



# Richard Pierpoint

## Heritage Minute Learning Tool



### Introduction

This learning tool complements **The Historica-Dominion Institute's** Richard Pierpoint Heritage Minute by exploring his life and the experiences and contributions of Black soldiers in the War of 1812. The Bicentennial of the War of 1812 provides an opportunity for Canadians to gain a deeper understanding of the role of **Black Loyalists** in this war. Securing freedom was an important factor for the participation of Black people in the War of 1812. An American victory would jeopardize the rights that free Blacks had under British law in British North America (now Canada) and threaten a return to slavery for them.

Richard Pierpoint brings a petition before a British officer in the Heritage Minute dedicated to him.



In 1793, Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe passed an act to limit slavery in Upper Canada (now Ontario) and called for its gradual **abolition**. When war was declared in 1812, Richard Pierpoint, a Black Loyalist and former slave from the U.S., **petitioned** to form a "Corps of Men of Colour in the Niagara Frontier" to help protect Upper Canada in the armed conflict against the United States.

◊ Richard Pierpoint was 68 when he enlisted to fight in the War of 1812.

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# Black Loyalists

Enslaved African American men enlisted in the British Army to fight in the American Revolution (1775-1783) in exchange for their freedom. After the British were defeated, approximately 3,000 Black Loyalists came to live in British North America. A few dozen Black Loyalists settled across the southern portion of Upper Canada, while thousands settled in what are now the maritime provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

The names of Black settlers who went to eastern Canada from New York City are recorded in the “Book of Negroes,” a 150-page military ledger.

**DID YOU KNOW?** Canadian author Lawrence Hill’s award-winning novel *The Book of Negroes* (2007) was inspired by the experiences of Black Loyalists whose names were recorded in the historical document of the same name.

## Exercise

Conduct research to locate areas of settlement by Black Loyalists, and identify them on a map of modern-day Canada. Start your research using these resources:

*Black Loyalists: Our History, Our People* [blackloyalist.com/canadiandigitalcollection](http://blackloyalist.com/canadiandigitalcollection)

*Canada in the Making: Pioneers and Immigrants (1775-1812)*  
[canadiana.ca/citm/themes/pioneers/pioneers4\\_e.html](http://canadiana.ca/citm/themes/pioneers/pioneers4_e.html)

*The Freedom Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* by Daniel G. Hill (Toronto: Irwin Publishing Inc., 1981)

For a history of slavery and early Black settlement in Canada, search these websites:

[blackhistorycanada.ca](http://blackhistorycanada.ca) and [civilization.ca](http://civilization.ca)

For tips on how to analyze a primary source such as the “Book of Negroes,” visit: [Historica-Dominion.ca/1812](http://Historica-Dominion.ca/1812)



Artist applies makeup to actor before his scene.



Actors playing Black Loyalists on the way to battle in the Richard Pierpoint Heritage Minute.

## Who was Richard Pierpoint?

The man we know as Richard Pierpoint was kidnapped in Bondou (now part of Senegal, West Africa) in 1760 and sold into slavery in the United States when he was 16 years old. The name Richard was given to him and his last name was likely his owner’s. His birth name is not known. During the American Revolution, Pierpoint enlisted with Butler’s Rangers. His military service came with a promise of freedom for enslaved Blacks who fought in support of the British Crown.

When the war ended, Pierpoint, along with other Loyalists, both Black and White, migrated to Upper Canada. For his military service, he received a 200-acre land grant (free land from the government) in Grantham, a township in the Niagara region. In 1794, Richard was one of 19 free African men who unsuccessfully requested land plots beside one another in order to form a close community of mutual help and support.

## Richard Pierpoint and the War of 1812

At the age of 68, Pierpoint presented the government with the signatures of Black men he had recruited to form a militia company to defend Upper Canada during the War of 1812. The idea was initially turned down, but soon an all-Black militia, commanded by a white officer named Captain Robert Runchey, was started in Niagara. Pierpoint and his men were joined by soldiers from across Upper Canada, forming the new unit. They were known as “Runchey’s Company of Coloured Men,” and later the Coloured Corps.

The Coloured Corps fought in several battles including at Queenston Heights on October 13, 1812, where they were among the first reinforcements to arrive and help take the Heights back from the Americans. After 1812, the Corps was assigned to rebuild destroyed forts throughout the Niagara region and to construct the new Fort Mississauga. The stories of the approximately 40 soldiers who made up the Coloured Corps are not well known. They can be identified by name – though often only by their adopted names – but their personal stories and contributions have been lost or forgotten.

Richard Pierpoint - Soldier by Meredith Blackmore, 2012.  
Courtesy of the Wellington County Museum and Archives.



## The War Veteran's Role in his Community

In 1821, an elderly Richard Pierpoint petitioned the Government of Upper Canada to be given passage to Senegal so that he might live out the rest of his life in his homeland. The petition was rejected; and he was awarded another land grant, this time in Garafraxa Township (near present-day Fergus, Ontario).

In Garafraxa, he cleared his land and played an important role as an elder in the area's growing Black community. By 1826, the now 82-year-old Pierpoint had built a cabin and fulfilled other settlement requirements, with community assistance, to permanently own the land. He died around 1838, and the Black community he helped create eventually dispersed.

## Perspectives

An examination of the diverse perspectives of a historical event or issue is important in developing a better understanding of a particular time and place in history.

