

# "We Can Do As We Like Here": An Analysis of Self Assertion and Agency Among Black Refugees in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1813-1821

Harvey Amani Whitfield

Volume 32, Number 1, Autumn 2002

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad32\\_1art02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad32_1art02)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Whitfield, H. A. (2002). "We Can Do As We Like Here": An Analysis of Self Assertion and Agency Among Black Refugees in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1813-1821. *Acadiensis*, 32(1), 29–49.

HARVEY AMANI WHITFIELD

## “We Can Do As We Like Here”: An Analysis of Self Assertion and Agency Among Black Refugees in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1813-1821

WHITE HUNTERS TRESPASSED on the Dartmouth farm of Mr. Fuller, a “coloured man”, in March 1818. Fuller demanded that they vacate his property immediately, but the hunters claimed that they were on common land which belonged to no single individual or family. Fuller and the hunters traded insults, then blows. Mrs. Fuller and her children responded to the fighting with a volley of rocks which struck the hunters, prompting them to draw their guns and to order the family to retreat. Mrs. Fuller, though, defiantly informed the trespassers that the land was “our own, we are not now in the U. States, and we can do as we like here”.<sup>1</sup>

Following the “Battle at Fuller’s Farm”, the local authorities charged Fuller with assault. Fuller, taking advantage of his new status as a British subject, justified the assault as a legitimate response to the hunters’ trespassing on his private land. His lawyer argued in the Inferior Court of Common Pleas that if the roles had been reversed, no court would convict a white man of assault. Unmoved by these arguments, the all-white jury convicted Fuller and sentenced him to one week in jail. After the verdict, a magistrate warned Fuller and other blacks to correct what he viewed as their deviant social behavior.

Had you been in your own country, added the worthy Magistrate, and acted as it appears you have done in this case, you probably would have been shot. I am sorry to observe that there are too many of your colour in this country, whose conduct is highly reprehensible; and you may depend on it, if you continue the same course, it will be the means of uniting the voice of the people against you, in one loud and general complaint, to have you sent out of the Province altogether.<sup>2</sup>

The incident at Fuller’s farm reveals a part of the Black Refugee experience that has received scant coverage by historians. Much of the historiography portrays the

1 *Acadian Recorder* (Halifax), 4 July 1818. This article is part of my Ph.D. thesis, “Race, Immigration, and Community Formation: A History of the Black Refugees in Halifax, Nova Scotia 1813-1840”. I would like to thank David Sutherland, Judith Fingard, Robin Folvik, Michael Cross, John O’Brien, Cynthia Neville, the Dalhousie University History Department and anonymous reviewers from *Acadiensis* for their assistance. I am grateful as well for the financial support of the Faculty of Graduate Studies at Dalhousie University.

2 *Acadian Recorder*, 4 July 1818.

blacks who came to Nova Scotia from the United States early in the 19th century as hapless objects of white philanthropy, incapable of influencing their own destiny.<sup>3</sup> In *The Blacks in Canada*, which was written in the wake of the American Civil Rights movement, Robin Winks blamed the Refugees for reinforcing patterns of segregation. Winks ignored examples of agency and initiative, perhaps in part because of the breadth of his survey of African Canadian history from 1638 to 1970. While this may explain why he missed some aspects of the Refugee experience, it does not excuse his blanket condemnation of the Refugees, which seems to have been based on selective use of evidence. According to Winks, the Refugees were a “disorganized, pathetic, and intimidated body who seemed unable to recover from their sudden voyage up the Atlantic to Nova Scotian shores”.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, he argued, they “persistently” lacked leadership and remained wholly “unable to help themselves”.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, these interpretations are based on a study of numerous government documents that cannot be ignored, but other sources indicate a measure of complexity that escaped Winks and other historians who have relied too heavily on the musings of Lord Dalhousie, Lieutenant-Governor from 1816 to 1820, and on Nova Scotia’s Minutes of Council.

Historians of blacks in the Maritimes in the early 19th century are faced with the problem that most documents relevant to black history were created by the white colonial elite. It is difficult to gain meaningful insight into the black communities’ ideas, goals and perceptions through the distorted lens of white chroniclers and observers. Refugees’ petitions to government provide one way to circumvent this problem. These sources tend to be verbatim renderings of the Refugees’ pleas, written by white friends, and they offer historians an opportunity to counterbalance official government documents.

The petitions provide insight into a broader pattern of self-assertion that begins with the Black exodus itself. The creation of the Black Refugee community was grounded in the Refugee’s struggle for freedom, and their petitions upon arrival in

3 C.B. Fergusson, *A Documentary Study of the Establishment of the Negroes in Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1948), p. 67; Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* (New Haven, 1971), pp. 114-41. A more sensitive interpretation is offered by John Grant, *The Immigration and Settlement of the Black Refugees of The War of 1812 in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick* (Hantsport, 1990), pp. 118-20. Notable exceptions to this trend are James Walker, “The Establishment of a Free Black Community in Nova Scotia, 1783-1840”, in Martin L. Kilson and Richard I. Rotberg, eds., *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 205-36; David A. Sutherland, “Race Relations in Halifax, Nova Scotia, During the Mid-Victorian Quest for Reform”, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 7 (1996), pp. 35-54. These articles focus on the period after 1830. For a discussion of racial attitudes and race relations in early-19th-century Nova Scotia, see George Elliott Clarke, “White Niggers, Black Slaves: Slavery, Race and Class in T.C. Haliburton’s *The Clockmaker*”, *Nova Scotia Historical Review*, 14, 1 (June 1994), pp. 13 -40; Harvey Amani Whitfield, “North of Racism: White Attitudes toward the Black Refugees”, (paper presented at the paper Canadian Historical Association, Toronto, May 2002). For sources that discuss other aspects of the black experience in Nova Scotia during the 19th century, see Judith Fingard, “Race and Respectability in Victorian Halifax”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 20, 2 (1992), pp. 169-95; Suzanne Morton, “Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African Nova-Scotian Women in Late-19th-Century Halifax County”, in Janet Guildford and Suzanne Morton, eds., *Separate Spheres: Women’s Worlds in the 19th-Century Maritimes*, (Fredericton, 1994), pp. 185-210; Greg Marquis, *In Armageddon’s Shadow: The Civil War and Canada’s Maritime Provinces* (Montreal and Kingston, 1998).

4 Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, p. 114.

5 Ibid., pp. 114, 125.

Nova Scotia reveal their attempts to capitalize on this freedom by becoming farmers, despite their tenuous position and the major obstacles posed by race, class and a contracting post-war economy. The Refugees' early farming practices challenge the idea that they were simply the pathetic benefactors of white charity. Close consideration of the immigration and settlement of the Black Refugees reveals many acts of self-help and self-assertion in the period between their arrival in Nova Scotia and the government's attempts to relocate them to Trinidad in 1821.

Interpretations which obscure black self-assertion and agency begin with the development of the label used to identify these immigrants. Historians have adopted the term "Refugee" to differentiate between the black influx during the War of 1812 and the earlier immigration of Black Loyalists in 1783.<sup>6</sup> The word Loyalist has a more positive connotation than Refugee. The latter implies passivity, while Loyalist indicates activity, agency and historical importance. It is hardly surprising that most historical monuments and web sites in Nova Scotia concerning the black population are dedicated to the Loyalists. Yet, the two migrations are in many ways similar. Both the Loyalists and the Refugees came north because of military proclamations offering freedom, risked their lives in escaping from slavery and fought for the British during the wars.<sup>7</sup> Both declared their loyalty to the British Crown in obtaining their freedom. And either might be described as Refugees or Loyalists, in that the members of both groups were homeless because of the wars and faithful to the British Crown.<sup>8</sup> So why has the label Refugee been accepted for the 1812 migration? Was it the only designation used by contemporaries to describe these African Americans? How did the Refugees refer to themselves in petitions and other documents and what terms have historians applied to them?

One of the first items of correspondence between Lieutenant-Governor John Sherbrooke and Colonial Secretary Lord Bathurst concerning the black migrants of 1812, referred to them simply as "Black People".<sup>9</sup> A year later, in 1814, they were

6 Fergusson, *A Documentary Study*; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*; Grant, *The Immigration and Settlement of the Black Refugees*; Walker, "The Establishment of a Free Black Community in Nova Scotia"; Bridglal Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land: The Survival of Nova Scotia's Blacks, Volume II, 1800-1989* (Halifax, 1989); John Grant, "Black Immigrants into Nova Scotia, 1776-1815", *Journal of Negro History*, LVIII, 3 (July 1973); Frank Boyd, ed., *McKerrow: A Brief History of Blacks in Nova Scotia (1783-1895)* (Halifax, 1976). In 1796, the Jamaican Maroons migrated to Nova Scotia. They are generally depicted as a very assertive group unwilling to sacrifice their culture in the face of demands made by John Wentworth. See Lennox O. Picart, "The Trelawny Maroons and Sir John Wentworth: The Struggle to Maintain Their Culture, 1796-1800", M.A. thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1993.

