

Richard Pierpoint & others petition for tract of land for formerly enslaved Black farmers

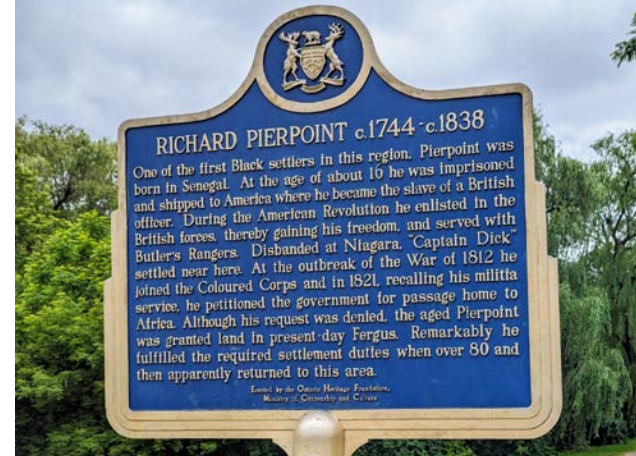
By Jessica Linzel

By the 1820s, one of the main complaints from farmers in Niagara was the lack of general labourers. Robert Gourlay's *Statistical Account of Upper Canada* reveals this through his 1817–1818 interviews with farmers from every township in the Niagara district. Most people worked on their own land (100–200 acre lots usually), with subsistence farming to provide for the immediate needs of their household.

It was hard to grow other industries like milling, tanning, shipping, potash production, etc., without the help of general paid labourers. This is why large families were valuable, providing a steady supply of dedicated labour. Niagara's limited population and very few non-landowning workers for hire limited the abilities of farmers from the outset to expand and diversify their enterprises. Servants and enslaved people were very much a part of this early economy and contributed to the continued economic success of certain prominent families.

One example of this is seen in a petition of Richard Pierpoint, a Black Loyalist. Lands granted to Loyalists required improvement before people could gain official title to them. They had to clear five acres, put a fence around it, and build a house and a road connecting to their neighbour within the first two years of settlement. Free Black men like Pierpoint living in Niagara were given land grants as "Loyalists" but had a hard time developing those properties because they lacked family support. Many of them had wives and children who were still enslaved in the American colonies. Further, if a free Black man married a Black female slave of a white Loyalist, his children would still be property of the enslaver.

Domestic production and access to key markets depended on the labour of the family unit, and thus it was extremely difficult for these individuals to legally gain title to their land. To solve this problem, in 1794, 19 Black Loyalists delivered a petition to Governor Simcoe. They asked to be given a tract of land with lots adjacent to one another so they could group their labour and have a better chance of farming successfully, rather than continuing in isolation. One of the signees was Richard Pierpoint, who had been granted land near Twelve Mile Creek in Grantham Township and later helped create the Coloured Corps during the War of 1812. He and the others were denied this petition.



Petition of the Free Negroes:

That there are a number of Negroes in this part of the Country many of whom have been Soldiers during the late war between Great Britain and America, and others who were born free with a few who have come into Canada since the peace—Your Petitioners are desirous of settling adjacent to each other that they may be enabled to give assistance (in work) to those amongst them who may most want it. Your Petitioners therefore humbly Pray that their situation may be taken into consideration, and if your Excellency should see fit to allow them a Tract of Country to settle on, separate from the white Settlers, your Petitioners hope their behaviour will be such as to shew, that Negroes are capable of being industrious, and in loyalty to the Crown they are not deficient.

References

- Mestern, Pat. *Fergus: A Scottish Town by Birthright*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008.
- Pitt, Steve. *To Stand and Fight Together: Richard Pierpoint and the Coloured Corps of Upper Canada*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008.