March 17, 1783: The city of Boston resolved that no returning Loyalist should be allowed to have "lot or portion with us." It invited other towns to do the same.

How And Why A Great Many Harvard Men Left Home In 1783

In 1776, a great many men and women residing in the new United States were still loyal to the Crown. At the American Revolution's end, thousands of them gathered behind the British lines in New York City. Many had been people of wealth and position, and some were learned — it is said that their number included half of the living graduates of Harvard College. They were not in physical danger; Sir Guy Carleton, the British Commander in Chief, had twenty loyal regiments under his command.

The Loyalists believed that the British Prime Minister, Lord Shelburne, would insist that the new government of the United States pay them for their lost lands. They underestimated American resentment (George Washington had suggested that all Tories should, in simple decency, commit suicide), and they overestimated the persuasive powers of Shelburne's chief negotiator, Richard Oswald. Peace brought only the hollow promise that the federal government would recommend that the various states treat the Loyalists liberally. So they went north, five hundred in October 1782 and seven thousand more in April. In all, some forty-five thousand would leave New York.

They went with hope and not too dismal prospects; the Crown would be generous with land. About thirty thousand of them went to Nova Scotia and some began a new town at Port Rosemary in the southwest corner of that province. It was a beautiful place and optimism swept across the shore like a summer breeze.

Governor Parr sailed down and gave the town an incongruous name — Shelburne, after the statesman who had let them down. With a firmer grip on reality, he also gave two grand dinners and a ball, and announced that he had "no doubt but that in a short time it will become the most flourishing town for trade and district for agriculture of any in this part of the world."

The prediction did not seem fantastic. By the next year there were nine thousand citizens with shops, churches and inns to spare. Each Sunday a military band played pleasant airs on the promenade. A newspaper was founded, and a brisk trade began in fish and lumber. Farms were sown and a shipyard was built. Elections were held. Shelburne gained another thousand citizens and became larger than Halifax and as big as Quebec or Montreal.

Then it fell from grandeur. The beautiful land was almost barren. The crops failed and trade diminished. The shipyard closed down.

Judge Haliburton, the Nova Scotia author, visited Shelburne years later: "Hundreds of cellars with their stone walls and granite partitions were everywhere to be seen, like uncovered monuments of the dead. Time and decay had done their work . . . a generation had passed away forever."

But Shelburne was not the end. The Loyalists were welcomed elsewhere in Nova Scotia, the eastern townships of Quebec and north of Lake Ontario. Two new provinces, New Brunswick and Upper Canada, were created to accommodate them. Their descendants still put UE, for United Empire, after their names, and St. John, New Brunswick, celebrates "Loyalist Days" with the vigour Americans display on the Fourth of July.

Shelburne, Nova Scotia in 1789 Public Archives of Canada

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