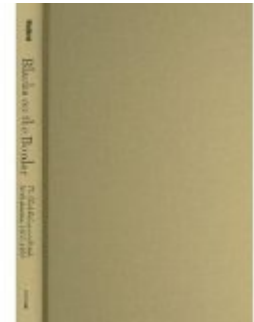


Harvey Amani Whitfield. *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1900.* Burlington: University of Vermont Press, 2006. 200 pp. \$65.00, library, ISBN 978-1-58465-605-0.



Reviewed by Karolyn Smardz Frost

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Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860 is a wonderful book. Far more than the sum of its parts, this slim volume focuses on several critical themes while expertly detailing the history of an important segment of the African Diaspora. Harvey Amani Whitfield, an assistant professor at the University of Vermont, demonstrates how African Americans from different parts of the United States, slave and free, who fought in the British forces in the War of 1812 came to found families, cultural institutions, and communities on Nova Scotia's inhospitable soil. He further details their subsequent development as a community and as a new, hybrid culture. This, Whitfield maintains, came about largely because of the hardships the so-called Black Refugees faced, not the least of which was the unrelenting and pervasively discriminatory treatment these brave and hardworking people encountered in their adopted Maritime home.

The story of Nova Scotia's Black Refugees is generally less well known than that of the earlier migrants from the United States, the Black Loyalists. The Black Loyalists were African Americans,

the vast majority formerly enslaved, who had sided with and fought for the British in the American Revolution. Some 3,500 Black Loyalists were evacuated to Nova Scotia by the British after their own defeat in the American Revolutionary War. Ironically, white Loyalist owners were permitted to transport thousands of enslaved Blacks into what remained of British North America. Despite promises of free land and liberty, only about one-third of the Black Loyalists were rewarded with such land grants by 1788, and these were smaller than those accorded white veterans. Furthermore, their sudden influx into an overwhelmingly white and homogeneous population, coupled with their anomalous position as free Blacks into what was, if not a slave society, at least a society with slaves, contributed to a growing antipathy towards free Black settlers. These newly styled African Canadians were located in communities widely scattered through Nova Scotia, often on very inferior land. Those who had fought in the British forces were, however, at least accorded their freedom.

Similarly, the Black Refugees were African Americans, also both slave and free, who accepted

Britain's offer of freedom and land in return for their service to the British forces in the War of 1812. Although as was the case with both the Black Loyalists and the Refugees, unscrupulous British officers returned some to their erstwhile American masters and sold others into slavery in the British West Indies, some 2,000 of the so-called Black Refugees were carried in the ships of the Royal Navy to Nova Scotia, with 400 settling in what is now New Brunswick. Many never received their land grants, with those who did being settled on small allotments of rocky soil, mainly at Hammonds Plains and Preston outside Halifax. It is their subsequent fate, their ongoing concern for and relationship with Blacks living along the American seaboard and throughout the Atlantic world, and the hardships they endured on the way to becoming Black Nova Scotians, which form the core of this important and timely volume.

Harvey Amani Whitfield is an African American whose study of Black Nova Scotians can be traced back to his doctoral work at Dalhousie University in Halifax. He brings a fresh perspective to what is, after all, both an American and a Canadian story. In *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860*, the arrival of the Black Refugee population is skillfully placed in its chronological and cultural context. His tale begins with the arrival of African slaves beginning in the late seventeenth century, most of them from the West Indies, as slaves of first French and the British colonizers. This was followed by the influx of free Blacks from the United States after the American Revolution--the Black Loyalists--and then the short-lived resettlement there of the Jamaica Maroons. He shows that the Black Refugees who came after these three groups to Nova Scotia's stony shores had previously been enslaved in the coastal districts of what would later be termed the Tidewater on the one hand, and the shores and Sea Islands of the Carolinas and Georgia on the other. He explores what their different origins meant in terms of the cultural experience, work patterns, family organization, and

expectations they brought with them to their new Maritime Canadian homeland. Apart from the actual slaves who were desirable additions to the French and then the British colonies because of an endemic shortage of labor on the Canadian east coast, none of the peoples of African descent who came after them were welcomed or accepted into the mainstream of Nova Scotian society. Conditions were, in fact, so difficult that a significant proportion of the Black Loyalists (1,200 people) and all but a handful of the Jamaican Maroons chose to accept British abolitionist John Clarkson's offer of assistance to "return" to the African continent and settle in Sierra Leone.

The latest African migrants to the Canadian Maritime provinces, the Black Refugees of the War of 1812, remained, however. Whitfield convincingly demonstrates that their tenacity was, in and of itself, an effective and eloquent form of resistant behavior against white oppression. The title of the book, *Blacks on the Border*, is apt; in fact, Whitfield maintains, that "in escaping to the Royal Navy, the Black Refugees began their history of negotiating the border between the British and American worlds" (p. 36). They came in hope of gaining what they had been denied as slaves--not only liberty but the stability of family life, protection of person and property under law, the right to participate in the political process that governed their lives, and to educate their children. Most came with the same hunger for land ownership that was harbored by the vast majority of pre-industrial settlers in the New World.

