# Loyalist Place Names of Nova Scotia

*By Stephen Davidson* *

Given that two-thirds of the loyal refugees of the American Revolution found sanctuary in Nova Scotia, it will be no surprise to learn that many of the province's geographical features bear names related to significant figures from that era. Today we'll take a virtual tour of the "fourteenth colony" and learn about some of the loyalist place names found on the map of Nova Scotia.

Loyalists began arriving in Nova Scotia as early as 1775, came in their thousands in 1783, and emigrated there from England in subsequent years. For many of these refugees, their saviour was Sir Guy Carleton, the commander in chief of British forces in North America. Charged with overseeing the removal of all the king's troops through the port of New York, Carleton could not abandon the loyal Americans. In writing to the British prime minister, he said "it is utterly impossible to leave exposed to the rage and violence of these people, men of character whose only offence has been their attachment to the king's service."

And so Carleton marshalled the resources at hand, organizing fleets of evacuation ships to send loyalists to Nova Scotia, England, the West Indies, and the province of Canada. Those who settled in Nova Scotia did not forget his efforts. In Yarmouth County, there is a town, a river and a lake named Carleton. Shelburne County has its Carleton Village and Carleton Village Shore. There is a Carleton Head in Cape Breton, and Carleton Corner in Annapolis County.

Many of the commissary staff and black teamsters who worked for Carleton in New York went to Port Mouton. They honoured Carleton by using his first name, calling their settlement Guy's Borough. When the town burned down a year later, they moved to the Chebucto Bay area, naming the principal settlement Guysborough and another Guysborough Intervale – and later the entire county bore this name.

At one time Shelburne County's Birchtown was the largest settlement of free Africans in all of North America. Carleton saw to it that these former slaves were given certificates of freedom, fulfilling the crown's promise that anyone enslaved by rebels who joined the British would be emancipated. He put Brigadier-General Samuel Birch in charge of issuing these certificates. When Black Loyalists were put ashore near Port Roseway, they established their own settlement – one comprised of people who had been set free by a General Birch certificate. Both Shelburne County and Guysborough County's Birchtowns are named for this friend of enslaved Africans.

A look at the map of Hants County will reveal Rawdon, Upper Rawdon, Centre Rawdon, Rawdon Gold Mines, South Rawdon and the Rawdon Hills. This area was first settled by loyalist refugees from South Carolina as well as the disbanded members of the 2nd Battalion of the 84th Regiment. The latter had fought in South Carolina at the siege of Forty Ninety-Six in May of 1781. It was Francis Rawdon-Hastings and his Volunteers of Ireland who rescued over 500 displaced loyalists and soldiers who were inside the fort, sparing them death at the hands of vengeful rebel forces.

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Admiral Robert Digby, commander of the North American Station, organized an evacuation convoy that brought 1,500 loyalists to Conway on the Annapolis Basin in the summer of 1783. Within four years, the grateful refugees named both the town and the county in his honour. For a time the admiral and his wife lived in Digby, but only their well and the grave of their daughter have survived to the present. The bell that Digby donated to Trinity Anglican Church is still in use.

Pictou County's Abercrombie is named for a British hero of the Battle of Bunker Hill. General James Abercrombie, who served with the Royal Highlanders, was killed during the landmark battle on June 17, 1775.

Some towns in Nova Scotia have very ordinary loyalists as their namesakes. Digby County's Tiddville is named for Samuel Tidd who was a private in Col. Beverly Robinson's Loyal American Regiment. The New York loyalist and his wife Elizabeth settled on Digby Neck with their five children. Gilbert Cove, in the same county, was named for Lt. Thomas Gilbert, a loyalist from Freeport, Massachusetts (Maine).

Barton, a small community across St. Mary's Bay from Digby Neck was named for Lt.-Col. Joseph Barton. This New Jersey loyalist was recognized as a capable man; the colony's governor mandated Barton to establish a school for the children of Black Loyalists. However, a foolish bet brought the loyalist's time in Nova Scotia to a premature end.

While enjoying one drink too many at a Digby hotel, Barton bet that he could fell a tree all by himself – something he had never done before. Dr. Joseph Martin bet that he couldn't. The next day, the loyalist picked up his axe and located an especially tall birch on his property. Barton managed to chop down the tree, but it crashed down on him, mortally wounding the loyalist officer. His friends buried Barton on February 19, 1788.

Russell Lake, just outside of Halifax's twin city Dartmouth, is named for Nathaniel Russell. A Russell family tragedy eventually became part of local lore. When the loyalist's daughter was escorted home from a fireworks display, her jealous fiancee stabbed her to death before her parents' eyes.

Cumberland County's Diligent River has an unusual connection to Nova Scotia's loyalist history. Governor John Parr and a friend had decided to go on a hunting trip one December. During their expedition, the hunters took shelter in the log cabin of Lt. Eleazer Taylor. This loyalist and his family had settled by a river to the west of Partridge Island (now Parrsboro).

When Parr discovered that Mrs Taylor had just had a son, he offered to give the baby a 500-acre grant if the parents would name him John Parr. And so the first Taylor child born in Nova Scotia became both a landowner and a namesake of the governor. (John Parr Taylor lived to be 90 years old!) Parr was so impressed by Eleazer Taylor's industry and diligence that he named the nearby waterway Diligent River, which in time became the name of a town.