7 James W.St.G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone 1783-1870* (London, 1976), pp. 1-12; Frank Cassell, "Slaves of the Chesapeake Bay Area and The War of 1812", *The Journal of Negro History*, LXII, 2 (April 1972), pp. 144-55. The British government eventually paid the United States government \$1,204,960 for the Refugees in 1826.

8 Recent scholarship has questioned the construction of Black Loyalist identity. See Barry Cahill, "The Black Loyalist Myth in Atlantic Canada", *Acadiensis*, XXIX, 1 (Autumn 1999), pp. 76-87. For a vigorous response, see James Walker's article in the same issue: "Myth, History and Revisionism: The Black Loyalists Revisited".

9 Sherbrooke to Bathurst, 18 October 1813, RG 61, Lieutenant-Governor's Letter Book, 1808-16, vol. 111, pp. 66-7, Public Archives of Nova Scotia [PANS].

described as Black Refugees.<sup>10</sup> This might reflect their increasing numbers and the need to differentiate between the Refugees and other elements of the local black population. Several months later, in a letter to the House of Assembly, Sherbrooke categorized them as “people of colour”.<sup>11</sup> Sherbrooke’s changing labels for the Black Refugees reflected a general trend. His successor, Lord Dalhousie, usually described them as “Refugee Negroes”, but in his diary they became “Chesapeake Blacks”.<sup>12</sup> Government officials and the local population labeled them interchangeably as “Black Refugees”, “Negro Refugees”, “People of Colour” and “Black People”.<sup>13</sup> The Black Refugees’ self-descriptions in petitions to the government included “Inhabitants of Colour” and “Refugees”.<sup>14</sup> Often the petitioners specified their geographic location and referred to themselves as “People of Colour” at Preston or Hammonds Plains. In 1818, seaman John Carter, who had arrived in Halifax two years earlier, described himself as an “American”.<sup>15</sup> It is understandable that Carter identified himself in this manner as his stay in the province was brief. The labels used by the Black Refugees were situational; in other words, characterization differed with the particular circumstances of an individual or group.

Most scholars have not been so flexible. Nearly every historian of the subject has employed the term “Refugee”. Alternatively, however, some historians use “Chesapeake Blacks” to indicate the origin of many of the Refugees. But this label is also problematic since recent research indicates that substantial numbers of the Refugees were from Georgia.<sup>16</sup> The term Refugee need not be abandoned or condemned with quotation marks, but it can no longer be seen as the antithesis of the more heroic label, Black Loyalist. Having distinct labels to distinguish the black migration of the American Revolution from that of the War of 1812 is useful, providing we remember the similarities between the two influxes and abandon the notion popularized by Winks that one group exhibited pride, while the other was devoid of pride, skills, capital and agency.<sup>17</sup>

The War of 1812 provided American slaves with an opportunity to escape the shackles of the “Peculiar Institution”. As they had during the Revolutionary War 30 years earlier, African-Americans sought refuge behind British lines in hope of

10 Sherbrooke to Cochrane, 5 October 1814, RG 1, Lieutenant-Governor’s Letter Book, 1808-16, vol. 111, pp. 101-3, PANS.

11 Sherbrooke to House of Assembly, 24 February 1815, RG 1, Legislative Files of the Council, 1809-16, vol. 288, doc. 101, PANS.

12 Dalhousie to Bathurst, 2 December 1816 and 14 August 1817, RG 1, Lieutenant -Governor’s Letter Book 1808-16, vol. 112, pp. 1-5, 32-5, PANS; Entry for 28 September 1817, in Marjory Whitelaw ed., *The Dalhousie Journals*, vol. 2 (Ottawa, 1978), p. 63.

13 Minutes of Council, 1816-19, 30 April 1817, RG 1, vol. 214 1/2; Dalhousie to Bathurst, 29 December 1816, RG 1, Lieutenant-Governor’s Letter Book, 1816-20, vol. 111, pp. 6 -9; Chamberlain to Morris, 4 January 1816, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790 -1834, vol. 419, doc. 46; Coleman to Sabatier, 23 March 1815, RG 5, A, Assembly Papers, vol. 21, doc. 84, PANS.

14 School Petition, 11 November 1820, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 420, doc. 22; Petition of Coloured People at Preston, 23 February 1841, Box-Crown Lands-Peninsula of Halifax-1840-45, PANS.

15 *Acadian Recorder*, 29 August 1818.

16 Malcolm Bell, *Major Butler’s Legacy: Five Generations of a Slaveholding Family* (Athens, Ga., 1987); Mary Bullard, *Black Liberation on Cumberland Island in 1815* (De Leon Springs, Fla., 1983).

17 Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, p. 114.

obtaining freedom. These escaped slaves were primarily from the Chesapeake region and the Georgia Sea Islands.<sup>18</sup> Although some runaways came to the British side before April 1814, it was Vice-Admiral Alexander Cochrane's well-circulated proclamation at this time promising freedom and the opportunity to settle in British North America or the West Indies that prompted nearly 3,500 slaves to desert their masters during the war.<sup>19</sup> Of that total, by the end of 1818 approximately 2,000 had landed in Nova Scotia. Around 400 subsequently went to New Brunswick.<sup>20</sup>

The experience of Chesapeake blacks from Maryland and Virginia prior to immigration were different than those of blacks living on the Georgia Sea Islands.<sup>21</sup> In the Chesapeake, mixed agricultural production developed in response to falling tobacco prices during the European Wars (1792-1815) and this led to long workdays

- 18 "Slaves on Halifax List, claimants and state"; "List of slaves allowed to Virginia, Maryland, etc. at Georgia Average"; A List of Negroes, in possession of the British Forces in the State of Georgia, under the command of Rear Admiral Cockburn with the period of their being taken, and the period of their removal from Cumberland island, or the waters adjacent to the same", MG 15, Misc., Blacks War of 1812, PANS; *Documents Furnished by the British Government* (Washington, D.C., 1827).
- 19 *Acadian Recorder*, 16 July 1814; Grant, "Black Immigrants into Nova Scotia"; Frank Cassell, "Slaves of the Chesapeake Bay Area". Admiral Cochrane enjoyed a relatively successful career during the War of 1812 and received support in Britain both for his stance toward American slaves and his military exploits. After the war, he was elected to Parliament.
- 20 W.A. Spray, "The Settlement of Black Refugees in New Brunswick, 1815-1836", *Acadiensis*, VI, 2 (Spring 1977), pp. 64-79; Fergusson, *A Documentary Study*, pp. 10-13.
- 21 For an important discussion about the distinctive systems of slavery in the United States, see Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America", *American Historical Review*, 85, 1 (February 1980), 44-78. The rich historiography of slavery in the Chesapeake and the Lowcountry includes: Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1998); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1986); Lorena Walsh, "Slave Life, Slave Society, and Tobacco Production in the Tidewater Chesapeake, 1620-1820", in Ira Berlin and Philip Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville, Va., 1993), pp. 170-99; Philip Morgan, "Black Society in the Lowcountry, 1760-1810", in Ira Berlin and Ronald Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville, Va., 1983), pp. 83-141; Richard S. Dunn, "Black Society in the Chesapeake, 1776-1810", in Berlin and Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom*, p. 60; James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York, 1997); Julia Floyd Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture in Low Country Georgia, 1750-1860* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1985); Mary Beth Norton, Herbert Gutman and Ira Berlin, "The Afro-American Family in the Age of Revolution", in Berlin and Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom*, pp. 184-5; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998); Sarah S. Hughes, "Slaves for Hire: The Allocation of Black Labor in Elizabeth City County, Virginia, 1782 to 1810", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, XXXV, 2 (April 1978), pp. 260-86; Lorena S. Walsh, "Rural African Americans in the Constitutional Era in Maryland, 1776-1810", *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 84, 4 (Winter 1989), pp. 327-41; Joyce Chaplin, "Tidal Rice Cultivation and the Problem of Slavery in South Carolina and Georgia, 1760-1815", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, XLIX, 1 (January 1992), pp. 29-61; Lorena S. Walsh, "Work & Resistance in the New Republic: The Case of the Chesapeake 1770-1820", in Mary Turner, ed., *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves: The Dynamics of Labour Bargaining in the Americas* (London, 1995), pp. 97-122; Betty Wood, "'Never on a Sunday?' Slavery and the Sabbath in Lowcountry Georgia 1750-1830", in Turner, ed., *From Chattel Slaves to Wage Slaves*, pp. 79-96; Lorena S. Walsh and Lois Carr, "Economic Diversification and Labor Organization in the Chesapeake, 1650-1820", in Stephen Innes, ed., *Work and Labor in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1988), pp. 144-88.



