

FLIGHT FROM FLORIDA

By N. L. BURNETTE

IN the romantic story of the United Empire Loyalists, no episode is more dramatic (and yet so little known) than the settlement in Nova Scotia of a group of British refugees from Florida.

Following a period of Spanish rule, East Florida became a British Province. In 1763, the Spanish garrisons and civilians having left, the British Government made serious attempts at colonization. Individual land grants were made on terms that could fairly be described as generous. Considering the times, some of the projects had curiously modern overtones of humanitarianism. Three colonies for the settlement of poor Jews actually were founded in Florida. One was near the old trading post at Volusia, another near the present city of Gainesville and the third, of which at least we know its name — "Hope Hill" — near Astor.

Very large grants of land were made to patentees who contracted to introduce settlers. Two of these deserve passing mention. The grant made to Denys Rolle which centered round the present site of Palatka on the St. Johns River and which, between 1764 the date of Rolle's first patent and 1782, had grown to total holdings in excess of 80,000 acres. Second, Dr. Andrew Turnbull's settlement at New Smyrna, of 1400 people from Minorca, Leghorn and the Peloponnesus.

Despite the evils inherent in absentee landlordism and bad local management of the large estates, East Florida, under 20 years of British rule did make solid, if slow, progress. This is evident in the Trade Returns. The chief exportable product was Indigo. In 1782 England imported 569,000 pounds of Indigo of which Florida provided 125,000 pounds. Madder and Cochineal, which like Indigo were used as dyes, were cultivated and exported on a smaller scale. Another minor item of export was skins. As it does today, Florida in Colonial times produced turpentine. Interestingly enough, there are early references to citrus. In 1766 a shipping bill listed, "Five quarter casks of juice, three hogsheads of peel for the making of marmalade as well as some quantities of lemons and limes." Ten years later 65,400 oranges were exported. Rice and sugar were harvested but apparently in quantities sufficient only to supply local needs. Cotton growing and silkworm culture do not seem to have progressed beyond the experimental stage. Despite the wealth of timber and accessibility of deep water harbours, shipbuilding was not seriously engaged in, due prob-

ably to a dearth of skilled shipwrights.

The population in 1771 seems to have been around three thousand. What altered the whole picture and gave Florida its first real boom was the American Revolution. The successes of the Continental Armies in the South, culminating in the evacuation of Savannah and Charleston by the British, sent a flood of Loyalist refugees to Saint Augustine. Florida received over 13,000 refugees from Georgia and South Carolina. The local records of the times reflect the problems created by this influx. In these records there is an item which, while unconnected with the main subject of this article, is not without interest to the present day winter visitor to Florida. A restaurant or liquor shop license in Saint Augustine under Colonial rule cost £5. But, if the establishment boasted a shuffleboard, the license fee was £10!

Throughout the revolution, Florida remained a staunch supporter of the British cause. Volunteer Corps based in Florida repelled invasion and took part in successful operations against adjacent colonies in rebellion. To the Loyalists fleeing from persecution, if not worse, Florida with its mild climate and its promise of security under the Crown must have appeared a desirable haven. But in 1783 these hopes of a new life were dealt a bitter blow. East Florida was ceded to Spain.

To dismiss the action of the British Government as a callous abandonment of a loyal population, is an oversimplification of a complex situation. It must not be forgotten that the Americans, in their war for independence, were aided by two powerful allies. Against these two, the West Indies garrisons needed strengthening. In fact, as early as March 1782, before peace negotiations with the Americans had begun, London had suggested the withdrawal of troops from Saint Augustine and their employment in the defence of the West Indies against the Spaniards.

In so far as Florida itself was concerned, with the loss of the harbours and coastal cities of Georgia and the Carolinas, the British position in Florida became untenable. Florida could be held only as long as the Americans were willing, which obviously wouldn't be for very long. From the military point of view the evacuation of Florida by the British was based on sound strategic reasoning.

