

## **Nova Scotia's Position during the American Revolution**

by: Frank Norman Robitza

In 1773, Britain watched as the people of Boston dumped 10,000 pounds of tea into the Boston Harbor. The Coercive Act was immediately passed in England. Boston Harbor was closed and the government of Massachusetts was turned over to the British. This made the people of the thirteen colonies, now known as the United States of America, extraordinarily irate. Boston Harbor was the most important commercial port in the area and having the British forcefully close it was like the proverbial "last straw".

In 1774, representatives from the thirteen colonies met at the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia. They were there to make decisions on what should be done in reciprocation to the Coercive Act. The Congress agreed that British Parliament had no right to tax the people of the colonies and a ban was placed on all British trade. They, however, refused to finance a military, and to go to war against Britain.

One year later, the British marched on Concord to take the American political leaders prisoner. They met American forces at Lexington, half way between Boston Harbor and Concord, and the first battle of what would become America's plight for Independence took place. The American colonies of British North America revolted but two colonies did not. The northern colonies of Quebec and Nova Scotia remain neutral in the war. Quebec was prospering under British rule, revolting would have been an unwise decision, neutrality was a wiser position. However, Nova Scotia was a different story. Why did it remain neutral during this important time in the history of the continent of North America?

The Colony of Nova Scotia, at that time, consisted of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. The area was populated by people from all walks of life; farmers, fisherman, doctors, lawyers, shopkeepers, craftsmen, the working poor, and so on; lived in communities spread throughout the colony. When the Revolution began, several of these people were placed in a very delicate position.<sup>(1)</sup> About one half of the population of Nova Scotia, nearly 20,000 people were born or has previously lived in New England.<sup>(2)</sup> These "Neutral Yankees" sympathized with the colonies to the south but refused to get involved in the revolution against the British. These former citizens of the thirteen colonies to the south were granted some of the best plots of land along the coasts of Nova Scotia. The land was put to great use employing Nova Scotians and boosting the colony's economy. The Legislative Assembly of Nova Scotia was made of a huge amount of people that were formerly American citizens.<sup>(3)</sup> With so much power and prestige given to these people it would have been a dreadful error for them to turn against the people who made it possible for them to be in the positions that they now held. As tensions increased and the war raged on, more people immigrated to the neutral colony. Loyalists from throughout the United States, as well as, British settlers moved to Nova Scotia calling her their new home. This increased the population of loyalists in Nova Scotia and strengthened the neutral ideology.

Even if the people of Nova Scotia wished to join the Revolution it would have been difficult. They were unorganized and there was virtually no communication among the settlements. The people relied on the sea for its food and for trade. They lived in communities along the coast to be close to the trade routes and for the vast food supply offered by the Atlantic. The only way for the communities to communicate was to travel, by boat, along the coastline or to trek across the land through rough terrain. There were few roads through Nova Scotia as the land was too rough and it "defied the road makers".<sup>(4)</sup> The citizens of Yarmouth, argued this as their reason "to be Neuter during the war."<sup>(5)</sup> They petitioned the Governor and assured him that they did not want to help the Americans. Many of them being originally from New England said " they were torn between affection to our nearest relations and good Faith and Friendship to our King and Country."<sup>(6)</sup> They also stated that they were "few in number" and "scattered up and down the woods." <sup>(7)</sup>

General George Washington and Congress refused to attack Nova Scotia during the war because it wasn't of much value and didn't possess a threat. Washington said, "to attack them therefore is a Measure of Conquest rather than Defense."<sup>(8)</sup> But this didn't stop the New England Privateers, who took advantage of the Nova Scotians who lived along the Atlantic Coast. Several successful raids made the New Englanders realize that Nova Scotia was more valuable to loot.<sup>(9)</sup> The economy of Nova Scotia took a huge decline due to the raids. Prices on food raised to ridiculous amounts and the people's dependents on Britain increased.<sup>(10)</sup>

The religious revival in the American colonies known as the Great Awakening took place between 1720 and 1760. Men travelled the colonies and preached to massive congregations of people of several different religious beliefs. The Great Awakening was a powerful religious revival in the United States at that time. And it was just as powerful to the Nova Scotians when it came north in 1760, around the same time that it ended in the United States. The Great Awakening lasted in the colony until 1791.<sup>(11)</sup>

The earlier American version of the Great Awakening had, George Whitefield while the Nova Scotian Great Awakening had Henry Alline. Alline was born in Rhode Island, he was a member of the Congregational Church and was living in Nova Scotia.<sup>(12)</sup> When Alline was twenty-eight years old, he travelled throughout Nova Scotia preaching to the townships. Slowly the communities began to unite as religion became the main topic of conversation in Nova Scotia. Alline's popularity reached amazing heights by 1783, he had become the "undisputed leader" of the revival in all of the "out settlements".<sup>(13)</sup> The idea of Republicanism that was the main topic in American held no interest with the people of Nova Scotia. Alline's preaching made them view the New Englanders as being wrong for their war with Britain. Alline told the people in Nova Scotia that they were doing God's Will by remaining neutral. The war was considered an "illegal and sinful undertaking" by Alline and his followers.<sup>(14)</sup> Alline was approached by the militia to join forces with them, but he refused saying, "War is a sad consequence of the Fall of man and his subsequent apostasy."<sup>(15)</sup> The Great Awakening unite the Americans living in Nova Scotia to the people of Nova Scotia. They now were one, in a "new identity" as Nova Scotians.<sup>(16)</sup>

The War for Independence ended around 1783, with the United States winning its freedom from the British. Nova Scotia remained neutral for the eight years of fighting, even though they had strong ties with New England. The pull to join family members who lived in the United States in their fight for freedom was not strong enough for them to turn against their King. To revolt after all that the crown had given them would have been wrong. Nova Scotia was a disorganized land mass that had few road ways and the people were not prepared to fight against the British. The economy of Nova Scotia was in disarray due to raiders from New England who looted much of the coastal townships forcing the price of food to rise. This in turn forced the people of the colony to rely more on Britain for support. Henry Alline preached neutrality to the mass congregations during the Great Awakening. This united the Nova Scotians in a single attitude, it was wrong to revolt against the British. A colony so close to the fighting; so much like the colonies to the south; but one thing was different about Nova Scotia, it was neutral during the American Revolution.

1. Allison, David, M.A., LL.D., History of Nova Scotia. (Halifax, N.S.: A.W. Bowen & Co., 1916) p. 485.
2. Wilms, Bill J., Nova Scotia during the American Revolution, for The American Revolution: An .HTML project. (Internet site: <http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/E/novascotia/scotiaxx.htm>, 1997) p. 1.
3. Allison, History of Nova Scotia. pp. 485 - 486.

4. Wilms, Nova Scotia during the American Revolution. p. 2.
5. Brebner, John Bartlett, The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia. (McClellan and Steward Ltd., Toronto, ON. 1937.)
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid, pp. 87-92.
9. Leamon, James D., Revolution Downeast, The War for American Independence in Maine. (The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Mass. 1993.) pp. 102-103.
10. Ibid.
11. Wilms, Nova Scotia during the American Revolution. p. 1.
12. Ibid, p. 3.
13. Ibid, p. 4.
14. Ibid, p. 5.
15. Ibid, p. 5.
16. Ibid, p. 6.

## **Bibliography**

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Allison argues that a many of the people living in Nova Scotia at the time of the Revolution were from New England, and they were thankful for the land that they received from Britain.

Leamon, James D.; Revolution Downeast, The War for American Independence in Maine. (The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Mass. 1993.)

Leamon discussed the significance of Massachusetts in the War for Independence. He discusses Nova Scotia's contacts, good and bad, with the colony.

Brebner, John Bartlett, The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia. (McClellan and Steward Ltd, Toronto, ON. 1937.)

Brebner argues the reasons why Nova Scotia did not become the fourteenth colony to revolt against Britain.

Wilms, Bill J.; Nova Scotia during the American Revolution. (World Wide Web

WILMS, D.H.J., NOVA SCOTIA DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION. (WORLD WIDE WEB, <http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/E/novascotia/scotiaxx.htm>. 1997)

Wilms discusses how the religious revival in Nova Scotia brought on by Henry Alline and how this effected the people's views on the war.

Lanctot, Gustave; Canada & the American Revolution. (Clarke, Irwin & Company Ltd, Toronto, ON. 1967.)

Lanctot discusses several different aspects of the American Revolution and its effects on Canada. Including the mass immigration of Americans refugees to Nova Scotia.