and an intensive work environment for slaves.<sup>22</sup> Planters who remained in the Chesapeake downsized their labor forces by hiring their slaves out to poor white farmers or by selling them to cotton-growing regions.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, the Chesapeake's slave population nearly doubled between 1780 and 1810. This growth primarily derived from natural increase since the importation of Africans had decreased substantially over time.<sup>24</sup>

Slaves in the Chesapeake had more contact with white Americans than had the slaves in the Georgia Sea Islands during this period as, unlike the Sea Islands, whites resided in the same areas as their slaves.<sup>25</sup> The religious revivalism that swept across the United States in the late 18th century encouraged further contact between whites and blacks. By the first decade of the 19th century, some Chesapeake blacks had been brought into the Baptist or Methodist fold. As Albert Raboteau argues, "the inclusion of slaves in the 'close communion' of evangelical churches was feasible because Chesapeake blacks, unlike those living farther south, regularly came into close contact with whites".<sup>26</sup> Some slaves, however, attended "African" churches with black congregations and their own pastors and distinct forms of service.<sup>27</sup> Not surprisingly, when the Black Refugees developed their own separate "African" churches in Nova Scotia, the leaders of this movement were from the Chesapeake.

Black society in the Georgia Sea Islands was characterized by isolation from white Americans, and the Atlantic slave trade reinforced the development of a distinct Sea Island culture. Between 1790 and 1810, 92 per cent of the slaves entering Georgia came directly from Africa.<sup>28</sup> Subsequently, the insularity of the Sea Islands maintained and reinforced aspects of African culture.<sup>29</sup> The songs and dances of Sea Island slaves were particular to this area, and isolation fostered the development of Gullah, a blend of African dialects and English which was unintelligible to those unfamiliar with it.<sup>30</sup>

Another significant difference between the experience of slavery in the Georgia Sea Islands and the Chesapeake concerned the organization of labour. In the Sea

22 The intensification of workdays is illustrated in the words of George Washington. He demanded that slaves do "as much in 24 hours" as possible without endangering their health. George Washington to John Fairfax, 1789, in John C. Fitzpatrick ed., *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources 1745-1799*, vol. 30 (Washington, D.C., 1931), p. 175. See also, Walsh, "Work and Resistance", pp. 106-9; Lorena Walsh "Plantation Management in the Chesapeake", *Journal of Economic History*, XIX, 2 (June 1989), pp. 393-406.

23 Allan Kulikoff, "Uprooted Peoples: Black Migrants in the Age of the American Revolution, 1790-1820", in Berlin and Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom*, pp. 149, 152; Hughes, "Slaves for Hire", pp. 260-86.

24 Dunn, "Black Society in the Chesapeake", p. 59.

25 Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society", p. 76.

26 Albert J. Raboteau, "The Slave Church in the Era of the American Revolution", in Berlin and Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom*, p. 208.

27 Raboteau, "The Slave Church", p. 206.

28 Allan Kulikoff, "Uprooted Peoples: Black Migrants in the Age of the American Revolution, 1790-1820", in Berlin and Hoffman, eds., *Slavery and Freedom*, p. 149.

29 Smith, *Slavery and Rice Culture*, pp. 166-206; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619-1877* (New York, 1993), p. 48.

30 Georgia Writers Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* ([1940] Westport, Conn., 1973); Bell, *Major Butler's Legacy*, pp. 126-54. Also see Lydia Parrish, *Slave Songs of the Georgia Sea Islands* (New York, 1942).

Islands, plantation managers employed the task system, which allowed slaves some control over the pace of work for their given assignment during the day. If they completed the task early, slaves could spend the rest of the day as they pleased.<sup>31</sup> The drivers who directed nearly every aspect of plantation labor ranging from assigning tasks to imposing punishments were usually blacks. In this context, Sea Island slaves “remained physically separated and psychologically estranged from the Anglo-American world and culturally closer to Africa than any other blacks on continental North America”.<sup>32</sup> Given the extent of the culture and language differences between Sea Island blacks and those from the Chesapeake, communication between the two groups may have been a challenge. Certainly, the early Black Refugee identity was fragmented; Black Refugees were a diverse group from at least two if not more distinct backgrounds.<sup>33</sup>

In the United States, the Black Refugees usually employed two avenues of escape from slavery. Many left their owners under the cover of darkness and sought out the nearest British naval vessel.<sup>34</sup> This entailed great risk as capture usually led to extreme punishment or execution. As Frank Cassell points out, “in both 1813 and 1814 armed patrols of whites constantly scoured the coastal areas [in the Chesapeake region] shooting suspected escapees on sight”.<sup>35</sup> In other areas slaves were more fortunate. The British navy invaded and occupied the undefended Sea Islands and freed slaves as they did so.<sup>36</sup> Two large-scale slave owners in the Georgia Sea Islands, James Hamilton and Pierce Butler, lost slaves in this manner.<sup>37</sup> However, some Sea Island

31 Roswell King Jr., “On the Management of the Butler Estate”, *The Southern Agriculturist*, 1 (1828), pp. 523-9; Philip Morgan, “Work and Culture: The Task System and the World of Lowcountry Blacks, 1700-1880”, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, XXXIX, 4 (October 1982), pp. 563-99.

32 Berlin, “Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society”, p. 54. Other studies of the Sea Islands’ distinctive culture include Randall Miller, “The Golden Isles: Rice and Slaves along the Georgia Coast”, *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 70 (Spring 1986), pp. 81-96; Sterling Stucky, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York, 1987); Margaret Washington Creel, “A Peculiar People”: *Slave Religion among the Gullahs* (New York, 1988); William Duminberre, *Them Dark Days: Slavery in the American Rice Swamps* (New York, 1996).

33 Historians of Nova Scotia’s Black Refugees have made little effort to understand the impact of American slavery on these people. Some make passing remarks about the Black Refugees’ origins, but these are not grounded in a serious examination of primary or secondary materials. Historians such as Robin Winks and C.B. Fergusson agree with Lord Dalhousie’s infamous comment about the Refugees that without “the dread of the lash, their idea of freedom is idleness and they are therefore quite incapable of industry”. Neither historian rigorously explores the slave experience of these African Americans. John Grant admits that slavery had some influence on the Refugees, but maintains it is beyond the scope of his study to delve into the issue. Thus, possibly the single most important aspect of the Black Refugees’ experience prior to their arrival in Nova Scotia has been distorted or neglected. See Fergusson, *A Documentary Study*, p. 67; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, p. 124; Grant, *The Immigration and Settlement of Black Refugees*, pp. 118-20.

34 Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball* ([1837] New York, 1969), pp. 470-1.

35 Cassell, “Slaves of the Chesapeake Area”, p. 147. A more recent account of African Americans during the war is Christopher George, “Mirage of Freedom: African Americans in the War of 1812”, *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 91, 4 (Winter 1996), pp. 426-50.

36 Shipping Log, *Regulus*, 19 February 1815, in *Documents Furnished by the British Government*, p. 63; Bell, *Major Butler’s Legacy*, p. 172.

37 Roswell King to Pierce Butler, 18 March 1815, Butler Plantation Papers [BPP], University of Toronto Library, reel 4. Pierce Butler and John Hamilton lost 139 and 238 slaves respectively. John Couper lost 60 slaves.



slaves made dangerous trips of nearly 15 miles to reach British encampments. These slaves did not simply cling to the freedom of the British naval vessels; many returned to help others escape.<sup>38</sup>

The British practice, and later policy, of encouraging American slaves to escape derived from humanitarian and military motives. It is clear from letters to the Admiralty that the top commanders were concerned with the performance and well-being of their black troops.<sup>39</sup> In one letter, Admiral Cockburn stated that it “would be very sad indeed if they [the Black Refugees] fell again accidentally into the Hands of their old Masters”.<sup>40</sup> While the British can be accused of using American slaves to their own ends, the reverse is also true. Both benefited from a mutually helpful relationship that gave the British an upper hand militarily, while the Refugees achieved freedom. In actions and words the British Admiralty was willing to help the Refugees, within the confines of British law.

