

# Slavery in Canada

**Dr. Afua Cooper**

The enslavement of Blacks in Canada is a little-known fact. However, slavery was practised under both the French and British colonial regimes, and lasted for more than two centuries. It was recognized by law and custom. The enslavement of Black people in Canada was part of the larger process of the Transatlantic Slave Trade which ripped upwards of twenty-five million people from the shores of Africa to the New World.

In 1608, French explorer and colonizer, Samuel de Champlain, established a settlement at Québec, and launched the era of French colonization in what is now Canada. The earliest record we have of a Black enslaved person in Canada dates back to 1628. In that year, the Kirke brothers, Huguenot pirates working on behalf of the English Crown, captured the feeble colony at Québec.<sup>1</sup> The Kirkes had with them a nine-year-old boy from Madagascar whom they promptly sold to a Québec clerk. The boy was baptized and given the name Olivier Le Jeune—the first name being that of his owner, and the last name belonging to the Jesuit priest, Paul Le Jeune, who baptized him. This African child was to live in Quebec as a domestic slave for the rest of his life. He died in 1654.

By the end of the century, a stream of Black people entered the colony as enslaved persons. New France's colonists continually experienced a labour shortage and they felt that only slaves could relieve such a shortage. Owned by a variety of individuals and

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<sup>1</sup> The English rule of the Kirkes lasted for only three years. The colony reverted to France in 1631.

corporations, enslaved people toiled as farm labourers, domestic workers, garbage collectors, hangmen, rat catchers, trappers, miners, and canoeists. It is important to note that Native people also suffered enslavement in Canada. Native slaves were colloquially called Panis.<sup>2</sup>

The origins of Black slaves in Canada were diverse. Some came from the thirteen American colonies, others from the West Indies, Africa and Europe. Of course, many were born in the colony throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Under the French regime, slavery was given legal foundation in Canada in 1689 when Louis XIV authorized the entry and sale of enslaved Africans within the colony. Furthermore, aspects of the Code Noir<sup>3</sup> and additional colonial ordinances were used to regulate slavery within the colony.

Enslaved people, both African and Aboriginal, resisted the system of slavery in specific ways. The most spectacular challenge came from Marie-Joseph Angélique, a 29-year-old Portuguese-born Black woman, who was charged with setting fire to Montréal in April 1734. The fire destroyed half of the city, and ruined most of the principal merchants as their homes and businesses were burnt. Angélique had a history as a rebellious slave, who talked back to and cursed her owner, and who left the house whenever she wanted. Prior to the fire, the slave woman had fled Montréal but was caught and returned to her slave mistress.

Angélique underwent a two-month trial. She was found guilty and sentenced to hang. But before she was hanged, she underwent the torture of the *Brodequins*, a device attached to her legs which resulted in their breaking. After the hanging, the corpse of the slave woman was burnt and the ashes scattered to the four winds.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The term Panis is believed to derive from the name of the Pawnee Tribe and came to refer to all Aboriginal enslaved people in New France.

<sup>3</sup> The Code Noir refers to the group of laws which governed the condition of slavery and the conduct of the enslaved. It was established by King Louis XIV of France in 1685.

<sup>4</sup> A thorough investigation of the Angélique story is given in Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal*, Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2006 and *La Pendaison d'Angélique*, Paris: Les Éditions de l'Homme, 2007.

So important was slavery to the colony that in 1760 at the time of the Conquest of Canada by Britain, the French bargained with the conquerors to insert a clause in the Treaty of Capitulation that gave them the right to continue using their slaves, and permission to trade in their bodies. The appropriate clause reads:

Negroes and Panis of both sexes shall remain, in their status as slaves, in possession of the French and Canadians to whom they belong; they shall be at liberty to keep them in their service in the colony or sell them; and they may also continue to bring them up in the Roman religion.

With the Conquest and the Treaty of Paris, signed in 1763, New France ceased to exist, and the new British colony of Québec came into being. Under the British dispensation, the enslavement of Africans actually increased. Right after the Conquest, numerous colonists from the Thirteen Colonies migrated to Québec and brought with them their slave property. After 1783, thousands of settlers, now dubbed “Loyalists” from the former Thirteen Colonies came as a result of the British loss during the American Revolution. Likewise, slave property again accompanied them. These white Loyalists were settled in the five older colonies of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Québec, Prince Edward Island and Ontario.

Enslaved people under the British Regime, as during the French period, built roads and highways, public buildings, farms, homes, cooked and cleaned for their owners, minded their children, and did every conceivable work that was vital in establishing new settlements. Much credit must go to these enslaved Africans for creating communities out of the wilderness.

Because plantation slavery was not the norm in Canada, many believed that the Canadian variant of slavery was mild. However, documents reveal that Canadian slaves were treated as harshly as their brethren in the rest of the New World. Enslaved Blacks in Canada were murdered, whipped, tortured, starved, imprisoned, punished and brutalized in other ways by their masters.

