Charting the Loyalist Migrations: Digital Public History, Shared Authority, and Descendant Communities

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The American Revolution, (1775-1783), was a civil war that divided communities and displaced thousands of people in North America. Perhaps 60 000 people left the United States in the conflict’s aftermath to settle in what is today Canada, the Caribbean, and in other parts of the British Empire.¹ Loyalist Migrations, (loyalistmigrations.ca), is a spatial history project that uses ArcGIS to trace these journeys.² It is also an experiment in collaborative public history research. The project, now in its initial phase, is a partnership between the Huron Community History Centre, the Map and Data Centre at Western Libraries, and the United Empire Loyalist Association of Canada (UELAC). The UELAC has generously provided funding for two student researchers at Huron University College and has shared their Loyalist Directory as an initial dataset for the project. Loyalist Migrations has multiple goals. We are drawing upon a variety of archival, scholarly, and genealogical sources, to visualize the scope and diversity of the migrations for public audiences and, in the years to come, we will provide new research and analysis based on this data. We also hope to demonstrate ways in which university-based historians can cooperate with genealogists and family history-keepers to share in the production of history.

¹ For a good overview of the history of the loyalists and their migrations, see Maya Jasanoff, Liberty’s Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World (New York: Knopf, 2011).
² In addition to ArcGIS Pro, we are using ArcGIS Online, Survey123 for ArcGIS, Dashboards, and Hub Sites. For an overview of historical GIS see Ian N. Gregory and Alistair Geddes, Toward Spatial Humanities: Historical GIS and Spatial History (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014). Our project was inspired and influenced by many spatial history projects such as Stanford University’s Spatial History Project and the Tennessee State Archives Patriot Paths.
Our starting dataset is the Loyalist Directory, a list of over 9000 entries for families and individuals collected by the UELAC membership. Many of the most detailed entries come from decades of research conducted by family historians. Genealogy is a widespread pursuit, but organizations like the UELAC maintain rigorous standards for proving direct descent from a loyalist who served during the American Revolution. This is a legacy of Britain’s attempt in 1789 to distinguish bona fide loyalists from other settlers by recording them on lists and awarding the special post-nominal letters “U.E.” for “Unity of Empire.” This distinction provided some preferential treatment at the time and remains a matter a pride for some members. Loyalist descendants can apply to the UELAC with their researched lineage, constructed by scouring court and church records, land registries, and other sources that hold vital information for individual families. This work is then vetted by other UELAC members and the research is filed with the main branch in Toronto. Taken together, the Directory provides an exciting opportunity. It would take a single researcher, or team of historians, lifetimes to trace the threads of the individual families found in these different records. The Directory is a remarkable achievement and is a testament to the abilities of citizen historians and loyalist descendants to trace and preserve their family histories.

The initial phase of Loyalist Migrations is therefore not simply a form of crowdsourcing, but a collaboration that relies on the work of family historians. It is also an attempt to build mutual trust between genealogists and academia. Attitudes have changed considerably, but in the past university-based historians could be dismissive of genealogists and their goals, interests, and

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approaches to the research. Genealogists were sometimes disparaged as antiquarians who collected facts without any concern for interpretation or synthesis, or they were suspected of seeking to prove some kind of ancestral privilege or superiority over newer arrivals in Canada.\(^4\) Indeed the proponents of the loyalist myth or tradition in nineteenth and early twentieth century Canada are described by Norman Knowles as a collection of “filiopietistic descendants, political propagandists, status-conscious, middle-class professionals” and others who “sought to establish continuity with the Loyalist past to legitimize and perpetuate particular points of view, to inculcate social values, and to promote claims to status and recognition.”\(^5\) Devotion to the loyalist myth waned long ago, but some descendants still find this characterization of loyalist genealogy jarring. In the introduction to her guide to tracing loyalist ancestry, genealogist Barbara Dougall Merriman reported that the portrayal of the UELAC as “filiopietistic” left her “grinding my teeth.”\(^6\)

This project is influenced and informed by historian Michael Frisch’s term: “shared authority.” A champion and practitioner of oral history, Frisch coined the term as an instruction to historians not to treat interviewees simply as sources to be mined, but as co-creators of historical narratives. This concept is applicable for all public historians who need to be conscious of and respect “the very real authority their audiences bring” to “promote a more democratized and widely shared historical consciousness, consequently encouraging broader participation in debates about history.”\(^7\) Shared authority has been part of public and oral history discourse ever


\(^6\) Brenda Dougall Merriman, *United Empire Loyalists: A Guide to Tracing Loyalist Ancestors in Upper Canada* (Campbellville, ON: Global Heritage Press, 2006), 2. Merriman’s guide to research guide is practical and clear and has valuable insights that would serve any researcher of Upper Canada well.

since, and the explosion of participatory culture online has expanded this idea even further.

