

Early Settlers of Grand Bay Westfield

Many of the early settlers in this area had black slaves working for them. Slaves were referred to as "servants". Many blacks were captured in Africa and brought to New Brunswick. They were bought and sold at auctions in Saint John and Halifax. Slavery was legal. Some of the blacks signed long term contracts (indentures) to work in return for passage to the new world. They were called indentured servants. Their contracts were bought and sold. At the end of a contract the servant would be free and receive some money and a new suit of clothes. It was big business.

Settlers from New England who moved north to this area brought almost 1200 slaves and indentured servants with them. Major John Coffin's wife, for instance, had two slaves, Nelly a "likely wench" aged 8 and Fortune a "likely boy" aged 9. Major Coffin had three black male slaves and one black female slave.

When the British fought with the American colonists during the American War of Independence, the British tried to cripple the economy by offering freedom to any slave who could escape and join them. Many slaves jumped at the opportunity especially when the freedom came with promises of grants of land and free provisions. The war did not go well for the British and during the retreat; many escaped slaves were captured by the Americans and returned to their owners. Those that remained with the British were employed cleaning, cooking and doing menial jobs. They were not allowed to join a regiment and bear arms.

When the war was lost, the British granted freedom to those slaves who had remained with them. General George Washington demanded a return of all slaves but the British refused and offered to pay compensation (which was never paid). More than 3500 slaves, then free, left by boat from New York for Nova Scotia and Saint John. Between April and November 1783, several hundred of the free slaves arrived in Saint John. Although the British had promised them land and supplies, very few of them received any. Many became slaves or indentured servants to the white loyalists. Others worked at menial jobs at really low wages while waiting for the promises to be kept.

In 1785, 31 of them each received a grant of 50 acres in Westfield near Negro Lake and Robin Hood Lake. The group was led by Richard Corankapone Wheeler and some of the surnames were Morris, Heron, Malaby, Hutchins, Sampson, Cole, Cox and Wansey. These "grants" were really annual leases with rent and were too small and too wooded to grow crops to support a family.

The black community struggled to survive and many left to go to Saint John. Life there was no better as the city charter of 1785 prevented them from voting, practising a trade, fishing in the harbour or selling goods. Also, blacks could not live in the city unless they worked as menial labourers or "servants".

By 1790, many of the free slaves had become disillusioned with life in Westfield and abandoned the land or sold out to white settlers. Some of the land reverted back to the government and was regranted to whites. One of the free slaves, Thomas Peters, went to England and persuaded the British to provide free transport to Sierra Leone and provide land grants there for anyone interested. Richard Corankapone Wheeler was so desperate to leave

Westfield that he and several companions spent 15 days walking to Halifax from Westfield in December 1791 to catch one of the ships going to Sierra Leone.

On January 15, 1792 he and approximately 1200 free slaves left Halifax in a flotilla headed for Sierra Leone. Many died en route and when the survivors arrived there it was not as promised. There was nothing there and many never got the promised land grants. Slave traders and hostile natives made life very difficult for them. They did build a town called Freetown and many descendants of the New Brunswick blacks still live there.

Those that remained in New Brunswick had to endure discrimination, harsh winters, poverty and ill health. Tales of the suffering can be found on the many websites devoted to those brave, determined souls who made these tremendous sacrifices for their freedom and freedom for their children.

Submitted to the River Valley News, 2011

by

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