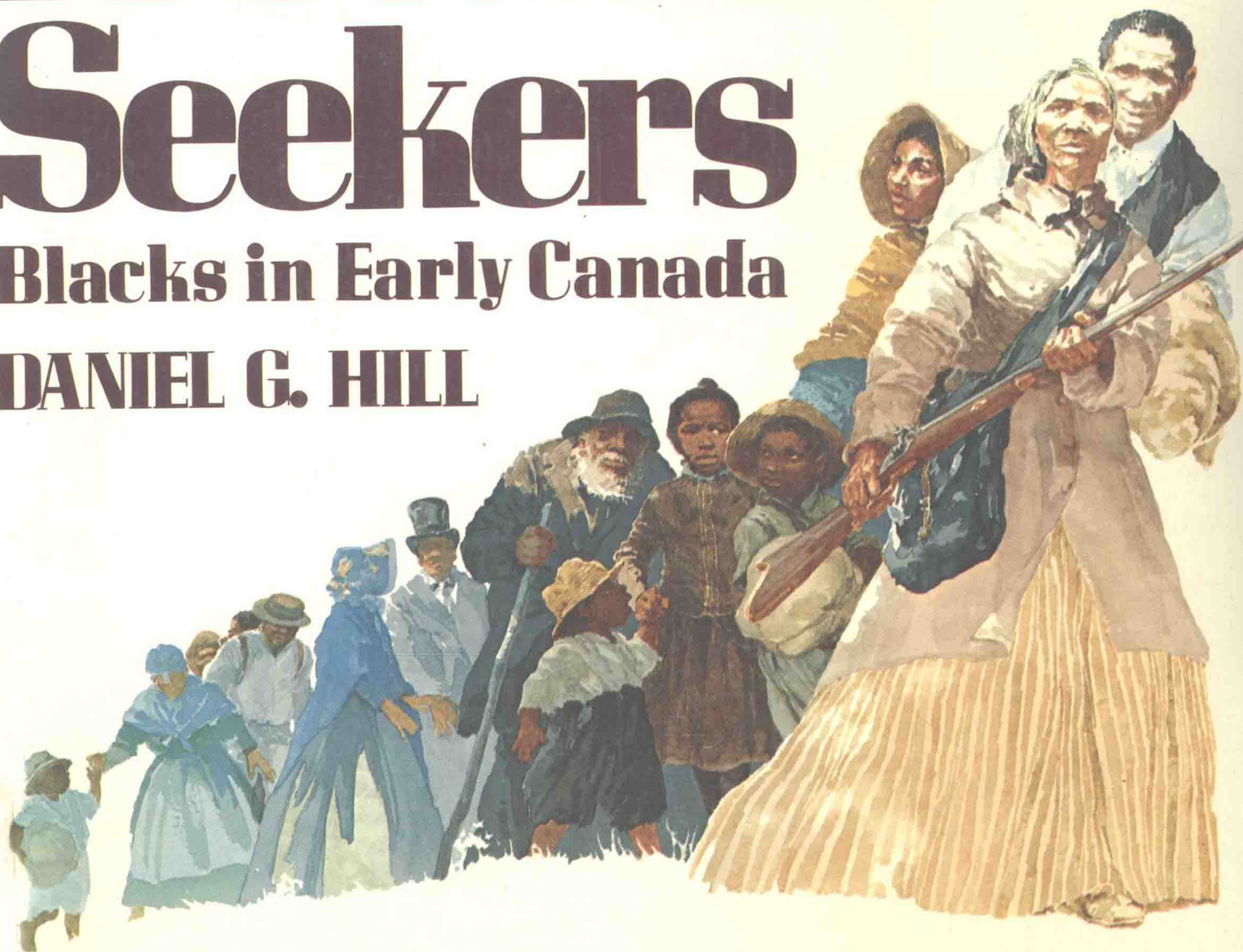


The Freedom- Seekers

Blacks in Early Canada

DANIEL G. HILL



Seekers

in Early Canada

Daniel G. Hill

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Agincourt, Canada

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*To my parents,
Daniel G. Hill & May E. Hill,
my wife, Donna Hill,
and our children
Dan, Larry and Karen.*

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D.G.H.
Don Mills, 1981.