Admiral Cochrane and Admiral Cockburn instituted a policy that freed slaves once they stepped onto British vessels. Throughout the war slave owners attempted to recover their human chattel, but the Royal Navy refused most requests. However, with the war’s conclusion, Cochrane was compelled to return slaves who had escaped after the Treaty of Ghent’s ratification.<sup>41</sup> This was not enough for the slave owners who pursued their attempts to recover slaves all the way to Bermuda, where many of the Black Refugees were awaiting transportation to Halifax. Admiral Cockburn told them that he “would rather Bermuda and every man, woman and child in it were sunk under the sea than surrender one slave who had sought protection under the flag of England”.<sup>42</sup>

During the war, the British recruited many Black Refugees to serve in the Colonial Marines. Cochrane asserted that black soldiers were “more terrific to the Americans than any troops that could be brought forward”.<sup>43</sup> The Black Refugees participated in assaults on American encampments in Virginia and Georgia. They also served as spies, messengers and guides. For example, the horrified editors of the *Niles Weekly Register* reported that recently escaped slaves served as messengers for a British raiding party.<sup>44</sup> On the 25 June 1814, Cockburn reported that “the Colonial Marines, who were for the *first* time employed in Arms against their old Masters on this occasion . . . behaved to the admiration of every Body”.<sup>45</sup> In another letter, Cockburn

38 Shipping Log, *Regulus*, 7 March 1815, in *Documents Furnished by the British Government*, p. 63; Bullard, *Black Liberation on Cumberland Island*, pp. 63-5.

39 Report to Cockburn, 19 June 1814, Papers of Admiral Sir Alexander Forrester Inglis Cochrane 1813-15, Florida State University Library [FSUL].

40 Cockburn to Cochrane, 9 May 1814, Papers of Admiral Sir Alexander Forrester Inglis Cochrane, 1813-15, FSUL. Admiral Cockburn commanded raids along the Georgia Sea Islands in the winter of 1815. He also conducted raids along the Chesapeake Bay and helped torch Washington, D.C. in 1814. The slave owners in the Georgia Sea Islands considered Cockburn evil.

41 Shipping Log, *Regulus*, 12 March 1815, in *Documents Furnished by the British Government*, p. 63; *Niles Weekly Register* (Baltimore), 30 September 1815.

42 Bell, *Major Butler’s Legacy*, p. 180.

43 Cochrane to Bathurst, 14 July 1814, in Cassell, “Slaves of the Chesapeake Area”, p. 152.

44 *Niles Weekly Register*, 22 May 1813.

45 Cockburn to Cochrane, 25 June 1814, Papers of Admiral Sir Alexander Forrester Inglis Cochrane, 1813-15, FSUL.

stated that the Colonial Marines were “indeed excellent men, and make the best skirmishers possible for the thick woods of this Country”.<sup>46</sup> In 1815, the Colonial Marines played an important role in the invasion of Cumberland Island, the southernmost of the Georgia Sea Islands, helping to free hundreds of slaves.<sup>47</sup>

Most slave owners demonstrated an absolute blindness to their slaves’ intense desire for freedom, claiming instead that the British forced their property to abscond.<sup>48</sup> Roswell King, plantation manager for the wealthy slave owner Pierce Butler, reserved his greatest anger for the British. “Do not think I shall be violent with your Negroes”, he wrote to Butler. “They are more to be pittied [sic] than blamed. It is the British Policy (that God suffers to be a scourge and Curse on all Nations that know them) that is to blame”.<sup>49</sup> In the face of evidence to the contrary, slave owners and plantation managers clung stubbornly to their opinion that the slaves had been tricked by the British into running off. In the Chesapeake region when slave owners were allowed to board British ships to persuade their slaves to return, however, they encountered defiance.<sup>50</sup> In Georgia, where slave owners were permitted to implore hundreds of slaves to return, only 13 did so.<sup>51</sup> The Black Refugees used British policy to achieve their paramount goal of freedom.

Slaves allegedly had been bombarded with British promises of an easy life in their colonies, complete with carriages, servants and free food. According to George Baillie, a southern merchant, the British even told slaves that the Queen of England was black.<sup>52</sup> According to British observers, the Black Refugees’ motivations were rooted in a desire to obtain land and freedom.<sup>53</sup> Charles Ball, a slave who later achieved freedom, accompanied his owner on an unsuccessful attempt to recover the Refugees. In his narrative Ball recalled the experience: “I was invited, and even urged to go with the others, who, I was told, were bound to the island of Trinidad, in the West Indies, where they would have lands given to them, and where they would be free”.<sup>54</sup> G.R. Gleig, a British officer, also recalled the blacks’ emphasis on becoming free. “During this day’s march, we were joined by numbers of negro [sic] slaves, who implored us to take them with us, offering to serve either as soldiers or sailors, if we would but give them their liberty”.<sup>55</sup> The clearest expression of how the Refugees defined freedom can be found in Captain William Moorsom’s account of meeting a

46 Cockburn to Cochrane, 24 July 1814, Cochrane Papers.

47 *Niles Weekly Register*, 30 September 1815; Bullard, *Black Liberation on Cumberland Island*, pp. 62-80.

48 Cassell, “Slaves of the Chesapeake Area”, p. 155; Bell, *Major Butler’s Legacy*, pp. 170-91.

49 Roswell King to Pierce Butler, 18 March 1815, Butler Plantation Papers, reel 4. University of Toronto Library [UTL].

50 Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, p. 472.

51 *Niles Weekly Register*, 30 September 1815.

52 Bullard, *Black Liberation on Cumberland Island*, pp. 62-80. Yet, one must read the opinions of slave owners with great caution. Many depicted the slaves’ understanding of freedom in overly simplistic terms. Interestingly, there were rumors that Caroline actually had descended from African ancestry. At the Black Cultural Center in Nova Scotia, Caroline’s portrait is on the wall along with a caption recounting the rumors that she might have been black.

53 Cochrane to Bathurst, 14 July 1814, in Cassell, “Slavery of the Chesapeake Area”, p. 152.

54 Ball, *Slavery in the United States*, p. 472.

55 G.R. Gleig, *A Narrative of the Campaigns of the British Army at Washington and New Orleans* (London, 1821), p. 144.

Black Refugee in Nova Scotia in the early 1820s. When Morrison asked the Refugee why he did not return to the United States given the difficulty he experienced in Nova Scotia, the Refugee replied "Cause, what I work for here, I gets". Moorsom added, "this is not the idea of one, but of the many".<sup>56</sup> No doubt there were many reasons why these American slaves left their owners, but hopes for land and the right to keep the product of their labour were central.<sup>57</sup>

It is difficult to establish an exact number for the Refugees who entered Nova Scotia. Records are confusing, incomplete and contradictory. The lists of lost slaves from different states, are helpful, but they must be treated with care because some Refugees went to the West Indies.<sup>58</sup> Many slaves probably changed their names once on board a British vessel making it difficult to know their exact origins or owners.<sup>59</sup> A general profile of the Refugees who landed in Halifax, though, can be gained from shipping records and British government documents which list 1,791 Black Refugees.<sup>60</sup> The majority were men, with women and children accounting for nearly 46 per cent of the total population. This distribution indicates that many fled as family units. In fact, more than 30 per cent of the adult population was married upon arrival in Halifax. The importance of family in deciding to leave the United States can be gleaned from the comments of Roswell King, who noted that while some Refugees left their wives or husbands, others "said they must follow their daughters and others their wives".<sup>61</sup> Although black families were torn apart by slavery, some slave owners encouraged marriage and family ties in order to stabilize their workforces.<sup>62</sup> This policy is reflected in the significant number of marriages among the Refugees.

The Black Refugees also brought diverse skills and trades with them to Nova Scotia. In the Georgia Sea Islands most slaves labored in the rice or cotton fields. However, there were many artisans in this region including blacksmiths, carpenters and masons.<sup>63</sup> Few records, however, note the skills Black Refugees brought to Nova Scotia. One document, *Claims for Slaves in Virginia*, lists about 156 individuals with occupations (among a total of 1,232 slaves). However, it is impossible to know if these particular slaves came to Nova Scotia or went elsewhere.<sup>64</sup> The records of ships

56 W.S. Moorsom, *Letters from Nova Scotia: Comprising Sketches of a Young Country* (London, 1830), p. 126. Captain Moorsom traveled throughout Nova Scotia in the 1820s.

57 The emphasis on freedom was also the primary concern of the Black Loyalists during their escape from American Slavery. See Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, p. 4.

58 *Documents Furnished by the British Government*, pp. 60-6. In 1823, the Black Refugee population in Trinidad was 876. John Grant, "The 1821 Emigration of Black Nova Scotians to Trinidad", *Nova Scotia Historical Quarterly*, 2, 3 (September 1972), p. 288.

59 *Documents Furnished by the British Government*, p. 103.