Of the thousands of British subjects who elected to leave Florida after its cession to Spain, the largest number went to the West Indies and islands in the Caribbean. A letter written in Nassau in January of 1784 notes that "nearly 1000 Loyalists

and their families had come from East Florida to the Bahamas and double that number are still to come." Records in Jamaica and the lesser Antilles also note the arrival of Loyalists from Florida. A number of persons were taken to Britain. The fortunes of many members of these various groups can be traced through the proceedings of the special courts set up to examine the claims of losses incurred as a result of the evacuation. These vary all the way from modest claims for "Fifty acres with a good house — a good crop of potatoes, corn, etc.£150"; to very large claims from the owners of extensive estates.

The strangest emigration and perhaps the one most filled with heartbreak was that of nearly 900 people from Sunny Florida to the forbidding shores of Nova Scotia.

Sir Guy Carlton, Commanding Officer of all British forces in North America, had issued a proclamation offering generous grants of land in Nova Scotia to all soldiers who went there for their discharge. Most of the Loyalists who went to Nova Scotia from Florida were members of volunteer Loyalists regiments, but not all. The passenger lists of the transports, as well as the Nova Scotia records of lands granted to Loyalists, show that accompanying the troops were quite a number of respectable civilian families from Saint Augustine.

One cannot but admire the indomitable spirit of those who decided to embark on the long journey north because, among the well informed, there could have been very little illusion about the climate of the prospective new homeland. There is the case of a memorial presented to the authorities in October, 1784 by a group of gentlemen on the St. Marys River. "They" stated the petitioners "would rather die with their swords in their hands than go to the inhospitable regions of Nova Scotia." "Or" continues the rather hysterical wording of the memorial "deny their religion and become Spanish subjects or return to the States at the risk of insult and assassination." One petitioner, John Crudens by name, advanced a wild and incoherent scheme for the setting up of a government of his own between the Saint Johns and the Saint Marys Rivers. This came to naught. What eventually happened to this particular group of perturbed individuals is not clear. It is to be hoped that, somewhere under the British flag, they found a refuge with a climate more to their liking than that of Nova Scotia.

The Claims Courts throw further light on Nova Scotia's unfavourable reputation. Robert Robinson, a master butcher of Saint Augustine claimed "£9.2.9, loss on the sale of a negroe wench from her aversion to go to Halifax being a very cold

climate." There is also record of a claim for "£35, loss of a negroe man named Jack who run away at embarking for Halifax from his dread on encountering so cold a climate."

The first fleet of transports left Saint Augustine for Halifax on October 28th, 1783. It carried men of The Royal North Carolina Regiment and The Carolina King's Rangers. Other transports left Saint Augustine for Halifax in April, June and October, 1784, with civilians and part of The South Carolina Regiment. A portion of this regiment remained on active duty and served in the West Indies. Its Commanding Officer lived for a year in Jamaica. Later, he and his wife moved to New Brunswick.

The overall total destined for Nova Scotia, as shown on the Saint Augustine evacuation roll, was 880 souls. This included troops, civilians, members of their families and servants. But in various records there frequently occur names of Loyalists from Florida that do not appear on the lists of the Commissioner of Evacuation at Saint Augustine. To quote just one example out of many, in the American manuscripts of the Royal Institute of London there is a letter from Sir Guy Carlton to Governor Parr (of Nova Scotia) which is as follows:

"Sir.

The Bearer Adam Chrystie Esq. served as a Captain of a troop of Dragoons in West Florida under the command of Major General Campbell until the reduction (sic) of that province by the Spaniards. As he is now desirous of settling in Nova Scotia I beg leave to recommend him to your Excellency for such a grant of land in that province as is given to other inhabitants."

