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## The "Colored Corps" 1812-1815

On Saturday June 18, 1994 in Queenston Heights, near the Brock monument in Queenston, the Ontario Heritage Foundation unveiled a plaque.

This is one in a series of historical plaques erected throughout the province by the Ontario Heritage Foundation. The bilingual marker reads:

### **THE "COLORED CORPS" 1812-1815**

When the War of 1812 began, people of African descent in the Niagara peninsula feared an American invasion. They were anxious to preserve their freedom and prove their loyalty to Britain. Many joined the militia; others offered to raise their own militia company. Authorities responded by forming a "Colored Corps" of about thirty men commanded by white officers. Based in the Niagara region throughout the war, it fought at Queenston Heights in October 1812 and at the siege of Fort George in May 1813. The corps was disbanded soon after the peace, but had nonetheless set a precedent. Black units were a feature of the Canadian military until the First World War.

### **LE "COLORED CORPS" 1812-1815**

Lorsque commence la guerre de 1812, les habitants de la péninsule du Niagara de descendance africaine craignent une invasion américaine. Ils tiennent à préserver leur liberté et à prouver leur loyauté à l'Angleterre. Nombre d'entre eux entrent dans la milice; d'autres offrent de recruter leur propre compagnie de miliciens. Les autorités décident alors de former un corps d'une trentaine d'hommes de couleur sous la commande d'officiers blancs. Stationné dans la région du Niagara pendant la guerre de 1812, le "Colored Corps" prend part à la bataille de Queenston Heights en octobre 1812 et au siège du fort George en mai 1813. Le corps, dispersé peu après la paix, établit un précédent. L'armée canadienne a des unités noires jusqu'à la Première Guerre mondiale.

## **Historical background**

During the War of 1812, Blacks took up arms to defend Upper Canada from American invasion by serving in companies of the Upper Canada Militia across the province and in segregated units like the "Colored Corps" at Niagara.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Black population of Upper Canada was small and clustered mainly in the Niagara and Sandwich (now Windsor) areas. Many were Black Loyalists who came to Upper Canada after gaining their freedom in exchange for serving in the British military during the American Revolution. Others migrated to Upper Canada after 1793 when Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe limited slavery in Upper Canada by prohibiting the importation of enslaved people. Despite this legislation, however, some Blacks remained enslaved.

Nevertheless, many Blacks saw Upper Canada as a refuge from slavery. When this refuge was threatened in 1812 by the American declaration of war, the Black community rallied to the British flag. Blacks from across the province joined the Upper Canada Militia to defend the border, protect their families, and fight against slavery.

Richard Pierpoint, a veteran who served in Butler's Rangers during the American Revolution and a leading member of the Black community at Niagara, petitioned the government to form a "Corps of Men of Color on the Niagara Frontier," which was authorized under the command of a white officer named Robert Runchey. Runchey was a retired British soldier, landowner and tavern-keeper serving as lieutenant in the flank company of the First Lincoln Militia in July 1812. The following month, he was promoted to the rank of captain and by September was listed as captain of the "company of colored men."

The segregated unit was known as "Captain Runchey's Company of Colored Men" or the Colored Corps.<sup>1</sup> Initially, the company was made up of Blacks from Niagara, St. Davids and St. Catharines, although by late 1812 Black soldiers from York and the Bay of Quinte area had transferred into the unit. The unit consisted of approximately 30 militiamen – its officers were white; the noncommissioned officers and other ranks were Black. Like others serving in the Upper Canada Militia, many Black soldiers were married and temporarily separated from their families while performing military duties.

In the winter of 1812-13, George Fowler replaced Runchey as company commanding officer, Fowler was, in turn, succeeded in the summer of 1813 by Lieutenant James Robertson, who remained in command until the end of the war.

The unit saw its first action at the Battle of Queenston Heights on October 13, 1812. It was

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<sup>1</sup> Muster sheets from the War of 1812 show "Colored Corps" being spelled without the "u."

part of the defending force that unsuccessfully counterattacked the American landing force at Fort George (Niagara-on-the-Lake) on May 27, 1813. The corps then followed British forces retreating westward up the Niagara peninsula to Burlington Bay. It is believed that the Colored Corps fought at the Battle of Stoney Creek on July 5, 1813, at St. Davids later that year and at the Battle of Lundy's Lane in July 1814. For the remainder of the war, the unit garrisoned Fort George and Fort Mississauga where the soldiers of the Colored Corps were employed as artificers.

The Colored Corps was disbanded in 1815. Although many of its soldiers were granted land in Oro Township, few actually settled the grants because of the poor quality of the land.

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Colored Companies were important institutions for the Black community. In the Rebellion of 1837, the Black community answered the call to arms by serving in companies of the Upper Canada Militia across the province and segregated companies at Chatham, Hamilton, Niagara, Toronto, St. Catharines and Sandwich. Although many of these companies were disbanded after the rebellion, the government retained a Colored Corps at Niagara until 1850. It played a significant role in Canadian security by defending the border against American invasion, preventing desertion from the British army and quelling riots during construction of the Welland Canal. Afterwards, Blacks continued to serve in the Canadian military and segregated units existed in Canada until the First World War.

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