60 Shipping records include: HMS *Rifleman*, September 1813, vol. 420, doc. 1; HMS *Marlborough*, September 1813, vol. 420, doc. 2; HMS *Junon*, September 1813, vol. 420, doc. 4; HMS *Mariner*, September 1813, vol. 420, doc. 5; HMS *Diomed*, September 1813, vol. 420, doc. 7; HMS *Diadem*, September 1813, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1808-16, vol. 420, doc. 8, PANS; *Documents Furnished by the British Government*, pp. 67-102. The total numbers were 963 men, 612 women and 216 children.

61 King to Butler, 14 February 1815, Butler Planation Papers, reel 4, UTL.

62 Mary Beth Norton, et al., "The Afro-American Family in the Age of Revolution".

63 Bell, *Major Butler's Legacy*, p. 116.

64 *Claims for Slaves in Virginia*, MG 15, Ethnic Groups, Misc, Blacks War of 1812, PANS. It is likely that many of these slaves migrated to Halifax. Their occupations provide a sense of the Refugees'

entering Halifax in 1813 list 74 Refugees as having occupations. Seventy-two per cent of these Refugees were listed as servants, farmers or laborers.<sup>65</sup> The remaining 28 per cent were described as having more specialized occupations, such as blacksmith, sawyer, hostler and shoemaker. The Refugees brought diverse skills to Nova Scotia but two of the most important skills learned in the Georgia Sea Islands – the cultivation of cotton and rice – would be of little consequence in their new homeland.

The first arrivals in Nova Scotia were subject to a series of “ad hoc” decisions.<sup>66</sup> The local government failed to institute instructions from the Colonial Office requiring them to provide for the maintenance and support of slaves captured during war.<sup>67</sup> Instead, Lieutenant-Governor Sherbrooke sent some Black Refugees to the Halifax Poor House and encouraged those in better health to enter the colony’s interior in search of employment.<sup>68</sup> In late 1814, the situation became desperate when some Refugees fell victim to a smallpox epidemic.<sup>69</sup> A few months later, Cochrane informed Sherbrooke that Nova Scotia must prepare for the arrival of 1,500 Refugees. In response, Sherbrooke enforced Lord Castlereagh’s 1808 Order-in-Council, placing the Refugees under the supervision of the Collector of Customs at Melville Island.<sup>70</sup> In its first months as a quarantine center, from late April to late July 1815, Melville Island received more than 700 Refugees. Although the government provided them with clothing, food and shelter, more than 70 Refugees died during this period. The anticipated arrival of many more Refugees did not materialize.<sup>71</sup> However, Melville Island remained open until the following summer, serving as a poor house and hospital for the earlier arrivals.<sup>72</sup> Clearly, the colonial government needed a more permanent solution to the Refugee problem.

In the summer of 1815, Lord Bathurst suggested that the government give the Refugees small farms to provide for their own subsistence.<sup>73</sup> The Refugees played an important role in deciding settlement patterns. Those who had been neighbors in the

skills: 17 carpenters, 8 cooks, 16 spinners, 29 house servants, 2 servants, 17 sawyers, 8 ploughmen, 14 blacksmiths, 3 house carpenters, 5 weavers, 22 field slaves, 2 hostlers, 3 woodcutters, 1 sailor, 1 wheelwright, 1 shoemaker, 1 housemaid, 2 coopers, 1 coach driver, 1 overlooker, 1 farmer and 1 smith.

65 HMS *Rifleman*, September 1813, vol. 420, doc. 1; HMS *Marlborough*, September 1813, vol. 420, doc. 2; HMS *Junon*, September 1813, vol. 420, doc. 4; HMS *Mariner*, September 1813, vol. 420, doc. 5; HMS *Diomedé*, September 1813, vol. 420, doc. 7; HMS *Diadem*, September 1813, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1808-16, vol. 420, doc. 8, PANS.

66 Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, p. 117.

67 Castlereagh to Prevost, 10 April 1808, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1806-16, vol. 420, doc. 9, PANS.

68 Sherbrooke to Bathurst, 18 October 1813, Sherbrooke to Cochrane, 5 October 1814, RG 1, Lieutenant-Governor’s Letter Book, 1806-16, vol. 111, pp. 66-7, 101-3, PANS.

69 Coleman to Sabatier, 6 February 1815, RG 1, Files of the House of Assembly, vol. 305, doc. 5; Sherbrooke to House of Assembly, 24 February 1815, RG 1, Legislative Files of the Council, 1809-16, vol. 288, doc. 101, PANS.

70 Minutes of Council, 5 April 1815, RG 1, vol. 214, PANS. Melville Island was used as a prison during the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812. It is located in the Northwest Arm of Halifax Harbor.

71 Grant, *The Immigration and Settlement of the Black Refugees*, pp. 67-72.

72 Melville Island Medical Reports, May 1816, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, May 1816-February 1818, vol. 421, docs. 1 and 2, PANS.

73 Bathurst to Sherbrooke, 13 June 1815, RG 1, Dispatches from the Secretary of State to the Lieutenant-Governor, 1815-20, vol. 63, doc. 12, PANS.

United States usually sought to become neighbors again in Nova Scotia. For example, the majority of Pierce Butler's and John Hamilton's ex-slaves settled at Hammonds Plains. The former slaves of a Mr. Wylly, from the Georgia Sea Islands, also settled mainly at Hammonds Plains.<sup>74</sup> Levin and George Winder, former slaves of Mr. Winder from Virginia, settled at Preston together.<sup>75</sup> There they were given provisions, tools and 10-acre farms during their first years of settlement.<sup>76</sup> The Surveyor General, Charles Morris, envisaged the development of flourishing agricultural communities. Yet the government put the Refugees on the worst land in the province. Preston had previously been occupied by disbanded soldiers from the Revolutionary War and the site had proven an unmitigated disaster: "Those Soldiers, confined to these Lands as the condition of receiving Rations [the same policy would be applied to the Refugees], built a few miserable Huts in which they remained eating the King's provision while any was allowed to them, then sold their land for a trifle, or abandoned them unsold".<sup>77</sup> The land's infertility coupled with the small size of the lots left Refugees without the means to support themselves. The government later admitted, "in this severe climate at least 100 acres would be required for each family in order to afford a proper supply of fuel".<sup>78</sup>

Why did the government place Refugees on such inadequate holdings? If disbanded soldiers and experienced farmers failed to produce anything of value at Preston, why did the government believe that a group of impoverished ex-slaves might do any better? Did it wish to ensure a cheap labor supply for white farmers, or was it out of concern to remove the Refugees from the possibilities of social integration that mass settlement in Halifax might have provided? Certainly, the colonial government wanted Black Refugees to pursue unskilled labor. The local government land agent, Theophilus Chamberlain, encouraged settling Refugees in Preston because they would "serve to improve the Place in general, and afford assistance to us towards repairing the Roads, but likewise furnish us with Laborers of whom we stand in too much need to make tolerable progress on our own improvements".<sup>79</sup> Given that the government officials knew that earlier settlements at Hammonds Plains had failed miserably, their claim that they hoped to create agricultural communities capable of providing for their own subsistence is not entirely convincing.<sup>80</sup>

74 Return of the Black American Refugees residing at Hammond's Plains, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1818-39, vol. 422, doc. 19, PANS. Also, see Report of the Inspection of Preston Lots, August 1818, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 419, doc. 90, PANS.

75 Report of the People off [sic] Colour, at, and about Preston, RG 20, C, Box-Halifax County Land Grants 1787-1835, doc. 169, PANS.

76 Morris to Sherbrooke, 6 September 1815, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1808-16, vol. 420, doc. 76, PANS.

77 Chamberlain to Morris, 11 November 1815, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 419, doc. 41, PANS. The Jamaican Maroons also had failed to produce anything of value at Preston 15 years before the arrival of the Refugees.

78 In Council, 11 March 1841, Box-Crown Lands-Peninsula of Halifax-1840-1845, RG 20, C, vol. 31, doc. 124, PANS; Fergusson, *Documentary*, p. 116.

79 Chamberlain to Morris, 11 November 1815, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 419, doc. 41, PANS.

80 Dorothy Evans, *Hammonds Plains: The First 100 Years* (Halifax, 1993), p. 57. Evans also notes that "little of the soil in Hammonds Plains was suitable for farming".

