probably came from the Middle Colonies and New England, whereas substantial numbers of southern Loyalists went instead to the Caribbean. The type of slavery found in New England and New York offered traits readily transferable to Nova Scotia. First, the majority of northern slaves lived in close proximity to their owners, often in the same household. As a result, slaveholders and slaves experienced extremely close contact and often ate, slept, worked, and socialized together. These slaves lived in an overwhelmingly white environment and did not have the same opportunity as their southern counterparts to develop families or an independent slave culture.¹⁹ Northern slaves tended to be multi-occupational in terms of their work. They were able to perform numerous tasks associated with urban labour or farming. For example, one Loyalist offered the following slave for sale: “Likely NEGRO MAN, about 28 years old, [who] is both a Carpenter and Cooper; [and] would be a valuable acquisition in the West-Indies or Nova-Scotia.”²⁰ Another advertisement made it clear that a female slave had numerous skills and was “acquainted with all country work, spinning, sewing, and Dairy.” The woman’s owner also described her as good at housework and with children.²¹ These skills, whether they were related to woodworking or domestic service, would be valuable for Loyalist slaveholders in Nova Scotia.

What type of slavery did Loyalist exiles find in Nova Scotia when they arrived on its rocky and thickly wooded shores in 1783? Slavery has been part of the province’s history since at least the early eighteenth century. Although pre-Loyalist Nova Scotia was hardly a slave society, it was a society with slaves whether among early French settlers or the later arriving English-speaking migrants. These early groups fashioned a type of slavery Loyalist masters greatly expanded during the 1780s.

Slavery in English Nova Scotia can be traced to the beginnings of Annapolis Royal after 1710. At the same time, in Ile Royale, French settlers established a community with slaves that would prosper until 1758.²² Before the arrival of the New England Planters in 1760, there is evidence of the presence of slaves and masters in Halifax and other areas. Generally speaking, seagoing entrepreneurs, merchants, and private families brought slaves to Nova Scotia from other American colonies and the West Indies. For example, in 1750, Governor Edward Cornwallis noted that Captain Bloss had purchased land outside of Halifax where he intended to settle along with his sixteen slaves. In all likelihood, these slaves would have worked as both agricultural labourers and domestic servants.²³ The number of slaves owned by this Royal Navy officer would place him among the largest slaveholders in Nova Scotian history. In 1752, the Halifax merchant Joshua Mauger placed an advertisement in the *Halifax Royal Gazette* offering to sell “several Negro slaves.” These slaves ranged in age from 12 to 35, including men and women. Mauger’s advertisement is significant because it not only shows the type of skills slaves possessed, but also the work experience potential purchasers preferred. He noted that one female slave had been raised in a “Gentleman’s family” and was capable of performing various duties including “Washing, Ironing, Cookery.” Mauger claimed that his two teenage male slaves were “fit for any kind of business.”²⁴ Seven years later, in 1759, Malachy Salter wrote his wife a letter imploring her to return with a slave from Boston to work in their home partially because his young slave boy named Jack caused him a great deal of trouble. Salter noted that he was “obliged to exercise the cat or stick almost every day.”²⁵

These early patterns of slavery before the Planter influx are significant because the type of work performed by enslaved blacks during this period would be continued first by Planter slaves and then by Loyalist slaves after 1783. As Mauger’s advertisement indicates, versatile and multi-occupational slaves were essential for Nova Scotia slaveholders. These slaves had to possess various skills that made them useful in numerous tasks ranging from domestic service to menial agricultural labour. Slaves also possessed several valuable skills that could be used in coastal communities. For example, several slaves were advertised for sale in a Boston newspaper in 1751. “Just arrived from Halifax and to be sold, ten strong, hearty Negro Men, mostly tradesmen, such as caulkers, carpenters, sailmakers and ropemakers.”²⁶ These skills were necessary in a seafaring economy and the marine environment that was not dependent on a staple crop such as rice or tobacco. Nova Scotia slavery did have an economic imperative, which was the use of multi-occupational slaves capable of performing numerous tasks inside of households. Additionally, the slaves had to be capable of helping owners with agricultural work. The labour provided by slaves even before the Planter influx freed up time for slaveholders and their family members to pursue other economic or social and cultural opportunities by providing important work in households.²⁷

Between 1759 and 1764, thousands of Planters migrated to Nova Scotia because of the government's offer of free land in the region. The Nova Scotia government promised an additional fifty acres to households for every black person brought into the colony. Heeding this call, some Planters migrated from their homes in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island to the northeast. Although the New England colonies were not slave societies, slavery did exist and prospered in coastal towns and throughout scattered agricultural settlements.

