

Life in Upper and Lower Canada

Upper Canada

- Upper Canada was created by the Constitutional Act of 1791 that split the former colony of Quebec into Upper and Lower Canada.
- The influx of United Empire Loyalists following the American Revolution was the prime reason for the division of the colony.
- It was clear that these United Empire Loyalists who had come to the western wilderness of what was still part of Quebec would not long be satisfied with the limited rights and French laws established by the Quebec Act.
- The Constitutional Act gave both Upper and Lower Canada representative government, not responsible government. Some people still felt disaffected by the changes – this would be one of the causes for the Rebellions of 1837.

Life in Upper Canada

- Life in Upper Canada was very difficult for its earliest inhabitants – many of whom were American settlers who had come north, lured by the promise of free land (Simcoe)
- There were few roads and even the routes used by the military were just tracks through the bush. Places 30 to 40km away from the capital of York (Toronto) were considered to be remote.

- The first task for many settlers was to clear the land, an often laborious task due to the thick growths of hardwood trees. It often took settlers nearly a year to clear just one hectare. A 25-hectare farm (about the size of a city block) took roughly 20-25 years to clear.

Immigration To Upper and Lower Canada

- Social class was a very important part of life in Upper and Lower Canada.
- Following the war of 1812 there was a massive wave of immigration. Most of these people were American, English, Scottish, or Irish in origin and settled in Upper Canada. Others settled in the Eastern townships of Lower Canada – between Quebec and Montreal.
- In the 1820's for example, Canada experienced an enormous wave of British immigration. More than 125,000 people arrived during these ten years. These people were predominantly from two groups at opposite ends of the social spectrum.
- On one hand there were lower-income immigrants trying to escape the economic hardships in England and start a new life. The other group of people were those from upper-middle-class British society. They hoped to become 'big fish in a small pond.'
- Canada, therefore was settled largely along social extremes (by contrast the U.S. was more middle class in its roots and its outlook)

- For many immigrants the voyage to come to Canada was very harsh. Immigrants were attracted by colourful posters promising a better life, and cheap fertile land close to townships and markets.
- Nothing could have been further from the truth.
- The Atlantic crossing was often a difficult, costly and emotional venture. For those people in the upper-middle-class it was a comparatively easy crossing compared to the poorer immigrants, many of whom arrived as 'ballast' in lumber ships that would otherwise have been empty on their return voyage.
- These ships had not been designed to carry passengers and bunks had been hastily installed so as to carry the poorer immigrants – many of whom were Scottish and Irish tenant farmers. Sanitation facilities were non-existent and the ships soon became rife with diseases such as cholera.
- Many people died before they even saw Canada – hence the ships came to be known as 'Coffin Ships'

The Family Compact and Chateau Clique

- Social class was an extremely important part of life in Upper and Lower Canada.
- For many people who came to Canada the experience had a way of leveling them, of making social status an insignificant part of their daily lives. In England the upper classes would have lived apart from those people in the lower classes. However in Upper Canada they lived side by side and often depended on one another.

- For some people, however, social class still retained a high degree of importance. Such people usually belonged to one of two groups – the Family Compact or the Chateau clique.
- The Family Compact (pg. 19) was an elite group of well to do families and wealthy merchants who lived in Upper Canada. They accepted British life and put an emphasis on wealth. They treated immigrants badly.
- The Chateau Clique was an elite group of wealthy families and leading merchants in Lower Canada. They were the British aristocracy and believed the British should control everything. The Molson's and the McGill's are two famous names that were part of the Chateau clique.
- The two elite groups were very similar to one another. They were both made up of the wealthiest families in the area and both believed in the Anglican Church. The two groups also controlled their respective governments.
- Each government had a legislative council, which was made up of the elite group members. Since the legislative council was given the power to over-rule any law passed by the elected assembly, the two were constantly at battle.
- The two elite groups were extremely disliked by people who were not members. The people felt that the government catered to the needs of the Chateau Clique and Family Compact and ignored everyone else.

The Problem of Land

- Almost every immigrant to Upper Canada had some interest in farming – they were either farmers themselves or they worked in activities related to farming such as blacksmiths etc.
- However, many settlers, who had been lured with promises of available and fertile land arrived to find that this was not the case – that much of the land had already been claimed by absentee landowners and land speculators. As well the crown and clergy reserves presented obstacles to these people obtaining land.
- Crown and clergy reserves were blocks of land that had been set aside for the government and for the Anglican Church. In total this was 2/7ths of all the land in Upper Canada.
- This land was not cleared and therefore presented an obstacle to the establishment of townships as they often blocked the development of roads. The presence of Crown and Clergy land increased the value of the land around it. As less land became available the price of land increased (supply and demand)
- Many members of the Family Compact were also land speculators (people who buy and sell land for a profit) and, because of the reasons mentioned above, became immensely wealthy as a result of this activity.
- The land problems that were experienced by the settlers in Upper Canada generated dissatisfaction with the colonial government and proved to be one of the major factors behind the Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada.