

## **THE COLOURED CORPS: UPPER CANADA'S GREAT BLACK DEFENDERS**

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O Canada!

We stand on guard for thee.

Stand on guard to freedom and victory.

This was the drive behind the many men of colour who joined the Canadian military. The Coloured Corps, also known as the Company of Coloured Men or Corps of Men of Colour was the first Black military unit in Upper Canada.

Upper Canada was formed under the Constitutional Act of 1791 which came after the Dorchester Proclamation of 1788. It consisted of the first land registry for Quebec Upper Canada and parts of present day Ontario. Its first capital was Newark, now Niagara-on-the-Lake before moving to York in 1796 which is now called Toronto, meaning the meeting place.

The population of Upper Canada from 1791- 1840 rose from 6,000 in 1790 to 46,000 by 1806. The citizens relied on agriculture, exports, with government spending a major source of revenue.

From 1790-1840, Upper Canada's elites, political officials, lawyers and military officers were dueling to assert their superior claims to honour. With time, new ideas and morals were emerging that opposed the dueling and rebuked the male egotistical code of the duelist. An opposition formed against the hierarchic dominance by the elite.

In 1790, Upper Canada appoints its first Governor, John Graves Simcoe. The man whom we honour with the formation of Toronto's largest cultural festival, Caribana, now called Scotiabank Caribbean festival. The festival occurs every summer leading up to the Civic Holiday named after John Graves Simcoe.

Starting in 1793, Simcoe, helped to abolish slavery through the Act Against Slavery and encouraged immigration from the United States and begins to build an infrastructure of roads. These roads or footpaths were used for transportation by horse or stage coaches in key settlements between London to Kingston.

This included The Governors Road which was built in 1793 from Dundas to Paris and the Lakeshore Road or York Road, built from York to Trent River and later extended eastward to Kingston by 1817 and later renamed Kingston Rd.

The open immigration under Simcoe through the Act Against Slavery, which was an anti-slavery law, makes way for runaway slaves and free slaves from America to find a new home here in Canada.

John Graves Simcoe, a supporter of the abolition of slaves prior to becoming governor of Upper Canada, as a British Member of Parliament, described the act of slavery as an offence against Christianity.

The number of slaves in Upper-Canada was relatively small compared to the significant number of settlers in York, Upper Canada also known as Toronto, Ontario. By the time of the Act Against Slavery, the number of slaves residing in Upper Canada significantly increased by the arrival of Loyalist refugees from the South who had brought with them servants and slaves.

Simcoe's desire to abolish slavery was met with opposition by some members of the Legislative Assembly who themselves owned slaves. The Attorney General of the time John White, was also helpful in the passing of the law titled An Act to Prevent the further Introduction of Slaves and to limit the Term of Contracts for Servitude within this Province, stated "while all slaves in the province would remain enslaved until death, no new slaves could be brought into Upper Canada, and children born to female slaves after passage of the act would be freed at age 25."

With the passing of this law, Upper Canada became the first British colony to abolish slavery and remained enforced until the British parliaments Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.

As a result of being the first British colony to abolish slavery through the Legislative Assembly, Christopher Robinson, an American-born soldier, lawyer and political figure, born to one of British colonies most influential families was commissioned as an Ensign in the Queen's Rangers under John Graves Simcoe and served through the surrender of the British army at Yorktown, until 1783. He played a huge role in establishing the Law Society of Upper Canada. Robinson introduced a bill in the Legislative Assembly to allow the importation of more slaves that was passed but stalled by council and later died by the end of the sessions.

By this time the War of 1812, which was a military conflict, took place for two and a half years, fought by the United States of America against the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, its North American colonies and its Native American Allies. The war became a major turning point in the development of the US Military. With its poor performance of several militia units, particularly during the 1812 invasion of Canada, convinced the US government of the need to move away from its Revolutionary-era reliance on militia and focus on creating a more professional regular force.

In Upper and Lower Canada, British and local Canadian militia victory over the invading US armies became iconic and promoted the development of a distinct Canadian identity, which included its loyalty to Britain and saw the contributions of Black Canadians with the first all Black unit in Upper Canada.

Thousands of Black Canadians volunteered in the War of 1812 and it was declared by the son of Christopher Robinson, Attorney General John Robinson, that by residing in Canada, Black residents were set free and that Canadian courts would protect their freedom.