The Planters settled in various parts of Nova Scotia including the Annapolis Valley, the Saint John region, and Yarmouth. In Nova Scotia, lands in the Annapolis Valley attracted New England planters who wanted to develop more profitable farming operations. Slaves served on these farms in the Annapolis Valley as agricultural labourers. In other areas, such as the southern shore, Planters and their slaves worked in timbering, shipbuilding, fishing, and other maritime related activities.

DIGBY, 21st JUNE 1792.



RUN AWAY, Joseph Odel and Peter Lawrence (Negroes) from their Masters, and left Digby last evening, the first mentioned is about Twenty four years of Age, five Feet six Inches high, had on a light brown Coat, red Waistcoat and thickset Breeches, but took other Cloaths with him, he is a likely young Fellow with remarkable white Teeth.—The other is about five Feet eight Inches high, very Black had on lightesth coloured Clothes.—Whoever will secure said Negroes so that their Masters may have them again, shall receive **TEN DOLLARS** Reward, and all reasonable Charges paid.

DANIEL ODEL,
PHILLIP EARL.

Figure 2. This advertisement for two “Run Aways” appeared in the Royal Gazette (Halifax), 10 July 1792.

One useful source for Planter slavery is the diary of Liverpool resident Simeon Perkins. In 1777, Perkins made several brief remarks in his diary about slavery.²⁸ His words about slaves are few, but what is available is intriguing. On March 7, Perkins recorded that “Capt. Dean secures me by Bill [of] sale of a negro boy, and cattle, and some notes of hand.”²⁹ Several months later, Perkins wrote that he had “settled

with Mr. Mercer, and pay him for a Negro boy. . . . The boy[']s name is Jacob, which I have altered to Frank. He is about 10 or 11 years old.”³⁰ In August, he noted that “[s]ome people come from Halifax after 2 negroes run away from Dav. Prince, and one from Mr. Sutherland.”³¹ In 1783, as the Loyalists fled the United States, Perkins recorded that one Colonel Campbell passed through Liverpool with “Several Black Slaves with him.”³²

In Perkins’s diary, the basic contours of slavery emerge, but not in great detail. First, black people were bought and sold like cattle and in the case of Perkins this included young children, which was not unusual. Perkins’s child slaves were separated from their parents (or possibly orphaned) and this speaks to the difficulties of local slaves maintaining any semblance of black family life. Second, Perkins’ decision to change one of his slave boy’s name from Jacob to Frank showed the child he had a new master and that his life and identity were to be tied to his new master through his new name. Third, masters owned small numbers of slaves per household, which means that masters and slaves probably had close contact with one another.

The occupations of enslaved blacks emerge from a few local slave advertisements during the 1770s. For example, in 1776 a local man hoped to procure “a Negro woman, about 25 or 30 years of age, that understands country work and the management of a dairy.”³³ The potential buyer expected that female slaves would be familiar with tasks associated with frontier farming. Three years later, the same paper offered for sale a young black woman who could not only perform a range of town duties, but also had familiarity with country work in addition to being an “exceedingly good cook.”³⁴ Town labour could involve an array of different tasks including clearing snow, washing clothes, and trucking materials to market. On the other hand, country work could involve all sorts of arduous duties associated with frontier farming.

Loyalist slaves experienced similar types of work patterns. Some worked as carpenters or blacksmiths, but the majority of work required, as American historians Lois and James Horton point out, “strong backs.”³⁵ Skilled slaves were much fewer in number than their unskilled counterparts, but those who could offer their masters a specialized skill were highly valued. For example, Thomas Robinson of Shelburne bequeathed “A Negroe Boy named Philip by trade a Blacksmith” to his brother.³⁶ Despite this example, it seems that domestic service was the most valuable labour that slaves offered to potential masters and possibly the most common form of slavery in Nova Scotia. In 1783, a local paper offered “A Negro Wench” for sale and noted that she was “a good House Servant.”³⁷ Domestic slaves were quite valuable. They did far more than simply serve as a status symbol for well-to-do families. These slaves performed a number of different tasks including sweeping, cleaning, washing clothes, cooking, and child care. Moreover, they had many other responsibilities around the house and any accompanying land an owner might possess. As Joanne Pope Melish notes in the case of New England domestic slaves, they also were responsible for