Government officials could not have predicted the numerous crop failures caused by unusually cold weather and rodents during the Refugees' first years of settlement. But this does not explain why they placed blacks on small lots of poor land. Although the reasons behind government decisions may never be revealed, the outcome is clear. Refugees were obliged to search for menial wage labor, usually on the farms of wealthier white neighbors. The government's policy created a marginalized agricultural class forced to seek work where it could be found. The black community's oral tradition is unequivocal on the subject role the government played in creating their plight:

You know, what the hell! So we [the speaker is talking about the government] inherited these people from slavery, we got to do something about them, so give them some land! In the province, they have been given land that was useless . . . in the hope that a combination between inclemency of the weather and the infertility of the soil we would all die.<sup>81</sup>

A post-war economic depression jeopardized Black Refugees' employment opportunities. As David Sutherland notes, Nova Scotia enjoyed a bustling economy during The War of 1812, but these conditions did not last. Originally welcomed as cheap labor, the Black Refugees became an "undesirable nuisance" in the immediate post-war period.<sup>82</sup> A growing influx of European immigrants placed the province in a precarious situation with an increasing population and a contracting economy. Steady work proved elusive for European immigrants as well as for Black Refugees. In a letter to the *Acadian Recorder*, "Friendless Emigrant" stated that it was nearly impossible to find employment in the colony and, as a result, many recent arrivals had left for the United States, an option not open to the Refugees.<sup>83</sup> The Black Refugees' difficulties in obtaining jobs were partly determined by these wider economic trends in the colony.

The Refugees faced other obstacles in finding work as well. Race relations in early-19th-century Nova Scotia reflected a society conditioned "to thinking of blacks as slaves".<sup>84</sup> The Black Loyalist influx of the late 18th century had included 1,232 slaves from the United States; while not dependent on slave labor, Nova Scotia was, nonetheless, a slave society. The racial badge of slavery continued into the 19th century and reinforced status-conscious thinking which placed the black community at the bottom of the social ladder. Although slavery had practically ceased to exist in Nova Scotia before the British government made the institution illegal in 1833, it informed and shaped the opinions of the white population toward the Black Refugees.

The major distinction between the experiences of different groups of Afro-American migrants to Nova Scotia in the 18th and 19th centuries might be found in the idea of place. James Walker notes that in the 18th century, blacks were accorded

81 1969 Interview, cited in Donald Clairmont and Fred Wien, "Blacks and Whites: The Nova Scotia Race Relations Experience", in Douglas F. Campbell, ed., *Banked Fires: The Ethnicity of Nova Scotia* (Port Credit, Ont., 1978), p. 141.

82 David Sutherland, "1810-1820: War and Peace", in Phillip A. Buckner and John G. Reid, eds., *The Atlantic Region to Confederation: A History* (Fredericton and Toronto, 1994), p. 256.

83 *Acadian Recorder*, 25 April 1818.

84 Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, p. 42.



the lowest place in society. The Refugee migrants of the early 19th century were not considered good enough for any place at all.<sup>85</sup> Even before large numbers of the Refugees arrived, the House of Assembly stated its opposition to their increasing presence:

The proportion of Africans already in this country is productive to a great many inconveniences; and . . . the introduction of more must tend to the discouragement of white labourers and servants, as well as to the establishment of a separate and marked class of people, unfitted by nature to this climate, or an association with the rest of his Majesty's Colonists.<sup>86</sup>

Grudgingly, the Refugees were eventually accorded the same low place as the Black Loyalists before them.

This lowly status limited employment opportunities for the Black Refugees. In a sympathetic memorial to the government some years later, white residents of Preston recalled that most employers preferred "white labouring people to the Blacks by which these unfortunate people have not an equal chance of obtaining their share of even the little labour that is wanted".<sup>87</sup> Also, Lieutenant-Governor Lord Dalhousie remarked that the Refugees were "abused and cheated by the other settlers near whom they are placed".<sup>88</sup> Despite these impediments, the Refugees did not simply accept rations and remain idle. They actively searched for work.

The first male Refugees were "met with immediate employment, at the rate of one dollar per day", but this relatively positive situation had changed by the beginning of 1815.<sup>89</sup> One commentator observed that their needs had "not become general until now".<sup>90</sup> Some were reduced to begging or theft in order to survive. This resulted in a popular image of the Refugees as being lazy and unwilling to seek employment. A letter to the *Acadian Recorder* argued that "our poorhouses and prisons were soon filled with them, because they were too lazy to work, and to steal was easier than to labour".<sup>91</sup> The idea of the Black Refugees as intrinsically indolent reached into the highest echelons of the colonial government. As he noted in a dispatch to Lord Bathurst, Lord Dalhousie believed they were inherently incapable of labor:

Permit me to state plainly to Your Lordship that little hope can be entertained of settling these people so as to provide for their families and wants – they must be supported for many years - Slaves by habit & education, no longer

85 Ibid., p. 391.

86 Journal of the House of Assembly, 1 April 1815, RG 1, Files of the House of Assembly, 1815-18, vol. 305, doc. 3, PANS.

87 Memorial of John Chamberlain, Alexander Lyle, Alexander Farquharson, Frederick Major and Allan McDonald-Dartmouth 8 June 1838, [who] reside in the neighborhood of the people of colour settled at Preston, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1818-39, vol. 422, doc. 49, PANS.

88 Dalhousie to Bathurst, 14 August 1817, RG 1, Lieutenant-Governor's Letter Book, 1816-20, vol. 112, p. 33, PANS.

89 *Times* (London), 27 June 1814.

90 Coleman to Truman, 5 March 1815, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1808-16, vol. 420, doc. 132, PANS.

91 *Acadian Recorder*, 23 December 1815.

working under the dread of the lash, their idea of freedom is idleness and they are therefore quite incapable of Industry.<sup>92</sup>

Dalhousie's perception of the Refugees was consistent with his general insensitivity to poor people. Even when he did find the Refugees or other poverty-stricken people at work he still considered them idle or indolent. In the spring of 1817, for instance, Dalhousie confided in his diary that he had recently witnessed "idle shop boys, Blacks, and other unemployed or unindustrious [sic] vagabonds" shooting birds for sale at the market.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, Dalhousie contradicted his own presumptions about the Refugees in a diary entry written after a short visit to their settlement, in which he observed that they were "busily employed in clearing [the] road I laid out for them".<sup>94</sup>

The reports of people more closely associated with the Black Refugees contradicted Dalhousie's generally negative views. Seth Coleman, a local storeowner and friend of the Refugees, who had vaccinated them during the small pox epidemic of 1814 argued that the Refugees were not lazy.<sup>95</sup> Job opportunities were limited, but able-bodied blacks eagerly made brooms, cut wood and washed clothes. Coleman argued that there was a "disposition in them [the Black Refugees] to labour, and to help themselves, but the fact is they have nothing to do".<sup>96</sup> By late 1816, most of the Refugees had moved to lands in Preston, Hammonds Plains or other rural areas around Halifax. In a letter of 30 September 1816, John Poule of Beaver Bank reported that Aaron Williams and Richard McArthur had "made several improvements on said land, have erected a very comfortable house, [and] cleared several acres of land now in Cultivation".<sup>97</sup> Poule also noted Benjamin Roberts, who had built a house and improved his land, and was characterized as "a decent industrious man".<sup>98</sup> Despite the contemporary image of the Refugees as failures due to indolence, the early years at Preston were promising. In the late spring of 1816, government officials visited the Preston Refugees and their report of the Refugees' progress reveals a wide range of attitudes toward work. It described some Refugees, such as James Patterson and Jerred Thomas, as "doing nothing". Richard Smothers, Friday Bush and Joe Sprigs, though, were listed as "industrious" men.<sup>99</sup>

What accounts for the difference in work attitudes? Possibly some Refugees were simply better at agricultural labor, and Refugees described as idle may have had no interest in farming, or their understanding of freedom may have meant the right to do

92 Dalhousie to Bathurst, 29 December 1816, RG 1, Lieutenant-Governor's Letter Book, 1816-20, vol. 112, pp. 6-9, PANS.

93 Entry for 23 April 1817 in Whitelaw, ed., *The Dalhousie Journals*, p. 32.

94 Entry for 28 September 1817 in Whitelaw, ed., *The Dalhousie Journals*, p. 63.

95 Seth Coleman came to Nova Scotia in hope of exploiting the whale fishery. He owned a store near the Refugees and was a Quaker.

96 Coleman to Sabatier, 23 March 1815, RG 5, A, Records of the Legislative Assembly, vol. 21, doc. 84, PANS.

97 Letter of John Poule, 30 September 1816, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 419, doc. 67, PANS.

98 Document concerning Benjamin Roberts, 5 October 1816, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 419, doc. 68, PANS.