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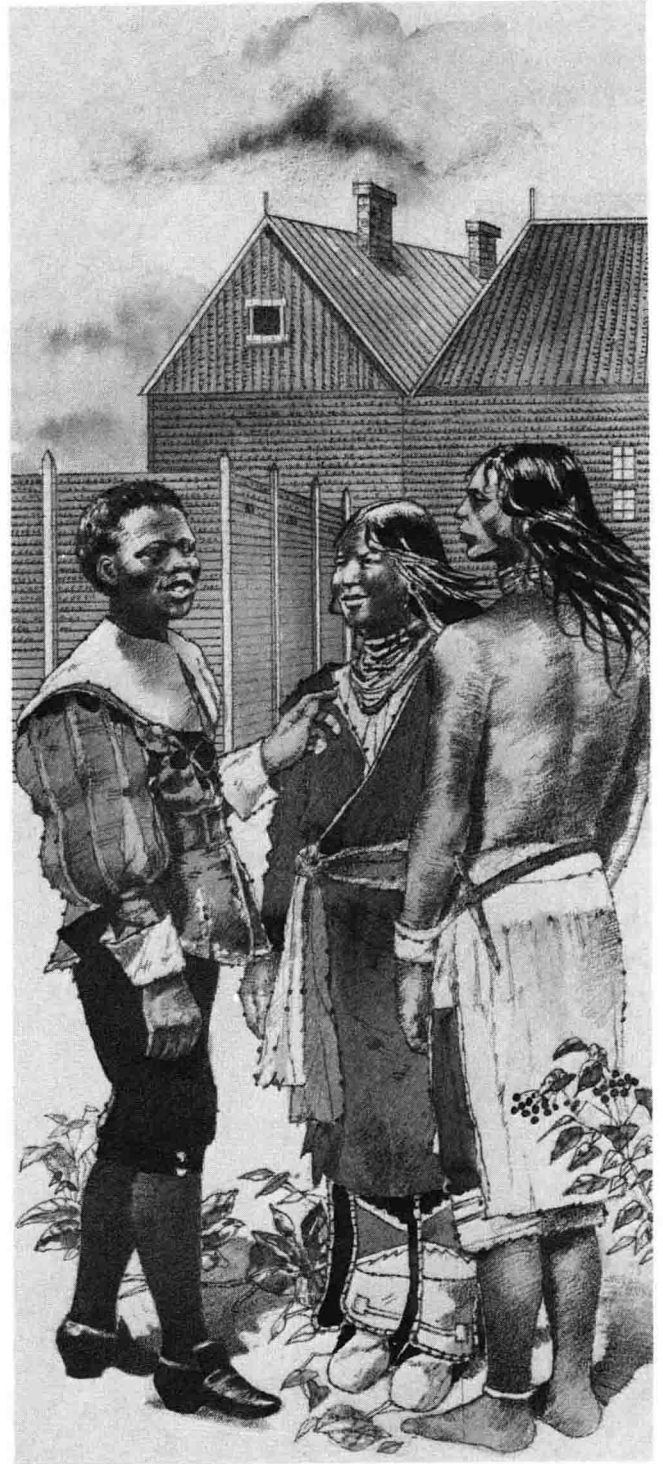
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The Freedom~Seekers

Blacks in Early Canada

1

Slaves and Slave-Holders



The French Régime

IN THE YEAR 1628 a British ship sailed up the St. Lawrence River to New France. It carried in its cargo a lone Black child from Madagascar. This six-year-old was the property of David Kirke, a famous privateer who, with the blessing of King Charles I, was making raids on the young French colony. The child from Africa was the first known Black resident of Canada.¹ He came as a slave.

In that same year Kirke and his brothers captured the first convoy of settlers and supplies sent out to Canada by the newly formed Company of New France.² The following year David Kirke captured Québec City from its founder, Samuel de Champlain. We know little about the life of the small Black slave who witnessed the struggle for control of Canada-to-be, but David Kirke seems not to have been his master for long. Soon after he took Québec, he left the colony in the hands of his brother Lewis. Before he himself returned to England, he sold his little slave for 50 half-crowns to a French clerk, Le Baillif. The clerk sold the child to Champlain's master-builder, Guillaume Couillard,³ who saw to it that he was taught his catechism.