As in other forms of American slavery, enslaved people were ripped apart from their families and sold and traded within the colonies and outside their borders. The following advertisement in the *Halifax Gazette* of 30 May 1752 for the sale of slaves reveals that Canadians were buying slaves from beyond its borders.

*Advertisements.*

**J**UST imported, and to be sold by Joshua Maudet, at Major Lockman's Store in Halifax several Negro Slaves, viz. A very likely Negro Wench, of about thirty five Years of Age, a Creole born, has been brought up in a Gentleman's Family, and capable of doing all sorts of Work belonging thereto, as Needle-Work of all sorts, and in the best Manner; also Wajding, Ironing, Cookery, and every other Thing that can be expected from such a Slave: Also 2 Negro Boys of about 12 or 13 Years old, likely, healthy and well shap'd, and understand some English: Likewise 2 healthy Negro Slaves of about 18 Years of Age, of agreeable Tempers, and fit for any kind of Business; And also a healthy Negro Man of about 30 Years of Age.

Halifax Gazette, 30 May 1752. Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management

However, enslaved people protested their enslavement through a variety of means, chief among them being flight. Numerous colonial newspapers recorded the escape of slaves, as this early example in the *Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle* reveals.

RAN away from her Master JOHN ROCK, on Monday the 18th Day of August last; a Negro Girl named *Thursday*, about four and an half feet high, broad sett, with a Lump above her Right Eye: Had on when she run away a red Cloth Petticoat, a red Baize Bed Gown, and a red Ribbon about her Head. Whosoever may harbour said Negro Girl, or encourage her to stay away from her said Master, may depend on being prosecuted according as the Law shall direct. And whosoever may be so kind to take her up and send her home to her said Master, shall be paid all Coats and Charges, together with TWO DOLLARS Reward for their Trouble.

JOHN ROCK.  
HALIFAX, Sept. 11, 1772.

Nova Scotia Gazette and Weekly Chronicle, 1 September 1772, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.

Enslaved Africans, especially in Québec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, perhaps encouraged by antislavery reformers, also took their masters to court in their bid for freedom. One example is that of enslaved woman Nancy Morton, owned by one Captain Caleb Jones of Fredericton, New Brunswick. In 1800, Morton sued Jones for wrongful ownership. The case reached the New Brunswick Supreme Court, but Morton lost and was returned to Jones. Although she was unsuccessful, Morton nonetheless showed tremendous agency in challenging her owner by taking him to the highest court in the land.

Slavery began to decline in the Canadian provinces by the end of the eighteenth century. In Upper Canada (now named Ontario) in 1793, influenced by the brutal removal of slave woman Chloe Cooley to New York State, Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe passed an act in the legislature to ban the importation of new slaves into the colony. The act did not free one slave, but it did pave the way for the eventual end of slavery, and was the first antislavery legislation passed in the British Empire. In Lower Canada (Quebec), New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, growing opposition of the courts of law, by 1820, ensured the decline of slavery. However, it took the British Emancipation Act of 1833 to formally end slavery in the Canadian provinces. Several enslaved Blacks, came forward, on 1 August 1834, when the Act took effect, and gained their freedom.

**TO BE SOLD,**  
**A BLACK WOMAN, named**  
PEGGY, aged about forty years ; and a  
Black boy her son, named JUPITER, aged  
about fifteen years, both of them the property of the  
Subscriber.

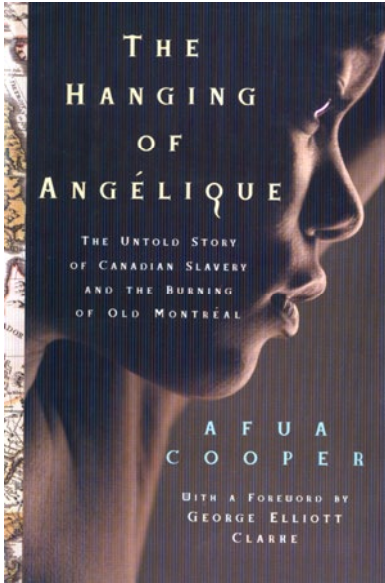
The Woman is a tolerable Cook and washer woman  
and perfectly understands making Soap and Candles.

The Boy is tall and strong of his age, and has been  
employed in Country business, but brought up prin-  
cipally as a House Servant—They are each of them  
Servants for life. The Price for the Woman is one  
hundred and fifty Dollars—for the Boy two hundred  
Dollars, payable in three years with Interest from the  
day of Sale and to be properly secured by Bond &c.—  
But one fourth less will be taken in ready Money.

PETER RUSSELL.

York, Feb. 10th 1806.

Upper Canada Gazette, 19 February, 1806. Archives of Ontario



Courtesy: HarperCollins

*Afua Cooper earned her Ph.D. in Canadian history with a special focus on the Black communities of 19<sup>th</sup> century Ontario. Her doctoral dissertation was a biography of Henry Bibb, the renowned antislavery crusader. Her book, The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Slavery in Canada and the Burning of Old Montréal (HarperCollins, 2006) became a national bestseller and was nominated for the Governor General's Award in 2006. The French language version was published by L'Éditions de L'Homme in 2007.*