Historians now collect personal reflections, visual material, and memories of historical events even as they unfold. As Frisch reminds us, the authority to interpret history, by its nature, is already shared. Historians “are called not so much to ‘share authority’ as to respect and attend to this definitional quality.” Loyalist Migrations does not set out to gather personal memories, photos, or other impressions of the past, but to visualize the collective results of research carried out by a descendant community. Our team vets the Directory entries and submissions we receive to ensure citations and check details, but we are aware that the family historians are the experts on these migration stories, and, they are very often authorities on the history of regiments, land allocations, surveys, and the other details of the loyalist settlements.

We have almost been overwhelmed with the positive response from UELAC membership. While we work through the entries in the directory, we are encouraging genealogists, historians, and researchers to contribute to the project by submitting a loyalist, refugee, or migrant using an online form to help us flesh out the details of each. Over 100 members have reached out using the online form or through email to share the details of their ancestors so far this year. We have also experienced descendants rapping our digital knuckles for typos and errors in their ancestor’s entry and this is exactly what we hoped. The descendants not only provide the material we need to build the map but the enthusiasm and knowledge to help us maintain it.

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8 See for example the special feature issue of The Oral History Review, Vol. 30, No. 1, (Winter, 2003). Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, eds. Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World (Philadelphia: Pew Centre for Arts and Heritage, 2011). Examples of memory projects include The Roy Rosenzweig Centre for History and New Media’s The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank and the September 11 Digital Archive. There are also current ongoing examples of memory collection for the Covid-19 Pandemic.

9 Michael Frisch, “From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back,” in Adair et al., Letting Go?, 127.
Charting the Migration

The loyalist migrations are a natural fit for spatial history, and like all spatial history projects this a collaborative effort.\(^\text{10}\) Liz Sutherland, GIS specialist with the Map and Data Centre at Western, led the development of the site and guides the team in their work with the ArcGIS platform. Each journey is first transferred from the Loyalist Directory or other source to an Excel spreadsheet where the details are vetted and organized. The journeys are divided into 6 possible geolocated events including place of birth, place of settlement before the war, place of refuge during the war, (often where the loyalist fled after being forced from their home), place of refuge after the war (such as a refugee camp in Canada), place settled after war, and place of death. While there are doubtlessly other events in the journeys, we concluded these six would be sufficient to show the general flow of the movement. Not all family histories include all six events, (most have only two or three and the dates are often sketchy), but they still provide a sufficient foundation to begin forming a picture of the migrations.

At first glance, (see figure 1), the visualization of human movement on the map is already a little overwhelming, and these lines account for only a small percentage of the total we hope to plot.\(^\text{11}\) Each line represents an individual or a family and users can click on a line or point to reveal a small snippet of lives turned upside down by war and displacement. We may never be able to plot every migrant, and the details for each entry will be tantalizingly brief, but we will do our best to ensure that diversity of the migrations is represented.


\(^\text{11}\) It is doubtful we will plot all 9340 entries in the Loyalist Directory. Not all of them are detailed enough and there are individuals who appear in more than one place (i.e. a son who appears listed in one family and then again as an individual settler).
Figure 1 Screenshot of the full map as of May 25, 2020

For example, the entry for Philip George Bender (figure 2) and his family demonstrates some of the potential and the limitations of the map. According to the entry, Bender was born somewhere in Germany in 1743 and emigrated to the Thirteen Colonies before the Revolution. He fled his Philadelphia home in 1776 and joined Butler’s Rangers on the frontier. He later resettled in the Niagara region of Upper Canada with his wife, Mary, and at least three children. The single line on the map represents the movement of a whole family of five.12

We are conscious that the lines on the map may replicate the patriarchal thinking and practices of the period. The official documents used to trace the loyalist journeys often focus on

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12 Philip George Bender’s entry in the Loyalist Directory provides specific details and sources: http://www.uelac.org/Loyalist-Info/detail.php?letter=b&line=233
the male householder and his services to the Crown. We do not know Mary’s family name nor her place of birth, and there is nothing to indicate what she may have thought about the Revolution or her husband’s allegiance. As Kacy Tillman writes, a variety of perspectives and motivations “were scripted as loyalism, often against the so-called loyalist’s will.”  