It is possible that Chrystie was a Captain in one of the two troops of Dragoons specially raised by Governor Tonyn of Florida to protect the British planters against banditry, which broke out during the evacuation. The two troops were, to all intents and purposes, mounted constabulary and would not appear on the ordinary army lists. Moreover, if Chrystie served in West Florida, he could have left via Pensacola rather than from Saint Augustine and therefore would not have come under the notice of the Commissioner of Evacuation at the latter port.

The Loyalist troops that moved from Florida were to be granted land in Nova Scotia at the rate of 200 acres to every N.C.O. and 100 acres to every private. These grants were exclusive of extra allotments to members of families. The

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grants were freed from payment of fees and quit rent for ten years. Rations were to be furnished by the Government for one year. All ranks were permitted to keep their arms and accoutrements. Officers were given grants the size of which were related not only to their military rank but also took into account loss of property consequent upon removal to Nova Scotia. Apparently this last matter also influenced the size of grants made to responsible civilians.

The intention of the authorities seems to have been to settle in Mary's Bay and Stormont, both in Guysborough County, men of three units, the King's Carolina Rangers, the Royal North Carolina Regiment and the South Carolina Regiment. No one knows who chose the site of the projected settlement but the selection was poor. The tract covered 8,450 acres. When after the lapse of several years, the surveys were completed, only 48 patents were issued. It is evident that most of the Florida emigres sought and obtained land elsewhere in the province because, in Report #4 of the Nova Scotia Archives entitled "Loyalist Land Settlement," there are listed 306 officers and men of the three Carolina Regiments as well as 59 civilians who sailed with these troops from Saint Augustine.

Of the 880 persons listed on the Saint Augustine evacuation rolls as destined for Nova Scotia, 155 were coloured. The South Carolina Regiment was accompanied by 13 negro servants, the property of 4 officers. The passenger list of another Halifax bound transport "The Argus" included 9 slaves. The landing lists at Halifax show a total of 194 negroes from Saint Augustine. Whatever was the correct tally, one thing is certain. The negroes from Florida, when added to the considerable number brought in by Loyalists from other States, created for Nova Scotia a special problem.

In reports and in official correspondence there crops up again and again the difficulty of determining a negro's status. In the case of slaves, ownership was sometimes in dispute. On one occasion, that long-suffering and overworked public servant, Sir Guy Carlton, wrote to Brigadier General Fox saying:

"I enclose a letter which I received from Mr. Roupall at Saint Augustine enclosing an affidavit respecting a negro woman taken from hence by Lieutenant Waldron of The King's Carolina Rangers and I request you will make enquiry into this matter and give such orders thereon as shall appear just and proper."

Also, in the Magistrate's Court Records of the old Loyalist

town of Shelbourne, Nova Scotia, there is a curious case involving a negro. One, Jessie Gray, who had received a large grant of land for military services in the South, had sold a coloured woman for 100 bushels of potatoes. The case hinged, not on the nature of the transaction but, on proof of ownership of the slave. This, apparently, Gray was able to prove to the satisfaction of the Court.

In the case of negroes claiming to be "Freedmen" two things added to the confusion. In 1781 the General Assembly of British East Florida had passed a law empowering the Governor to arm and employ negro slaves on public works presumably fortifications. Owners were to be compensated at the rate of 1/- a day. *But*, negroes showing exceptional courage in battle were to be given, not only a reward in terms of money and clothing, but their freedom as well. As there is no record of all negro combatant units, negroes so rewarded may have been carried as soldiers on the muster rolls of white regiments. This may explain the discrepancy between the number of negroes shown on the evacuation lists and the landing lists.

Another problem arose because of the loose use of terms. "Slave" was definite enough but what exactly was meant by "Servant for life?" Whose life? If, as was not uncommon, a master's last will and testament manumitted his slaves, the turmoil of the war years plus the upset consequent upon the evacuation must have raised questions concerning the status of negroes that would be very difficult for a Court to answer.

A survey of soldier settlers in Nova Scotia by a Colonel Morse of the Royal Engineers in 1784 mentions over 1200 slaves. This number seems too large. Morse probably meant negroes, irrespective of their status.

