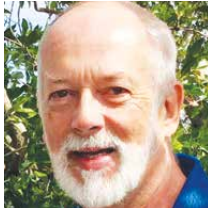


COLUMN —

OH, THE PLACES WE'LL GO: Exploring the history of Canada's Black Loyalists



By Paul Knowles

There is a tendency, among we Canadians, to look at the appalling history of race relations south of our border, and to feel rather smug about our own record in these matters.

Wrong.

Although Canada (actually Great Britain – we were still a colony at the time) did allow escaping slaves to settle in Ontario at the time of the underground railroad and earlier than that, allowed Black Loyalists to come to Canada if they had actively supported Britain against the Americans at the time of the American Revolution (which ended in 1783), they were “allowed” – but they were not welcomed here.

If you have read the book or seen the mini-series of

Lawrence Hill’s “The Book of Negroes”, you have some idea of the real story. I found both to be very powerful, highly educational, and quite shame-inducing. So when I got the chance to visit the Black Loyalist Heritage Centre in Shelburne, Nova Scotia a few weeks ago, one of my first questions was “Although Hill’s book is fictional, are the historical facts accurate?”

“Entirely” was the answer from Braden Chetwynd, programming and outreach co-ordinator for the Centre. It was really that difficult for the Black Loyalists who came to Canada.

If you are travelling in southwest Nova Scotia and you should; it’s wonderful! The Black Loyalist Heritage Centre is a must-visit. But please schedule enough time to capture the whole story – two hours at least. The narrative is well told in the modern interpretive centre, opened in 2016. But it says a great deal as to how far we still must go when we learn that the original interpretive centre was destroyed by arson in 2006.

In the well-designed new centre, a long wall is covered with quotes from Black Loyalists, with a number of video screens available to guide

visitors through the stories of the over 3,000 Black Loyalists who arrived in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick between 1783 and 1785. They were allowed to come from the United States to the British colony to live as free citizens because they had fought for, or otherwise supported, the British. Those who came to Canada included some who had been born free in Africa, captured as slaves, and transported in horrible conditions by ship to the Americas. Others were born into slavery on this continent.

When they came to Nova Scotia, slavery still existed in the British Empire, and thus, in Canada. There is a museum, also in Shelburne, that was a home in the same era; in the basement of that home is the kitchen that was tended in the first decade of the 1800’s by a slave named Catherine Edwards.

Braden Chetwynd made it clear that the Black Loyalist immigration to Nova Scotia was not inspired by anti-slavery altruism. The British promise of freedom was not focused on freeing slaves, but on gaining personnel for the British army.

And even when the promise of freedom was kept – and it

wasn’t, always – “Here they found wind-swept rocks and broken promises. Here, too, they learned that though they may be free, they were not seen as equal.” Assigned rocky land ill-suited for farming, the newcomers built “temporary” pit houses – holes in the ground covered with lean-tos – and ended up living in them for up to a decade. They learned survival skills in the foreign climate, not from white neighbours, but from the First Nations, Mi’kmaq people.

Racism was the order of the day for these early Black Loyalists. Shelburne was the location of “the first recorded race riots in North America,” in 1784, as white citizens rampaged against the Black community. Life was so challenging that many took the opportunity to flee Canada, crossing the ocean to found Freetown, in Sierra Leone.

But many stayed, and today there are more than 50 Black Nova Scotia communities with most residents having roots stretching back to the Black Loyalist immigration.

One of those residents is Jessie Corrigan, a descendent of Black Loyalists who grew up in Birchtown, the section of Shelburne that was home to

the original Black Loyalists and is now the site of the Centre. She guided us through the heritage buildings that surround the new interpretive centre, including the one-room school, dating back to 1835, which she attended as a child. There is also a church, a burial ground, and a replica pit house – a poignant reminder of how difficult existence was for these people who had made huge sacrifices for a new life that was a far cry from what they had been promised.

So a visit to the Black Loyalist Heritage Centre is not a highly amusing, entertaining stop – but it is highly educational, imparting a vital message for all Canadians. At the same time, there are plenty of reasons to smile – at the resiliency embodied in Jessie Corrigan, at the eagerness of the welcoming staff to share their history, to help us all to understand an era that must not be hidden behind optimistic mythology and to make us all slightly better citizens of a country we share.

Paul Knowles is an author and travel writer. To contact Paul about travel, his books, or speaking engagements, email pknowles@golden.net.



A replica Pit House – the hand-dug, primitive accommodation that housed some Black Loyalist immigrants for up to a decade. (Photos by Paul Knowles)



The 1835 school at the Black Loyalist Heritage Centre.