While this map includes loyalist soldiers, it will also plot the movement of enslaved and free African Americas, Indigenous people, and many others who had their own reasons for leaving the United States and not all of them left willingly. It is therefore not the intention of this project to ascribe political motivations to the refugees, migrants, and exiles plotted on the map, simply to demonstrate their movement.

![Map of loyalist movements](image)

**Figure 2 The Journey of Philip Bender and Family**

An entry like the twice-widowed Elizabeth Cline (figure 3) helps us flesh out the map. Cline, also a German migrant, arrived in America with her husband in 1765 and settled in what is

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today German Flatts, New York. Her husband, though not a soldier, was killed during the Revolution and she fled to British protection on Carleton Island in the St. Lawrence. Why she felt compelled to leave her home is not clear, though family lore records that her husband was killed for his loyalism. While at the British camp she married a Hessian soldier and settled near Kingston, Ontario in 1781, where she lived until her husband died in 1796. She later resettled further up the St. Lawrence. She did all of this with seven daughters in tow, the youngest born in 1781. This information was gathered from church records, land petitions, and notations in the family bible and presented as proof of loyalist descent to the UELAC. Though a brief entry, it reveals a poignant family story that would have remained unknown had it not been uncovered and shared by her descendants.\footnote{Elizabeth Cline’s entry in the Loyalist Directory was contributed by Don Brearley and Christopher Plante.}
Future Goals

We have several goals for Loyalist Migrations. We hope that it will eventually provide a significant contribution to the historiography of the loyalists in the American Revolution, that it will serve as an accessible visualization for public audiences, and that it will encourage or facilitate further cooperation and connections between researchers, institutions, and communities.

Historical GIS, in the past, was heavily focused on quantitative research. When this project was initially conceived, we thought that one of its potential contributions would be to shed light on the question of how many people left the United States in 1783. Past estimates have ranged up to 80,000, but historians tend to accept that perhaps 60,000 people left the US. Philip Ranlet offers a more conservative estimate of 20,000 and casts doubt on the British passenger records and other documents used to arrive at the 60,000 figure. It is clear, however, that the documentation is probably too spotty after 235 years to make any conclusive count. Yet by working with a variety of sources, including the entries in the Loyalist Directory, it already appears that the 20,000 estimate is too low. Aside from that tentative observation, we do not intend to weigh into the quantitative debate, but rather use the affordances of ArcGIS to visualize the scope of the migrations and keep an open mind about what we might find.

More broadly, we hope that this project might foster more cooperation between communities by discovering long-severed connections. The initial idea for this project formed many years ago while Compeau was on a research trip, tracing Upper Canadian loyalists to their Connecticut homeland. A scrap book of Litchfield, Connecticut’s founding centennial in 1851

contained a newspaper article that celebrated the patriotism of the town that “never furnished the enemy with any Tories.”16 The author would have been surprised to see the extensive archival evidence of Connecticut’s loyalists. Rather than an attempt to cover up the past, the clipping is a testament to the successful process of forgetting common across the United States in the aftermath of the American Revolution. Most loyalist families that remained in the United States, as well as their patriot neighbours, were eager to forget their divisions in the war and get on with their lives.17 The thousands of other loyalists who migrated north to Canada or elsewhere in the British Empire gradually lost touch with their homelands and all but the most prominent (or infamous) loyalists faded from American popular memory. From this research trip, museums in Connecticut and Ontario connected and pieced together a shared but forgotten history.18 We hope this map might reveal more lost stories and present new opportunities for transnational public history.

The loyalist refugees and migrants who fled the Revolution represent a shared North American and Atlantic history. Loyalist Migrations is an opportunity to engage in transnational research and collaborative public history. This spatial history project will hopefully provide a significant contribution to loyalist history, but it is also a project that recognizes history as everyone’s business. The conflict, followed by two centuries of collective forgetting and mythmaking, buried thousands of local and family connections between Canada, the United States, and the wider Atlantic World. Through cooperation and collaboration between, we hope to build a detailed picture of the migrations and help reconnect the threads of our shared history.


17 For example, see Rebecca Brannon, From Revolution to Reunion: The Reintegration of the South Carolina Loyalists (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016).