Everything from dangerous shoals to rural rivers received names from the loyalist refugees who found sanctuary in Nova Scotia during and following the American Revolution. Some namesakes were military leaders; others were loyalist homesteaders. As in every era, local politicians had their own ideas of what places should be named. Nova Scotia has its share of communities named in honour of influential men – either out of respect for them or in the hope of currying future favours from them. And some of these men would have been among the very last people whom the loyalist refugees would have honoured. Sydney and Shelburne both fall within this category.

Both Australia's Sydney in New South Wales and Cape Breton's Sydney have the origins of their names in the loyalist era. So many loyalists settled on Cape Breton Island that, like New Brunswick, it was partitioned from Nova Scotia as its own colony in 1784. The new governor, Joseph DesBarres, established his capital in what had once been called Spanish River by the French and Ulsebook by the Mi'kmaq tribes. Since it was **Thomas Townshend**, the 1st Viscount Sydney, who appointed DesBarres, it is no surprise that the capital was named Sydney.

The viscount held a number of positions within the British government, including home secretary and foreign secretary. Ironically, though Sydney did much to help the loyalist refugees in Cape Breton and Canada, he had opposed Britain's involvement in the American Revolution. The loyalist refugees of Cape Breton would hardly have shared his perspective. (Cornwall, Ontario's Sydney Street is also named in his honour.)

Once the largest city in British North America, Shelburne was also named for a government official. **William Petty**, the 2nd Earl of Shelburne, was the British prime minister when the Treaty of Paris was signed, ending the American Revolution in 1783. In fact, he only assumed the office on the condition that King George III would recognize the United States as an independent country. This would hardly make him a favourite among American loyalists. And it would only get worse. Later, when the loyalists saw the terms of the Treaty of Paris, they were horrified by the fact that the British government had done nothing to address their concerns (or their loss of property) in the treaty negotiations. Many would later feel bitterly betrayed by Shelburne and his government.

Naming the former Port Roseway (a corruption of the French "razoir") in honour of the British prime minister had not been suggested by any of the city's refugee population. It was Nova Scotia's Governor Parr who announced the renaming when he visited Shelburne on July 11, 1783. Tradition has it that the town's flag pole, flying the empire's colours, fell to the ground when Parr made his announcement. Perhaps it was an omen of the disappointments and decline yet to come. Sixteen years later, the loyalist settlement's county was named Shelburne as well.

Even offshore features could have their names bear witness to loyalist history – such as Yarmouth County's Blonde Rock. Rather than being the namesake of a local beauty or a mermaid, this rock recalls the shipwreck of the HMS Blonde on May 10, 1782. The British warship had just captured the Lyon, an American privateer, and was towing it back to Halifax; the Lyon's 65 crewmembers were in the Blonde's brig. While trying to navigate in the fog, the Blonde struck a rocky islet. The crew and prisoners escaped the wreck in rowboats and made it to Seal Island.

Days later, the Lively and the Scammell, two rebel privateers, anchored off the island in search of water and found the castaways. These rebels were so impressed by how well Captain Thornbrough had treated his prisoners that they agreed to put his crew ashore near Yarmouth in exchange for the Lyon's crew. Rather than keeping Thornbrough a prisoner of war, the privateer captains took him to New York and released him without conditions. In the years following this incident, many other ships foundered on Blonde Rock.

One loyalist town in Nova Scotia had the distinction of being named for a "lord of the bedchamber", a man who was an artist as well as a politician. Heneage Finch, the fourth Earl of Aylesford, assisted King George III with dressing, served him his meals, guarded the "water closet" and provided the monarch with companionship. Rather than being a menial job, the lord of the bedchamber was a title that members of the British nobility eagerly desired to have.

Finch filled this position from 1777 to 1783; he would have been privy to many a conversation about the course of the American Revolution. In his final year of service, the fourth Earl of Aylesford was appointed to the Privy Council, the king's inner circle of advisors. It may be because Finch held this important office that the loyalists who settled in Kings County decided to name their community Aylesford. Finch was also a famous landscape painter. Today Britain's Tate Gallery has 50 of Aylesford's prints, drawings and watercolours in its collection.

At least one man who was a royal appointment had suffered many of the same deprivations as the loyalist settlers of Nova Scotia. Despite his popularity, John Wentworth, the last royal governor of New Hampshire, could not withstand the animosity that the colonists felt toward British taxes. In 1775, the Wentworth family became refugees.

The former governor eventually secured a position as Nova Scotia's surveyor general; by 1792, he was appointed the colony's new governor. (Whether this can be attributed to his talents as an administrator or to his wife's talents as a mistress to Prince William remains a point of argument among scholars.)

As can be seen with places named for Governor Wentworth, the Scottish tradition of thrift prevailed during the loyalist settlement of Nova Scotia. Why waste a good name by only using it once when it could be used in so many ways?

Today, visitors to Nova Scotia can tour the Wentworth Valley in Cumberland County, drive through Wentworth Station, Wentworth Centre and Wentworth, travel to Wentworth Creek in Cape Breton or canoe in one of three Wentworth Lakes found in Clare, Shelburne and Queens County. Never let it me said that loyalists were unappreciative or anything but frugal!

**NOTE:**

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