99 Report of Lands Cleared by People of Colour in Preston, May 9, 1816, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, May 1816-February 1818, vol. 421, doc. 3, PANS.

nothing. The vast majority of Refugees were described as “Able Men” who were engaged in clearing land and building houses.<sup>100</sup> A statistical analysis of the Refugees’ land clearing reveals that at this early stage of settlement only six per cent made few or no improvements. Seventy-four per cent had cleared at least half an acre or more, while approximately 20 per cent cleared one-quarter of an acre.<sup>101</sup> Clearly, work patterns varied.

Visitors to Preston were impressed by the amount of work undertaken by the Refugees. In 1817, a Council report stated that the Refugees had “in many instances made great improvements” on the land.<sup>102</sup> As well as clearing it and constructing roads, the Refugees had planted “upwards of 1500 bushels” of potatoes and attempted to access the local fishery.<sup>103</sup> Lord Dalhousie was surprised at their work ethic: “I find almost every man had one or more Acres cleared and ready for seed + working with an industry that astonished me”.<sup>104</sup> Their “industry”, however, could not stave off continual crop shortages.

When their land failed to provide the necessities of life, many Black Refugees sought employment in Halifax. The colonial government did not approve of these acts of self-help. To keep the Refugees tied to their land, the government passed a law denying rations to Black Refugees if the male head of the household was not present when provisions were distributed. It passed this law because men allegedly were “too much accustomed to leave their wives and children at the settlement, and go themselves to Halifax in search of employment or pleasure”.<sup>105</sup> Thus, those seeking employment risked their rations if they competed with European labor for the few jobs that existed.

Some Refugees avoided this restriction by working at sea.<sup>106</sup> For example, John Carter left Halifax in 1816 to become a ship’s cook. The shipping industry was probably his best opportunity for employment.<sup>107</sup> In 1817, Brister Webb abandoned farming at Hammonds Plains and moved to Halifax.<sup>108</sup> There, Webb found employment as a seaman, an occupation his friend and neighbour Andrew Smith said “he had always been used to”.<sup>109</sup> By 1840, the Refugees had earned a solid reputation

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 Report of Council Committee on lands relinquished for the accommodation of the People of Colour settled in Preston, December 11, 1817, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 419, doc. 102, PANS.

103 Dalhousie diary entries, 23 April 1817 and 28 September 1817, in Whitelaw, ed., *The Dalhousie Journals*, pp. 32, 63; Dalhousie to Bathurst, 14 August 1817, RG 1, Lieutenant-Governor’s Letter Books, 816-20, vol. 112, pp. 32-5, PANS.

104 Dalhousie to Bathurst, 14 August 1817, RG 1, Lieutenant-Governor’s Letter Books, 816-20, vol. 112, pp. 32-5, PANS.

105 His Majesty’s Council to Dalhousie, 29 November 1816, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, May 1816-February 1818, vol. 421, doc. 37, PANS.

106 African North Americans were important in the shipping industry, especially in Maritime cities such as Philadelphia. See Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), p. 146; W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seaman in the Age of the Sail* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997); Ira Dye, “Early American Merchant Seafarers”, *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 120 (1976), pp. 331-60.

107 *Acadian Recorder*, 29 August 1818.

108 Andrew Smith 1829, Land Papers, RG 20, A, PANS.

109 Ibid.

for their ability in this line of work. According to the Reverend Robert Willis, “their aptitude for the service of merchant-sailors can be attested [to] by the mercantile community of Halifax”.<sup>110</sup> Other Refugees worked as apprentices. In Dartmouth, Dean Atkins had served James Creighton for seven years in this capacity and “behaved himself during that period with honesty and sobriety”.<sup>111</sup> In short, the Black Refugees’ reliance on public and private charity is only one part of the story. Many wanted to work and, when given the opportunity, did quite well.

Nor were the Refugees satisfied with the extent of government assistance. The petitions some Refugees submitted to the government requested more land. Most petitioners sought – and in some cases received – grants ranging from 10 to 120 acres. Other people wrote the petitions; most of the Refugees were illiterate and signed with an X, with the exception of James Barron who wrote out his name. The petitions included testimonials that the applicant was industrious and possessed good character,<sup>112</sup> and throw doubt on Winks’ assertion that the Black Refugees were “unable to recover from their previous condition of servitude”.<sup>113</sup>

The petitioners included a group of Refugees who were beginning to make progress in agriculture.<sup>114</sup> Some had cleared at least half an acre of land, others more.<sup>115</sup> This was a substantial accomplishment, especially considering that “those Lands have lain now more than Thirty years unimproved”.<sup>116</sup> Levin Winder expressed the situation of many Refugees who sought to gain better farmland in order to become successful farmers:

[The Petitioner] now finds, owing to its limited [sic] size and Sterile quality he cannot make a living for himself and family. That since his settlement thereon he has used his utmost endeavours to cultivate it in such a manner as that he might keep himself and family from Want which he finds he cannot do. That now his only object is to obtain a piece of Land on which by hard work he he [sic] may have a prospect of making a comfortable living for himself and family.<sup>117</sup>

The circumstances of some of the other petitioners deserve closer attention as well. Richard Smothers had cleared two acres of land by May 1816, more than any other

110 The Petition of the Reverend Robert Willis, D.D., Rector of St. Paul’s Church in behalf of the Coloured People of Halifax, 27 January 1840, RG 5, P, School Petitions, vol. 296, doc. 48, PANS.

111 Dean Atkins and William Wise 1821, Land Papers, RG 20, A, PANS.

112 Land Papers, RG 20, A, PANS.

113 Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, p. 114.

114 See Land Papers, RG 20, A, PANS. One of the petitioners, Dominic De Broker, applied for land with 35 others, but the archives have lost the document. I thank David States for providing me with some names I might have otherwise missed. Jesse Reed, another petitioner before 1821, might have been black, but the petition does not identify him as such.

115 Report of Lands Cleared by People of Colour in Preston, 9 May 1816, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, May 1816-February 1818, vol. 421, doc. 3; Report of the Inspection of Preston Lots, August 1818, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 419, doc. 90, PANS.

116 Chamberlain to Morris, 11 November 1815, RG 1, Negro and Maroon settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 419, doc. 41, PANS.

117 Levin Winder 1821, Land Papers, RG 20, A, PANS.

Refugee; he was, according to land agent Theophilus Chamberlain, “industrious”.<sup>118</sup> Smothers was married and had nine children.<sup>119</sup> By the summer of 1818, he had constructed a double house and the following year he successfully petitioned for 130 acres of land.<sup>120</sup> Septimus Clarke, the father of four children, had cleared three-quarters of an acre and constructed a hut during his first year at Preston.<sup>121</sup> By 1819, he had exhausted the supply of firewood on his lot; he successfully petitioned the government for an additional 100 acres.<sup>122</sup> At Hammonds Plains, Robin Cunard applied for the farm of his brother-in-law who had recently left the province for Trinidad.<sup>123</sup> In 1819, Dominic De Broker and 34 others petitioned the government for land recently relinquished by John Lidell. “They declared that several of them had built houses and made improvements on the relinquished tract”.<sup>124</sup> In 1820, Charles Arnold had five acres in cultivation and petitioned the government for more land. He hoped to extend “his improvements” and acquire more firewood.<sup>125</sup> James Barron, who lost his hut and child in a fire, successfully petitioned the government for 50 acres at Fletcher’s Lake.<sup>126</sup> In Preston, several Refugees sought the land of Richard Gross after his death. Clearly, many of these petitioners wished to improve their condition and did not want to remain idle wards of the government.<sup>127</sup>

The Preston Refugees petitioned in 1820 for the construction of a school. They also requested a school master, as they were too poor to afford one.<sup>128</sup> The proposed schoolmaster, James Bell, wrote the petition and 31 Black Refugees endorsed it. As they saw it, the transition from slavery to freedom made basic literacy a necessity. This document demonstrates the urge for self-improvement among the young community’s leadership. After years of struggle and hardship, the increasing number of land petitions and this school petition provide evidence of vitality among the black communities at Preston and Hammonds Plains.

The Black Refugee’s single most important act of group identity and self-assertion, though, was probably the refusal of most to migrate to Trinidad despite government

118 Report of Lands Cleared by People of Colour in Preston, 9th May, 1816, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, May 1816-February 1818, vol. 421, doc. 3, PANS.

119 Report of People off [sic] Colour at and about Preston, RG 20, C, Box-Halifax County Land Grants 1787-1835, doc. 169, PANS.

120 Report of the Inspection of Preston Lots, August 1818, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 419, doc. 90, PANS.

121 Report of People off [sic] Colour at and about Preston, RG 20, C, Box-Halifax County Land Grants 1787-1835, doc. 169; Report of Lands Cleared by People of Colour in Preston, 9 May 1816, RG 1, Negro and Maroon settlements, May 1816-February 1818, vol. 421, doc. 3, PANS.