This influx of negroes into Nova Scotia with the Loyalists was the largest mass immigration of negroes in Canada's history. It was not excelled at any other time, even during the operation of the so-called "underground Railroad." This mass movement of negroes has given rise to the popular misconception that slave holding was introduced into Canada by the Loyalists. This is far from the truth. As early as 1689 a Royal mandate permitted the colonists in New France to avail themselves of the services of African slaves. This was soon followed by the importation and sales of negroes. When the country passed to British rule the capitulation did not disturb the ownership of slaves by French citizens. All that the Loyalists did was to greatly augment Canada's negro population, particularly in Nova Scotia. That the authorities were not insensitive to their

responsibilities is shown by the fact that in "Land Grants of 1789," a publication of the Nova Scotia Archives, there is included a plan by a Major Mullidge for "The Settlement of Black People at Annapolis."

The negroes must have suffered greatly from the winter climate of Nova Scotia, particularly those unfortunates who came from Florida and who, in all probability, had never in their lives seen snow.

Nor were the white Floridians in much better circumstances. Despite every effort on the part of Sir Guy Carlton, the first winter in Nova Scotia was one of great hardship. Sir Guy's correspondence with subordinates shows his concern for the settlers. One of his letters reads:

"Sir.

The Commander-in-Chief being apprehensive that the refugees **** may suffer from the inclemency of the weather by not having sufficient time to construct the necessary buildings, His Excellency desires you will please to give orders that such temporary buildings as may be found absolutely necessary be constructed **** which with the stores he has ordered to be sent, he hopes will secure them from the severity of the approaching winter."

Following its immemorial custom, the army delivered the wrong things at the wrong places at the wrong time and there was much suffering because of lack of warm clothing, building material and household appliances.

By 1795 some of the Southern expatriates had become disheartened. On November 9th, of that year, a memorial from 72 officers was forwarded to Lord Sydney, Principal Secretary of State for the Colonies, strongly recommending that Lt. Colonel John Hamilton, late of The Royal North Carolina Regiment, be appointed Governor of the Bahamas Islands when the office should become vacant. The petitioners added, "They had forfeited their estates when they went to Nova Scotia. They were unable, in their present state of finances to clear the ground and raise the necessaries of life in a climate so severe and inhospitable to Southern constitutions and that the Bahamas were the only place in the British Dominions suitable for them."

Lt.-Colonel Hamilton eventually was made British Consul at Norfolk, Va. He died in England in 1817. Some of the other officers of the Carolina Regiments managed to transfer to the West Indies. A few, if a sound assumption can be based on similarity of names in records, migrated to what is now Ontario

to swell the ranks of the Loyalists led there by John Graves Simcoe. Those who did move to what was then Upper Canada would have heard of it because Benjamin Hallowell, a Loyalist of Boston, not only possessed one of the earliest land grants in Guysborough, Nova Scotia, but also held title to lands in the lovely Bay of Quinte country where, to this day, a township named after him perpetuates his memory.

Despite normal attrition due to deaths and removal from the province, the original Saint Augustine Loyalists, whether they stayed in Guysborough County or settled in other parts of the province, struck roots deep down into the soil and history of Nova Scotia. At the same time they treasured memories of the sunny lands from which they came.

Dr. A. C. Jost, the distinguished author of "Guysborough Sketches and Essays," in a personal communication writes:

"One of the diabolical things in connection with the war (the American Revolution), especially in the South, was the way in which families were broken up. Up till about 75 years ago there was a certain amount of communication between families here in Nova Scotia and their connections in the South. That was, I think, the reason why the sympathies of the Nova Scotians were with the South rather than the North when the war of Secession was on."

They builded well for Canada, these transplanted Southerners. With justice, their Nova Scotia descendants can echo Rudyard Kipling's "A School Song":

"Let us now praise famous men
Men of little showing
For their work continueth
Greater than their knowing."