“hilling, hoeing, gathering, and husking corn and cutting cornstalks; mowing, raking, and carting hay; digging and sledging stones and building stone walls; building fences; cutting and scowing wood; hoeing and picking peas, beans, and turnips; and mending baskets.”³⁸ Loyalist domestic slaves provided important labour that allowed members of the master’s family to seek other employment and thereby increase the family’s income. Child slaves also provided important labour for the household of their masters. For example, in 1786, the *Royal American Gazette* offered for sale a “NEGRO BOY, about fourteen Years of Age.—He has been brought up in a Gentleman’s Family, is very handy at farming, House-Work, or attending Table.”³⁹

Loyalist slaves and slaveholders settled throughout the colony from Cape Breton to Yarmouth and in what would become New Brunswick in 1784. Two important documents give us an idea of where Loyalist settlers and their “servants” lived and where they resided in fairly significant numbers. Colonel Robert Morse’s return and the musters of disbanded soldiers and other Loyalist settlers offer both a big picture of slavery and a smaller community-level picture. According to Morse,

T O B E S O L D,
A Healthy, stout, NEGRO BOY,
about fourteen Years of Age.—He
has been brought up in a Gentleman’s
Family, is very handy at Farming, House-
Work, or attending Table, is strictly hon-
est, and has an exceeding good Temper.
For Particulars, enquire of the Printer.

Figure 3. This advertisement appeared in the *Royal American Gazette* (Shelburne), 19 June 1786.

there were 1232 “servants” among a total of 28,347 people. Thus, approximately four percent of the Loyalist settler population was probably enslaved or in some form of indentured servitude. This number might not seem significant or even important. However, if we take a closer look at individual areas or townships, then the percentages change and become quite intriguing. In Annapolis Royal, 230 individuals were “servants” out of a total of 1230 people, suggesting about 18 percent of the population was under some form of bondage, probably slavery. In Digby, approximately 12 percent of the settlers were listed as “servants.” In Dartmouth and River Saint John respectively, 10 and 5 percent of the settlers were designated as “servants.” As Morse’s return indicates, even if we concede that it is

possible some servants were not slaves, slavery held a relatively significant place among various Loyalist settlements.

Other returns and musters also demonstrate a relatively high level of slavery/servitude among the Loyalists. In October 1783, British officials took a careful return of those Loyalists who left New York for Nova Scotia. The document is revealing. First, the “St Johns Loyalists” consisted of 14,162 people, and 1578 (the number is actually 1575) were listed as “Servants.” So, approximately 11 percent of these settlers remained enslaved or in some form of servitude. While Morse’s return does not include servants or slaves in Shelburne, the 1783 return does have numbers for the “Port Roseway” Loyalists. According to it, nearly 15 percent of the settlers were “servants.” This return also included “Black Companies” who had no servants.⁴⁰ What emerges from this document is the geography of slavery that would define Nova Scotia and the rest of Maritime Canada for as long as the institution persisted. Slavery in this region had deep roots in three areas: Shelburne, Saint John, and the Annapolis area. These three places would become an axis of slavery, which snaked its way along some of the better land in the region.

Although Loyalist slavery remained concentrated around Saint John, the Annapolis region (including Digby), and Shelburne, Loyalist slaves could be found in nearly every part of Nova Scotia. Morse’s return shows the diversity of places that slaves lived in the colony (See TABLE 1). Some slaves resided in very rural and isolated settlements, which meant that their lives would have been different from slaves in Shelburne. Here we must note the diversity of slave experiences based on geography—slaves in Annapolis or Shelburne would have had a much greater opportunity to find marriage partners, form families, and socialize than their counterparts in Sheet Harbour, where only five “servants” lived in 1784.⁴¹

TABLE 1

Township/Area	Population	Percentage of Servants
Antigonish	120	15
Bear River	115	8
Nine Mile River	72	7
Ship Harbour	151	1.3
Windsor	270	8
Windsor Rd/Sackville	130	2