### Activity

1. Primary documents, like the "Book of Negroes" and personal journals, are items created by people during the time period. Few documents exist from the perspective of Black Loyalists. Write a fictional journal entry, in the first person, as a Black Loyalist telling the story about a part of your life.
2. Using the PBS source below, *Black Sailors and Soldiers in the War of 1812*, record some information about the life of a Black soldier fighting on the American side. Describe any similarities and differences with the experiences of Black militiamen who fought for British North America. [pbs.org/wned/war-of-1812/essays/black-soldiers-and-sailors-war-of-1812](https://www.pbs.org/wned/war-of-1812/essays/black-soldiers-and-sailors-war-of-1812)
3. Richard Pierpoint gained his new name at some point after his departure from Africa, likely from his slave owner. Write a journal entry from his perspective on how he would have felt about his new name.

## Oral Traditions

According to oral history in the Black Canadian community, Richard Pierpoint was a skilled storyteller. He travelled around Upper Canada with his friend "Deaf Moses" before and after the War of 1812, memorizing the stories of Black Loyalists they met along the way. It is believed that Pierpoint associated a person's story with a unique pebble. He could re-tell the stories by pulling a pebble from his pouch and remembering each story. In the Richard Pierpoint Heritage Minute, Pierpoint receives a pebble after his enslavement and later passes that pebble to his fellow soldier, Deaf Moses. Watch the Minute again; can you see the pebble changing hands?

In West African cultures, storytellers, referred to by the French word *griot*, memorize, preserve and share the histories of families and communities. Pierpoint may have talked about his lost family in Bondu, the horrific **Middle Passage** to the Americas, the experiences of enslaved Africans in the United States, or the life of an 18th and early 19th century soldier.

### Activity

1. Recount a special event or memory about your family through a story. Share it with your class.
2. Do you remember stories from your family's history that you were told from your parents' or grandparents' memories? What value do you think this kind of storytelling has?
3. If not a stone, what object would you use to symbolize the important stories you wanted to remember and why?



🎬 **Richard Pierpoint - Settler** by Meredith Blackmore, 2012. Courtesy of the Wellington County Museum and Archives.

## Definitions

### Black Loyalist

Enslaved Africans who obtained freedom in return for fighting for the British during the American Revolution.

### Abolition

The act of ending the practice of slavery.

### Petition

A written request made to government supported by the signatures of numerous people.

### Middle Passage

The voyage taken by captive Africans across the Atlantic Ocean from the west coast of Africa to the Americas.

For a list of primary and secondary resources, visit:

[Historica-Dominion.ca/1812](https://www.historica-dominion.ca/1812)

## Black Canadians in Military Service

People of African descent have a long history of military service in Canada. They have enlisted in the military to protect British North American and Canadian interests in every major conflict since the War of 1812. Many served in racially segregated units until the Second World War when the Canadian military became fully integrated. Research the involvement of Black Canadians in these conflicts or one of these all-Black companies:

- War of 1812
- Upper Canada Rebellions of 1837
- The Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps (African Rifles), 1861-1865
- First World War (No. 2 Construction Battalion)
- Second World War

### Discussion Questions

1. How was their fight in each conflict also a battle against racism?
2. Why do you think Black Canadians continued to serve in the Canadian military even though they encountered obstacles to do so?
3. Compare the experiences of Black soldiers in the different conflicts. What was similar? What was different?

To hear the stories of Black Second World War veterans such as Leonard Braithwaite, visit The Memory Project Archive at [TheMemoryProject.com](http://TheMemoryProject.com).

## Citizenship and Immigration

People of African descent in Upper Canada held different social statuses before, during and after the War of 1812. There were enslaved Africans in Upper Canada who were considered to be personal property and had no legal rights even after the war. Due to their race, even free Blacks had only limited rights. Incoming refugees from American slavery continued to migrate to Upper Canada after the War of 1812, launching the start of the Underground Railroad movement. Under Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe's 1793 Act to Limit Slavery, no new slaves could be brought into Upper Canada. It wasn't until 1819, however, that Attorney General John Beverly Robinson declared that any Black person living in Upper Canada was automatically free.

Despite their difference in status, early Black settlers worked to create communities while also battling the racial discrimination that threatened their rights and freedoms.

### Activity

1. Watch the Richard Pierpoint Heritage Minute, and then analyze Pierpoint's motivation to join the war. How does it affirm his citizenship and reinforce his place in his community?
2. Identify some Black Canadians who were active citizens in their communities. Describe their occupations, roles, responsibilities, obstacles and accomplishments.

## Media Literacy

Media literacy is the ability to critically analyze the messages that are communicated through mass communications like television, radio and the Internet. Given the power and influence of the media today, it is more important than ever to understand how to view it critically. Watch the Richard Pierpoint Heritage Minute and then consider the questions below.

1. Identify your favourite section of the Minute. Explain to your class why this scene had the strongest impact on you.
2. How does the music enhance the mood of the Richard Pierpoint Heritage Minute?
3. Take a look at the "before and after" images on the right of this page. When we seek to reconstruct the past using digital technology for mediums such as television, what factors do we need to consider to make sure they are historically accurate?

## Making of the Minute

For an activity on "How to Make Your Own Heritage Minute," to watch the Richard Pierpoint Heritage Minute, and to view behind-the-scenes extras on the making of the Minute, visit [Historica-Dominion.ca/1812](http://Historica-Dominion.ca/1812).

**BEFORE** ◊  
Heritage Minute footage shot at Westfield Heritage Village, Ontario.



◊ **AFTER** ◊  
CGI effects turn these images into Bondu, Senegal.