This made possible the formation of a segregated militia company of Black Upper Canadians which was proposed by Richard Pierpoint, a Black veteran of the Loyalist Corps Butlers Rangers during the American War of Independence. He offered "to raise a Corps of Men of Colour" on the Niagara Frontier shortly before the outbreak of war in the US.

The province at the time unaware of the valour of Black men was slow to accept this formation but later, the nucleus of an all Black-company was formed at Newark which is now Niagara-on-the-Lake under the 1st Lincoln Militia.

It is no surprise that this great all Black squad instead of appointing Pierpoint to lead, command was granted instead to a white officer, captain Robert Runchey who seemed to be despised much and labeled a “black sheep” and a “worthless, troublesome malcontent” by fellow military men.

With his leadership, recruiting for “Runchey’s company of Coloured Men” proceeded slowly and received only 14 voluntary transfers of Black soldiers from the 3rd York Militia. His treatments of these Black soldiers were a source of income and he would hire these soldiers as domestic servants to other militia officers. Within time Runchey’s leadership of the all Black militia ended and the group was now seen as an embodied militia unit that became attached to the British Quartermaster-General’s Department and designated the “Coloured Corps” and spent the winter of 1812-1813 in quarters of Fort George where they exchanged heavy fire with American forces.

By March 1814, the Coloured Corps was employed in repairing the fortification at the mouth of Niagara River, then later tasked with building Fort Mississauga. Lieutenant John Le Couteur in his journal noted that Fort Mississauga was “a pretty little fort and would prevent vessels coming up the Niagara River.”

In February 1815, Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolls inspected the company of the Coloured Corps whose services on the Niagara Frontier were retained by The Royal Engineers for the remainder of the war. Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolls inspected the all Black unit and noted “no people could be better calculated to build temporary barracks than these Free Men of Colour, as they are in general expert axemen.”

Black men gave honourable services under The Coloured Corps and despite their valiant service, soldiers of the Coloured Corps experienced years of hardship due to bureaucratic and racial discrimination but despite these inequalities, The Coloured Corps set the precedent for the broader acceptance of the military service of African-Canadians, leading to the formation of other segregated units throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Today, lest not forget the contributions of the brave Coloured Corps unit and how they helped us to establish great forts, even humbly performed services beneath their skills as domestic military slaves and rose above this to be recognized for their great skills and abilities giving residents of Upper Canada, now Ontario, a great victory in the War of 1812 and a sense of pride today.

And so, we honour our Black Canadian Veterans with a ceremony that began in 2010 by Victorious Legacy and that received honourable recognition by the former Prime Minister of Canada Stephen Harper and former Defence Minister Peter MacKay as the Inaugural event to recognize Black Canadian Veterans.

You will find other groups that now pay tribute to remember Black Canadian soldiers such as the Federal government and Ryerson Universities Black Canadian Remembrance Ceremony that was held last November by Senator Anne Cools.

Victorious Legacy honoured Black Canadian Veterans over the Christmas holiday on December 27th, 2015 with funding provided by Veterans Affairs Canada and hosted by the Weston Village BIA. All three levels of government for the York South-Weston were present sharing the

contributions of Black Canadian Veterans and discussed the possibility to have a Black Military Parade. Councillor Frances Nunziata, MPP Laura Albanese, and MP Ahmed Hussen gave historic speeches reflecting the contributions of Black Canadians.

The York South-Weston residents should be proud of the victorious legacy of MP Ahmed Hussen making history in Canada to become the 1st Somali elected Member of Parliament.

Let us embrace our rich Canadian history and know that there is no Canada without Black Canadians to stand on guard for thee.

About the Author:

Kerry Ann Thomas was an Ethnic Media Coordinator at Queens Park for the Former Leader of the Conservative Party John Tory, who is now the Mayor of Toronto. She has interviewed many dignitaries, celebrities, sportsmen, businessmen and women and community leaders. She is also the founder of Smart Guide magazine, a guide on where to shop, dine, smart places to visit and smart products.

Images 1:

Councillor of Ward 11 Frances Nunziata

Image 2: MPP Laura Albanese

Image 3:

Kerry Ann Thomas of Victorious Legacy with Kathy Grant of Legacy Voices and MP Ahmed Hussen.

Kathy Grant is holding medals awarded to a No.2 Construction Battalion Soldier. They are the Victory Medals and the Overseas Medal from the First World War.