Loyalist slaveholders tended to be from more fortunate families and professions, but owning slaves cut across an emerging middling agricultural and artisanal class that found its roots in the expansion of slave-owning in New England and the Middle Colonies during the mid to late eighteenth century. Using the Book of

Negroes, newspapers, the 1787 Shelburne tax assessment, and other documents it is possible to explore the occupations of Loyalist slave masters. Nova Scotia slaveholders can be broken down into two distinct categories. The first one consisted of well-to-do masters who either owned large farms or worked as merchants. The second group of slaveholders held middling or artisanal positions. Nova Scotia slave owners came from various segments of society and this occupational and economic diversity shows that slaveholding existed among different classes of the white community (See TABLE 2).

During the evacuation from New York and other places, Loyalists attempted to take as much of their property as possible. Unlike their businesses and farms, these men and women could take their slaves to Nova Scotia. Slaves represented not only status, but also movable labour assets that could help in the construction of new homes, businesses, and could offer domestic service. James DeLancey, from one of the most wealthy and famous families in New York, brought about six slaves to Annapolis. He continued the practice of slaveholding throughout his life.⁴² Another Loyalist from New York, Thomas Barclay (though he complained about his relative poverty in Nova Scotia) also held several prominent positions and owned a few slaves.⁴³ General Timothy Ruggles owned a large farm in Wilmot and used slave labour to produce numerous crops.⁴⁴ Thomas Robinson arrived in Shelburne from Delaware where he had been one of the wealthiest Loyalists. He brought a few slaves to Shelburne who worked for his family including one who was a “Blacksmith.”⁴⁵ The wealthy made up an important segment of slaveholders.

Other Loyalist slaveholders worked as farmers, shopkeepers, merchants, mariners, grocers, butchers and similar occupations. In this sense, Loyalist slaveholding in Nova Scotia differed strongly from the norm on Prince Edward Island, where the elite tended to own most if not all of the slaves. A few examples are instructive. Captain John Spier of Hackensack, New Jersey settled in Shelburne. He owned one 20-year-old female slave named Anna. Spier worked as a cabinetmaker.⁴⁶ Richard Jenkins and Paul Speed both resided in the Shelburne area and found employment as bakers. Speed had a baker’s shop on Charlotte Lane. Both of these men owned at least two slaves.⁴⁷ Richard Birmingham settled in Shelburne after escaping from New York at the end of the war. He had at least one slave named Sampson Bush. According to the tax assessment, Birmingham was a “Tavern Keeper.”⁴⁸ Another New Yorker, Valentine Nutter owned a store in Shelburne where he sold various goods. He also owned one male and female slave in the their early twenties and thirties respectively.⁴⁹ James Collins settled in Shelburne after the war. Originally from New Jersey, Collins possessed one slave named Silvia. He worked in Shelburne as a “Taylor.”⁵⁰ Originally from Virginia, John Herbert brought about eight slaves to Nova Scotia. He had been the proprietor of two large farms in Virginia, but in Nova Scotia he worked as a ship carpenter. By the time of his death in 1799, Herbert seems to have had only two slaves left, which he bequeathed to his family.⁵¹

TABLE 2

Slaveholder Name	Occupation	Location
Thomas Barclay	MLA and speaker	Annapolis
William Black	Cabinet Maker	Shelburne
Isaac Bonnett	Merchant	Digby
George Cornwall/Cornwall	Farmer	Granville
Abraham Cuyler	Executive Council	Sydney
Samuel Davenport	Farmer	Shelburne
James DeLancey	Farmer and MLA	Annapolis
Douwe Ditmars	Farmer	Digby
Jesse Gray	Farmer	Argyle
Henry Guest	Deputy Sheriff	Shelburne
Lt. Colonel Isaac Hatfield	Farmer?	Digby
John Jakeways	Mariner	Shelburne
Richard Jenkins	Farmer and Baker	Shelburne
Captain Longstreet	Farmer?	Annapolis
Peter Lynch	Hatter	Shelburne
William Mangham	Farmer	Shelburne
Mr. Rowland	Minister	Shelburne
General Timothy Ruggles	Farmer	Wilmot
Frederick Sinclair	Tavern Keeper	Digby
Robert Sommerville	Merchant	Shelburne
William Summers	Sail Maker	Shelburne
Joseph Totten	Ship Builder and Merchant	Annapolis
Gregory Townsend	Assistant Naval Storekeeper	Halifax
Francis Wood	Butcher/Tavern Keeper	Shelburne