122 Septimus Clarke 1819, RG 20, A, Land Grants, PANS.

123 Robin Cunard 1821, RG 20, A, Land Papers; RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, May 1816-February 1818, vol. 421, doc. 35, PANS.

124 Dominic De Broker 1821, RG 20, A, Land Papers, PANS. The quotation is from Fergusson, *A Documentary Study*, pp. 52-3.

125 Charles Arnold 1820, RG 20, A, Land Papers, PANS.

126 Fauson to Cogswell, 14 July 1816, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, May 1816 - February 1818, vol. 421, doc. 6; RG 20, A, Land Papers, PANS.

127 Report of the Inspection of Preston Lots, August 1818, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1790-1834, vol. 419, doc. 90, PANS.

128 School Petition, 11 November 1820, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1818-39, vol. 422, doc. 22, PANS.

pressure, grounded in part in the claim that they were incapable of surviving in a northerly climate. As early as 1817, the Council planned to send the Refugees to Trinidad or back to the United States.<sup>129</sup> Initially, local officials did not have the money or the authorization to pursue these plans, but in 1820 the imperial government agreed to subsidize their relocation to Trinidad. The Halifax government promised land and rations and hoped that most of the Refugees would accept their offer. During the War of 1812, some of the Black Refugees were temporarily held in the West Indies before obtaining transportation to Halifax. Undoubtedly, friends and families were split up when some chose life in the West Indies rather than Nova Scotia. The Refugees who remained in Trinidad after the War of 1812 developed a successful settlement at Naparima and the colonial government hoped Nova Scotia's Black Refugees would choose to join family and friends there. They underestimated the Refugees' attachment to Nova Scotia and their fear of re-enslavement.<sup>130</sup> In the end, only 95 Black Refugees – 81 adults and 14 children – migrated to Trinidad in January 1821.<sup>131</sup> In other words, less than six per cent of the Refugee population left Nova Scotia.

The question of who chose to leave for Trinidad is difficult to answer. James Walker argues that the 95 emigrants were "all from Hammond's Plains"; Robin Winks maintains that "nearly all were from Beech Hill"; C.B. Fergusson and John Grant maintain that 34 families from Preston, Hammonds Plains and Beech Hill expressed interest in moving to Trinidad.<sup>132</sup> The existing documentation is confusing and there is no detailed enumeration of the Refugee emigrants in the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. An 1820 census return from Hammonds Plains lists 70 individuals "desirous of going to Trinidad".<sup>133</sup> Another source identified 81 Refugees who were interested in moving to Trinidad, from Hammonds Plains (51), Preston (23), Beech Hill (4) and Refugee Hill (3).<sup>134</sup>

What accounts for these differences? Enumerators may have miscounted, but as well some families and individuals made last minute decisions to leave or stay. Hammonds Plains farmer, Nassau Jackson, for instance, expressed interest in moving to Trinidad in 1820. But Jackson and his family remained in Nova Scotia.<sup>135</sup> Likewise, Thomas Dines' large family signed up to emigrate to Trinidad, but he changed his mind and remained in Nova Scotia.<sup>136</sup> The best data suggests 63 per cent of the Refugees who emigrated to Trinidad were from Hammonds Plains and 37 per cent had

129 Minutes of Council, 30 April 1817, RG 1, vol. 214 fi, PANS.

130 Fergusson, *A Documentary Study*, p. 35; Grant, *The Immigration and Settlement of Black Refugees*, pp. 94-9; Grant, "1821 Emigration", pp. 289-92; John Weiss, *Black American Settlers in Trinidad, 1815-1816* (London, 1995). The original black American settlers were from Georgia, South Carolina and the Chesapeake region.

131 Kempt to Harrison, 20 January 1822, RG 1, Lieutenant-Governor's Letter Book, 1820-28, vol. 113, doc. 35, PANS.

132 Walker, *The Black Loyalists*, p. 394; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, p. 123; Fergusson, *A Documentary Study*, p. 35; Grant, "1821 Emigration", p. 289.

133 Return of the Black American Refugees residing at Hammond's Plains, vol. 422, doc. 19, PANS.

134 Those who wish to go to Trinidad, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1818-39, vol. 422, doc. 20, PANS.

135 Return of the Black American Refugees residing at Hammond's Plains, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1818-39, vol. 422, doc. 19; Gray to James, 11 May 1836, MG 15, Ethnic Groups, vol. 9, doc. 58, PANS.

136 Ibid.; Land Grant for the People at Preston, 23 May 1842, Land Grants, RG 20, C, PANS.



lived at Preston, Beech Hill and Refugee Hill. The majority were married, but 56 per cent did not have any children. Nearly 40 per cent were single with no family attachments. Most of the emigrants were relatively youthful Sea Islanders without large families, people with a lower level of attachment to Nova Scotia than older Refugees at Preston.<sup>137</sup>

Surely there were many reasons why they chose to leave. They had suffered crop shortages, farming failures and unemployment. Moreover, government rations had ceased. Perhaps they believed they could grow rice in Trinidad and Trinidad would provide a solution to their problems. On the other hand, slavery still existed in Trinidad in 1821. They probably recognized the danger of travelling to an island where an unscrupulous official could have sold them into slavery, yet chose to risk re-enslavement in hope of finding meaningful freedom.

Once in Trinidad, these Refugees settled among their brethren at Naparima. The 1821 emigrants did not require any assistance after their first 18 months on the island. They contributed to the local Refugee settlement, which produced 2,000 barrels of corn and more than 400 barrels of rice in 1825.<sup>138</sup> They raised and sold poultry, pigs and other agricultural goods. By the 1830s, the more prosperous Refugees moved to other "cultivated districts". There, they acquired small farms and produced goods for the local market.<sup>139</sup> The Trinidad emigrants of 1821 took a calculated risk that helped them enjoy greater economic success than their more cautious friends in Nova Scotia.

Despite the adversity they encountered in Nova Scotia, 94 per cent of the Black Refugees refused to emigrate to the Caribbean. Some had established friendships, built houses, cleared land and found employment in Nova Scotia. Moreover, they realized that sailing down the American coast exposed them to possible capture and subsequent enslavement. Also, the Refugees, like most African Americans, were aware of the horror stories of slavery in the West Indies. Although many Refugees expressed initial interest in the possibility of moving to Trinidad, their religious leadership rejected any possibility of exodus. Lieutenant-Governor James Kempt subsequently recorded their reasons for staying in Nova Scotia:

At first a considerable number expressed their desire of going thither; but, when the time for their departure approached many who had given their names as being so disposed withdrew them in consequence of their having been made to believe by fanatical preachers interested in keeping them in the province that it would not be intended to send them to Trinidad, but to sell them to their former Masters in the United States.<sup>140</sup>

Unlike the leaders of the Black Loyalists and Maroons who opted to leave Nova Scotia for Sierra Leone, an emergent Refugee elite chose to remain in Nova Scotia.

137 Those who wish to go to Trinidad, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1818-39, vol. 422, doc. 20, PANS.

138 K.O. Laurence, "The Settlement of Free Negroes in Trinidad before Emancipation", *Caribbean Quarterly*, 9, 1 and 2 (1963), pp. 31-2.

139 Burnley to Campbell, 3 August 1839, RG 1, Negro and Maroon Settlements, 1818-39, vol. 422, doc. 53, PANS.

140 Kempt to Horton, 4 May 1825, Colonial Office 217/144/121-3.

This created the foundation of a new black consciousness which subordinated identity with Afro -America to forging a new identity within Nova Scotia. In other words, the community began to define itself as a distinct group of African North Americans. In 1836, when government officials again offered to remove the Refugees, they encountered a community more concerned with staying together than attempting to start life anew: "There are several of their numbers that have great influence among them, and being able to earn their own subsistence do not wish to leave the province, and the rest, poor and miserable though they be, are unwilling to leave without them".<sup>141</sup> The emerging conservative leadership of the Black Refugees in Nova Scotia created a community that valued safety and caution.

The Black Refugees attempted to carve out a position in the quickly changing landscape of Nova Scotia in the second decade of the 19th century. Although, poverty had a leveling affect on the Refugees, they were not a homogenous population. The Black Refugees reacted to freedom in various ways and with different degrees of success. The caricature of Refugees as miserable wretches constantly in search of government or private assistance fails to acknowledge the many Refugees who pursued steady employment and attempted to become successful agriculturists. Close examination of the experience of the Black Refugees reveals the emergence of black leaders who offered the group spiritual, social and political guidance and the coalescence of a group determined to make a place for themselves in colonial society.

141 Gray to James, 11 May 1836, MG 15, Ethnic Groups, vol. 9, doc. 58, PANS.