By the terms of the Treaty of St-Germain-en-Laye, Lewis Kirke handed Québec back to the French in

Mattieu da Costa, though not a permanent resident of Canada, was the first known Black to set foot on Canadian soil. He came with the expedition of Pierre de Gua, sieur de Monts, which founded Port Royal in 1605. It is probable that da Costa had spent some time in Canada even earlier, for he served as interpreter for the French Habitation with the friendly Micmacs of the area.

1632. In that same year Father Paul LeJeune arrived from France to become Superior of the Jesuit Order's Canadian mission. The following year he baptized the young slave lad. The child was given the Christian name 'Olivier' in honour of the Company's head clerk, Olivier Letardif, and Father LeJeune's own surname: at his baptism he became 'Olivier LeJeune'.

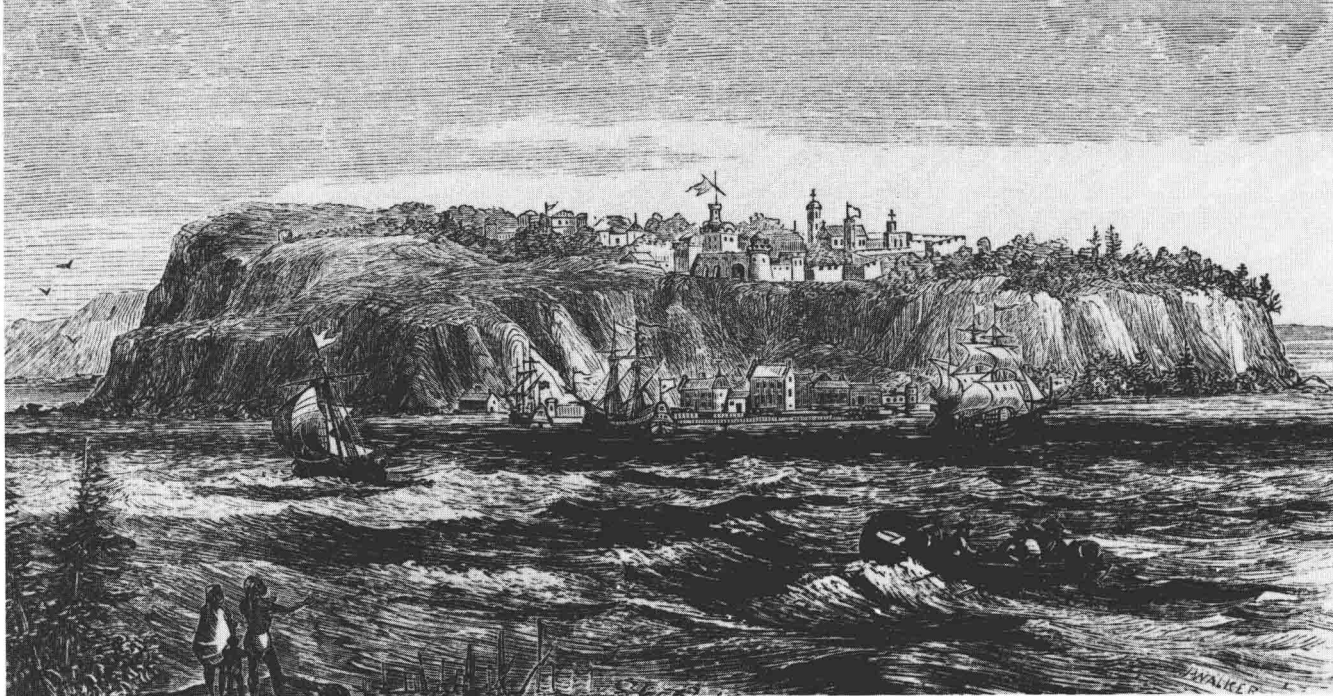
About 1638, shortly before Father LeJeune returned to France, Couillard set Olivier free. He died, still a young man, in 1654. The colony's burial register records that he had been a *domestique*.

In 1663 the Company of New France gave up its charter after 35 years of disastrous rule. King Louis XIV then tried to strengthen the colony. He appointed a governor and an intendant to carry out his wishes. The first intendant, Jean Talon, encouraged farming, mining and fishing. By 1688 the population of New France numbered 9000, but the chief citizens still complained of the shortage of servants and workers. They asked the governor, Jacques-René de Brisay, Marquis of Denonville, and the intendant, Jean Bochart de Champigny, for permission to buy Black slaves "... in the Islands at the arrival of the ships from Guinée [Guinea, West Africa]."