It can be difficult to estimate the number of slaves who lived in individual slaveholders' homes. In 1807, slaveholders from Digby petitioned the colonial government in an effort to have their property secured through some form of legislation. The petitioners listed the number and gender of slaves within each household. Thus, it offers an important glimpse into slaveholding during the early nineteenth-century. The value of the petition must be tempered by a number of considerations. First, it should not be taken as an example of what most slaveholding communities were like during the Loyalist era. Second, these slaveholders should be seen as unusually devoted to the continuation of the institution, as slavery had started to die out in other communities because of judicial decisions. Masters in the

Annapolis Valley tended to own more slaves than masters in Shelburne or Halifax. Thus, the number of slaves per household in this petition should not be taken as an example that was replicated in other Loyalist slaveholding communities. Despite these caveats, this petition might be one of the most important documents about slaveholding in Nova Scotia (See TABLE 3).

TABLE 3: Please note that the names in this table appear in the same order as the original petition.

Slaveholder	Male Slaves	Female Slaves	Child Slaves
John Taylor	2	2	2
James Moody	2	1	5
Margaret Moody			1
Simeon Jones	1	1	
Isaac Hatfield	2	2	1
Henry Rutherford	1	1	2
Andrew Snodgrass	1		
Frederick Williams	2	1	3
Isaac Bonnett			2
F.L. Rohme	2		1
John Basteit?, Jr.		1	1
Charity Cornwell	3		
Edward Thorne	1	1	
John Vroom	1		2
Elizabeth James	1		
Nicholas James		1?	3
John Polhemus	3	2	5
First name unclear Winniett	2	1	1
Elijah Purdy	1	2	
Bethiah Purdy		1	
Samuel Heloson		1	1
B. Heloson		1	1
Samuel Dowset			1
Harry Dowset	1		
Frederick Devoue	1	1	
Slaveholder	Male Slaves	Female Slaves	Child Slaves
Ebenezer Cutler		1	1
Thomas Cornwell		1	2

As TABLE 3 indicates, the number of slaves per household was not large with the exception of the property of four men. John Polhemus possessed a total of ten slaves. It is clear from the evidence that he increased his slave holdings while in Nova Scotia because he only owned a few slaves including twenty-year-old Dinah and her infant when he arrived in Nova Scotia.⁵² The owner of six slaves, Frederick Williams simply continued to use his slaves as farm labourers as he had done in New York. In his Loyalist claim, Williams complained that he lost several slaves to the Patriots including an adult male and female along with their “three or four children.”⁵³ Another large-scale owner, James Moody, served in the Nova Scotia Assembly and owned a farm. He owned eight slaves, of which five were children, while John Taylor possessed six. These men were exceptions. The majority of owners in this petition, like most Loyalist slaveholders, possessed only a handful of slaves.⁵⁴

Slavery in Loyalist Nova Scotia mirrored the institution in New York, New Jersey, and New England. Slavery existed in most parts of the colony, but was particularly strong in Shelburne and the Annapolis region. Some slaveholders were well-to-do, but the majority were men of average means from the middle and artisanal classes. For their part, slaves worked primarily as domestic servants and farm or urban labourers. They had extremely close contact with their masters and in most cases lived, socialized, and worked with them. The introduction of Loyalist slaves and slaveholders simply built on an already existing society with slaves. The same work patterns were continued, but the number of slaves and slaveholders increased dramatically.

One of the most fascinating aspects about slavery is that it opens up questions about the contours of Black Loyalist freedom. Indeed, as the primary source documents indicate, the difference between free and enslaved blacks was remarkably fluid. The primary sources show the type of ambiguity that black people, slave or free, encountered on a daily basis. The major demarcation in eighteenth-century Loyalist society was not slave versus free, or even poor white versus well-to-do white, but rather black versus white. Enslavement was simply a legal status that seemed the preferable position for all blacks. The utter lack of meaningful freedom for many Black Loyalists resulted in the merging of the term slave and servant to describe blacks no matter their actual legal status. The fundamental ambiguity about black slavery and black servitude awaits a much more sustained analysis in the future.

ENDNOTES

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PHOTO CREDITS

- Figures 1. & 2. NSARM.
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