

Loyalists

The Loyalists were colonists who stayed loyal to Britain and King George III during the American Revolution. They were against American independence. There were about 500,000 Loyalists when the American Revolution started in 1775. That was about 16 percent of the total population.

Loyalists, also known as Tories, lived in all the colonies. They were strongest in the south, especially Georgia and South Carolina. Many also lived in the Mid-Atlantic colonies. New York had at least three times as many Loyalists as any other colony.

Who Were the Loyalists?

Many important and powerful people were Loyalists. Thomas Hutchinson was a famous historian and governor of Massachusetts. John Copley of Massachusetts was a famous painter. Peter Harrison of Rhode Island was the greatest architect of the time. Some Loyalists, like Joseph Galloway of Pennsylvania, did not like Britain's harsh treatment of the colonies. But they remained loyal to Britain. They did not want to break away from that country.

Even Benjamin Franklin's son William was a Loyalist. He was the colonial governor of New Jersey. His father urged him to join the patriot cause, but he refused. The patriots put William in jail in 1776. He was released in 1778 and went to New York City, which was occupied by British forces. There he became head of the Board of Associated Loyalists. The Board helped direct Loyalist military activities. William Franklin left New York for Britain in 1782 and never returned.

Most colonists who worked for Britain as crown officials were Loyalists. But Loyalists came from other groups as well. Rich people and poor people joined the Loyalist ranks. They were bakers and bankers, farmers and sailors. Every religious group had its share of Loyalists, too. Their ancestries were English, Irish, Welsh, Scottish, German, and Dutch.

Some black slaves joined the Loyalist cause. They had been offered freedom by the Loyalist leaders. But there were far more American Indians who sided with Britain. Joseph Brant, the leader of the Mohawks, remained loyal to Britain. So did some of the other leaders of the Iroquois Confederacy. Brant was even made a captain in the British Army. In 1777 and 1778, he led Indian forces against American settlements in New York and Pennsylvania.

The patriots fought hard for their cause during the Revolution. The Loyalists did too. Some were spies. Some served in the regular British Army. Others fought in militias. About 19,000 men fought in more than 40 Loyalist units. The largest of these was Cortlandt Skinner's New Jersey Volunteers.

Many Loyalists Flee

The patriots believed the Loyalists were a serious threat to the Revolution. In January 1776, before the Declaration of Independence, the Second Continental Congress resolved that some Loyalists "ought to be disarmed, and the more dangerous of them ... kept in safe custody ..." After independence on July 4, 1776, some states passed laws to control the Loyalists. Their homes and property were taken away. They were beaten, tarred and feathered, and sometimes killed. This caused thousands of Loyalists to flee. During much of the American Revolution, the British army occupied New York City. Loyalists fleeing other states gathered there.

By the end of the American Revolution in 1783, about 100,000 Loyalists had fled to other countries. Some went to Britain, others to British colonies in Florida and the Caribbean. At least half the Loyalists went to Canada. They moved into the province of Nova Scotia. And they settled on lands that would become the provinces of New Brunswick and Ontario. Most Loyalists, however, stayed in the United States. And after the peace treaty was signed in 1783, some Loyalists who had fled returned to the United States.

Mohawk chief Joseph Brant was not one of them. He fled to Canada with thousands of Mohawks and other Native Americans. The British government gave him a large area of land in what is now Ontario.

Loyalists did not support American independence. But they were an important part of American history. The British called the American Revolution a rebellion. The patriots called it a war for independence. The Loyalists made the war into a civil war.

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