Although the law of France forbade slavery, Louis XIV gave it limited approval in Canada. An official letter informed the colonists on May 1, 1689:

His Majesty finds it good that the inhabitants of Canada import negroes there to take care of their agriculture, but remarks that there is a risk that these negroes, coming from a very different climate, will perish in Canada; the project would then become useless.⁴

After they received the King's permission, the French colonists bought Blacks and 'Panis' [Pawnee Indians]



This engraving shows Québec as it was in 1640 when the young Olivier LeJeune worked in the town as a domestique.

and set them to work as household servants and field-hands.

In 1701 the ambitious fur-trader and colonizer Antoine de Lamothe Cadillac travelled west with 100 French soldiers and settlers to establish Fort Ponchartrain beside the Detroit River. Black slaves were among the first inhabitants of this new fur-trade outpost. They did much of the heavy work of the frontier community, "... for many of the peruked and elegant colonists disdained rough work and, what is more, refused to do very much of it."⁵ At first, in fact, the new French arrivals had tried to enslave Indians to do their heavy work. When they could not hold these wilderness-wise prisoners-of-war bought from local tribes, they turned to Black slaves. They bought them from Southerners who had moved north with their chattels to settle in the Detroit Territory, from Indians who had captured slaves when they raided Southern plantations, and from slave-merchants in the East.

In 1709 Louis XIV gave full permission for the long-standing practice of slavery in New France: he authorized its colonists to own slaves "... in full proprietorship." There were fewer slave-owners in New France than in the neighbouring English colonies to the south, but the attitude to slaves was similar:

Louis XIV, King of France



Often in inventories slaves were enumerated with the animals. A Negro was a slave everywhere and no one was astonished to find him in bondage.⁶

The British Régime

In 1562 Captain John Hawkins was the first Englishman to bring a cargo of slaves to the New World. Over

the next five years he made three trips to Africa to buy slaves. He sold them at a profit in the Spanish American settlements. The first shipload of 20 African slaves to reach British North America was landed at Jamestown, Virginia in 1619.

Almost a century later, in 1713, the French territory of Acadia was ceded to the British by the Treaty of Utrecht. Settlers from New England moved north into the area, which was re-named 'Nova Scotia'. Some

America's first Blacks arrive at Jamestown. They were traded to the colonists for food by the captain of a Dutch ship.



of them may well have brought Black slaves, for slaves helped to build Halifax when it was founded in 1749. Many of these Blacks were skilled tradesmen who were re-sold in the American colonies when they were no longer needed in Halifax. The *Boston Evening Post* of 1751 advertised, for instance:

Just received from Halifax, and to be sold, 10 strong hearty, negro men, mostly tradesmen, such as caulkers, carpenters, sailmakers and ropemakers.⁷

When the British conquered New France in 1760, the slave system of Québec passed smoothly into the British régime. General Jeffrey Amherst of the con-

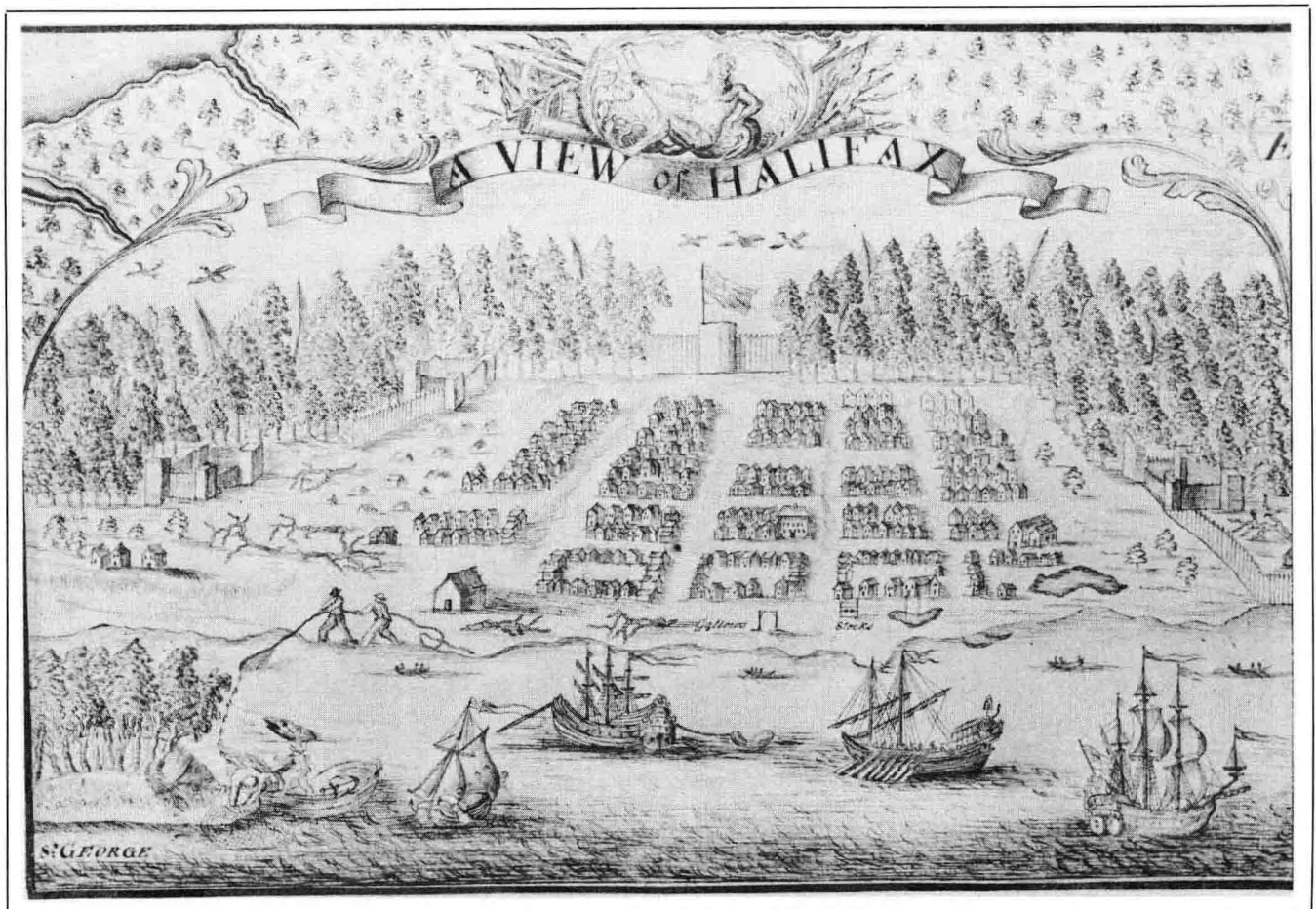
quering British forces assured the Marquis de Vaudreuil, the last governor of New France:

Negroes and panis [Indians] of both sexes shall remain in their quality of slaves in the possession of the French or Canadians to whom they belong; they shall be at liberty to keep them in the colony or sell them ...⁸

This assurance was included in the Articles of Capitulation signed at Montréal. Perhaps the deposed French governor, a slave-owner, found this comforting.

When General James Wolfe died on the Plains of Abraham, General James Murray, who took over his command, became the first British governor of

Halifax in 1750 was surrounded by a palisade and protected by bastions.





The British régime in Canada began in September, 1760. A modern artist, A.S. Scott, has recreated the scene of the ceremonial transfer of power from the French at Montréal.

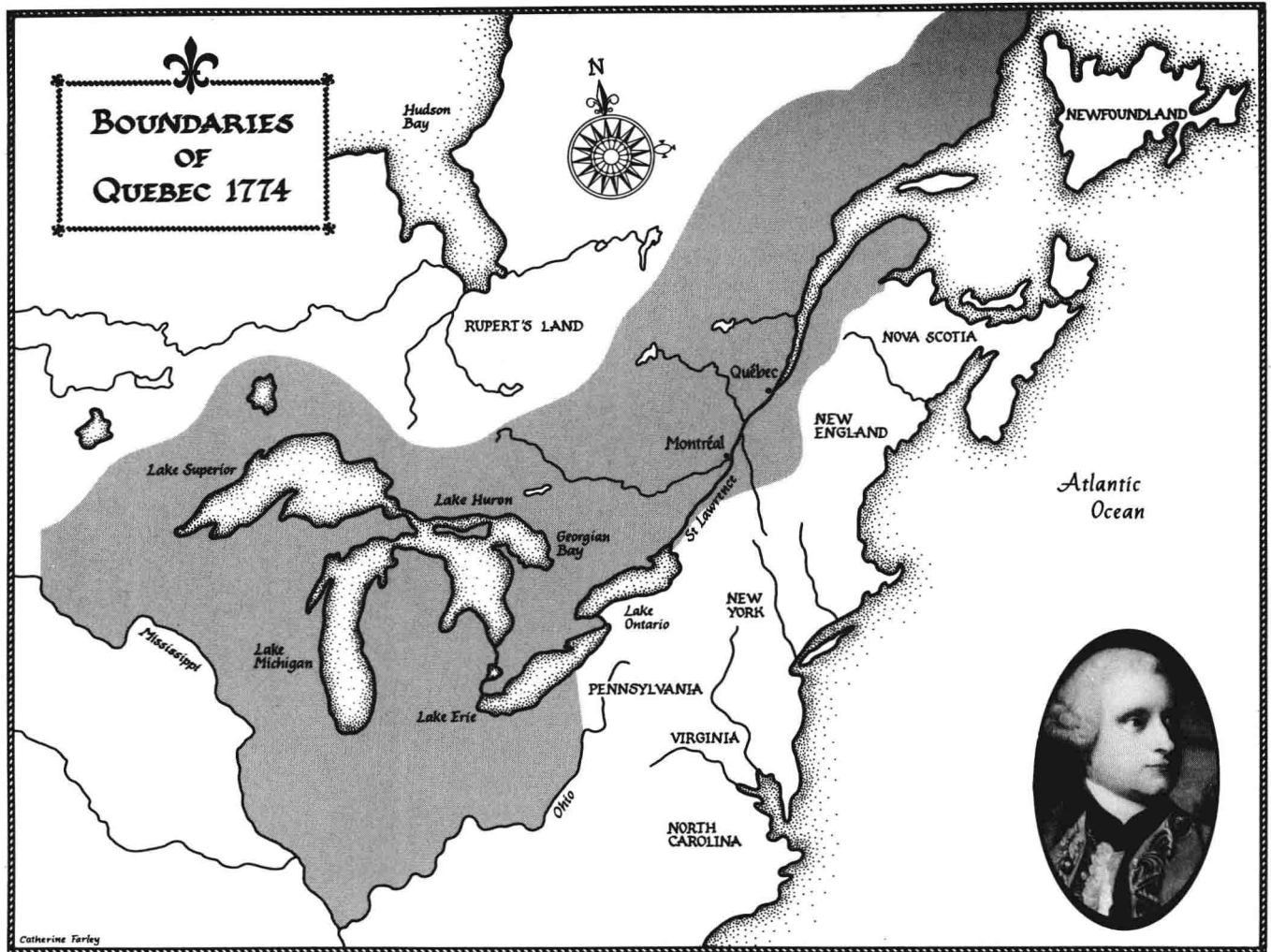
Québec. In November, 1763 Murray sent an urgent request for Black slaves to John Watts of New York:

I must most earnestly entreat your assistance, without servants nothing can be done, had I the inclination to employ soldiers, which is not the case, they would disappoint me, and Canadians will work for nobody but themselves. Black Slaves are certainly the only people to be depended upon, but it is necessary, I imagine, they should be born in one or other of our Northern Colonies, the Winters here will not agree with a Native of the torrid zone, pray therefore if possible procure for me two Stout Young fellows, who have been accustomed to

Country Business, and as I wish to see them happy, I am of the opinion there is little felicity without a Communication with the Ladys, you buy for each a clean young wife, who can wash and do the female offices about a farm, I shall begrudge no price, so hope we may, by your goodness succeed.⁹

It was fashionable for His Majesty's officers to own slaves. Lieutenant-Colonel Christie of His Majesty's 60th Regiment¹⁰ owned Bruce:

... a Negro Servant, Tall, well made with a high nose and very Black Complexion about 35 years of age ...¹¹



On October 7, 1763 the Government of George III issued a Proclamation setting the boundaries in North America of lands ceded to Britain by the Treaty of Paris. This put an end to the Seven Years War in America. The Proclamation created the new British colonies of Québec (including much of later Ontario), Nova Scotia (including later Prince Edward and Cape Breton Islands) and Newfoundland (including most of Labrador, Anticosti Island and the Magdalen Islands).

When the French surrendered Québec to Brigadier-General Sir James Murray (lower right) in 1774, its territory included much of the present provinces of Ontario and Québec.

Possibly because of the American Revolutionary War, Christie expected to be away from Montréal for some time in the summer of 1777. He gave Bruce written permission to support himself by finding work, but made it plain that the slave was not to go very far or to think that he would be set free even if his master died:

The Bearer — Bruce . . . being my property, has my Leave and Permission at his own Request to hyer himself to any Master or Mrs. as a Servant or take any other honest and Lawfull Way of Employing himself for his own Sole benefit and advantage providing he do not Embark on Board of any vessell by Sea or to go beyond

Albany in the Province of New York giving due notice to me or my agent at Montreal from time to time Where he is as often as he Changes places ...

This Leave to be only during my absence from this Province or the Good behaviour of Said Negroe, or till the Same is recal'd verbally or by other notice either from me, My Agent heirs Executors or assigns and no longer, and in no Shape to be construed into any freedom or discharge from Claim of Right or Property of Said Negroe aforesaid.

Given under my hand in Montreal this Thirtieth day of June in the Year one thousand seven hundred and seventy-seven.¹²

Many prominent citizens were also slave-holders. The Reverend David Charbrand Delisle of the Church of England in Montréal¹³ bought a slave named 'Charles' in 1766. Two years later a wealthy North West Company merchant, James McGill¹⁴, bought

... a Negro woman named Sarah, about the age of 25

The advertisement below appeared in The Royal Gazette And The Nova Scotia Advertiser.



DIGBY, 21st JUNE 1792.



RUN AWAY, Joseph Odel and Peter Lawrence (Negroes) from their Masters, and left Digby last evening, the first mentioned is about Twenty four years of Age, five Feet six Inches high, had on a light brown Coat, red Waistcoat and thickset Breeches, but took other Cloaths with him, he is a likely young Fellow with remarkable white Teeth.—The other is about five Feet eight Inches high, very Black, had on lightesth coloured Clothes.—Whoever will secure said Negroes so that their Masters may have them again, shall receive TEN DOLLARS Reward, and all reasonable Charges paid.

DANIEL ODEL,
 PHILIP EARL.

years for the sum of fifty-six pounds lawful money of the Province.¹⁵

Much of the dealing in slaves was carried on through the newspapers. When Fleury Mesplet founded the *Montreal Gazette* in 1778, he announced in his paper that he would "... give notice to the public at any time of ... slaves deserted from their masters."¹⁶ Trading in slaves was brisk. On April 3, 1790, a Black youth named 'Antoine' went from Oliver Hastings to Chevalier Charles Boucher de la Brière in exchange for 90 *minots*¹⁷ of wheat. George Westphall, a British officer, borrowed 20 louis¹⁸ from Richard Dillon in 1797. He gave as security a female slave named 'Ledy', who served Dillon until Westphall paid off the principal and interest of the loan.

It was not only in Québec that slavery continued to flourish under the British Régime. By the Articles of Capitulation, the British took Detroit from the French in 1760. Ten years earlier a census had counted 33 slaves in Detroit's population of 450. By the early 1770s the town had 1291 white residents and 96 Blacks. By 1778 the 2017 whites living there owned 127 Black slaves.

The Loyalists and Slavery

When 13 American colonies rebelled against the government of Britain's George III in 1775, United Empire Loyalists began to leave the dissident territories and move north. Their goal was to re-establish their families in the Maritimes and in Québec. The British government encouraged the Loyalists. It offered them military commissions, administrative positions, generous grants of land and permission to bring slaves.¹⁹

It is ironic that soon after the Revolutionary War broke out, the British offered to free any slaves who would join their forces. Both the slaves and their owners responded quickly. Many owners sent their slaves to places far behind the British lines. Some of the colonies passed new laws to banish, sell or execute slaves who were caught escaping. Slave patrols were even stricter than usual. In spite of all these measures,