Because they were transported to Nova Scotia in British naval vessels, a great many of the Refugees were able to bring their wives and children with them. A significant proportion of the Black Refugees were skilled workers who had backgrounds not only in various forms of agriculture and animal husbandry, but also in construction, shipbuilding, sailing, personal and domestic service, hairdressing, child care, and both dress-making and millinery. Socially and economically

marginalized, either deprived of the promised land grants or awarded properties too small and with too poor soil to support their families, they were forced to remain the lowest paid segment of the Nova Scotian labor force for generations. To exacerbate the problem, Whitfield details how the paternalism of Nova Scotia's British colonial government—which led it to provide Black settlers only with tickets of location and grant the land to them freehold only in the 1840s, after receiving multiple petitions—stymied any chance of economic prosperity or even stability that the scattered communities might have hoped to achieve.

It cannot be said from Whitfield's analysis that the Black Refugees thrived. Indeed, although the majority were dedicated to becoming independent farmers and devoted to the concept of self-sufficiency, most of these disenfranchised people were eventually forced off their land to seek employment in the cities and towns of Nova Scotia. While some of those who lived near major centers managed to combine agriculture, cottage industries such as broom- and basket-making, and wage labor in the docks, warehouses, homes and businesses of whites, those whose land grants were never awarded, or who found their land infertile and insufficiently large to feed their families, were forced to move to cities and towns such as Halifax and Dartmouth. Once there, Whitfield demonstrates, they provided a welcome source of cheap labor but were otherwise socially shunned.

Unable to progress in white-dominated Nova Scotian society, the Black Refugees and their predecessor populations turned inward, and this was most fruitful. Whitfield is quick to point out the richness of the society that was created by the descendants of enslaved Nova Scotians, Black Loyalists, a handful of Maroons, and the Black Refugees. In spite of their disparate geographic and climatic origins, and their varied cultural backgrounds, *Blacks on the Border* clearly shows how these scattered individuals forged a strong cultural tradition based around church, family,

and self-help groups to create the characteristic Black Nova Scotia of today. Indeed, it was, in Whitfield's view, the hardships they faced and their strongly resistant behaviors to combat them, that formed the crucible for the evolution of the vibrant society that characterizes modern Black Nova Scotia.

Whitfield portrays all this while describing through finely detailed research the disparity of peoples that made up the body of the Black Refugees; he shows their origins in the differing slave cultures that prevailed in the two areas of the United States that produced by far the largest numbers of the Refugees. He identifies some of the cultural mores and customs, as well as work patterns that characterized slave culture in both Virginia and the quite different areas of coastal Georgia and the Carolinas. He provides data to buttress his argument that the Black Refugees continued their familial, social, and to some extent economic connections with their former American homeland, and particularly with the New England states, for generations after their migration to Maritime Canada. Indeed, he shows that the African Canadians of Nova Scotian population vied with Massachusetts and Connecticut for the most populous of free Black communities on the eastern seaboard of the United States north of the Mason-Dixon line.

Ultimately, according to Whitfield's evidence, one key to the establishment of the Black Refugees as a distinct society within Black Nova Scotia was, at both beginning and throughout the crucial years of its early evolution, a shared and unshakable loyalty to the British Crown. Likewise, they used the American border as both a definition for their identity as Black Nova Scotians, but "the border also signified a more contested region, with which the Refugees engaged intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically by connecting their understanding of emancipation, migration, and memory with their former homeland" (pp. 2-3). He suggests that they formed part of

what he calls the "Afro-New England Diaspora," because of their similar "work patterns, community life, external pressures, and demography" (p. 3).

Finally, with meticulous investigations into very scanty records, Dr. Whitfield details Black community development in Nova Scotia. He recounts the hardships the Black Refugees faced because of discriminatory treatment on the part of government officials and their white neighbors, plus the coping mechanisms--social, economic, and cultural--that the Refugees employed in order to survive. In the end he convincingly demonstrates that the common experience they shared, and the activism and community-building efforts that evolved to help the widely scattered Black Refugee community endure, contributed to the formation of a new African Canadian identity, an awareness of community service and mutual support, and the centralized cultural institutions that facilitated both. Whitfield shows how despite the enormous challenges the Black Refugees faced, and to some extent because of them, there rose up among them leaders who sought to ameliorate their condition. Churches, schools, self-help and self-insurance organizations were founded and thrived in this adverse climate of racial discrimination. In *Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America, 1815-1860*, Harvey Amani Whitfield has produced a most useful book. Furthermore, it is based on such fragmented and scattered evidence that only the most dedicated scholarship could yield the remarkable degree of detail that he has discovered. He has both placed the Black Refugees in their historical and chronological context in the history of the Canadian Maritime provinces, and accomplished his much larger goal of defining the role the Black Refugees and their settlement played in the history of the Black Atlantic.

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