

## Maroon Legacy

By John Boileau

His Royal Highness Prince Edward watched the ship laden with its mysterious cargo sail into Halifax harbour and drop anchor. He had heard the strange tales of the wild men they carried, and now he was about to see them for himself. On board the transport, drawn up with martial precision for the vessel's entire length, was a row of men clad in new linen military uniforms, ready for his inspection.

The 29-year-old Edward, a soldier since he was 17, cast a professional eye over them. What a fine body of men! Impressed with their proud bearing and magnificent physique, his mind immediately turned to thoughts of how valuable they could be in his plans to improve the garrison.

As the prince made his farewells and was about to be rowed back to shore, a cheer went up from the large body of Jamaican rebels and former slaves he had just reviewed. The Maroons were delighted with their reception by the Prince.

The original Maroons were slaves brought from West Africa to the Spanish Main in the Caribbean. The Spaniards called them "Cimarrones," meaning wild cattle, because they were specially trained to hunt wild cattle and pigs for the Spanish garrisons and caravans. From the Spanish Cimarrones came the French word Marrons, and eventually the English Maroons.

Over the years, some of these slaves escaped and attacked the mule trains of their former masters, carrying gold, silver and other commodities. As more slaves escaped, bands were formed, eventually growing to impressive sizes. The first ravages by the Maroons began in the 1520s, in the colonies of Hispaniola, New Spain and Panama. Despite many attempts and even a treaty, the Spanish never succeeded in completely stopping raids by the Maroons.

The Maroons usually confined themselves to raiding plantations, caravans and inland settlements. But some of them allied themselves with pirates and attacked coastal towns as well. One group even formed an alliance with the famous English privateer, Sir Francis Drake, to their mutual benefit. Drake noted that they lived "civilly and cleanly, and their apparel was very fine and fitly made."

In 1655, the English took control of Jamaica from the Spanish. Refusing to give up, Ysassi, the local Spanish commander retreated to the wooded mountains of the interior, taking many of the Maroons with him. He then mounted a guerilla campaign against the British, using the tracking and hunting skills of the Maroons.

Without reinforcements from outside, Ysassi was eventually forced to leave Jamaica. But he did not take his ex-slaves with him. Over time, other escaped slaves fled to the hills and joined the Maroons' bands. They began attacking English plantations and settlements and refused all offers of clemency and freedom to stop their ravages.

Throughout the rest of the 17th century, the Maroons remained safe in Jamaica's rugged interior and kept up their attacks against the island's new

masters. Meanwhile, the English continued to bring in more slaves from West Africa. These new arrivals shared a common language base with the Maroons and soon established lines of communication with them. These eventually grew into alliances by which the slaves warned the Maroons of British plans for attacks on them.

By the 1720s, the depredations of the Maroons were so bad that many British planters were forced to abandon their sugar estates. Spurred on by the bloody slave revolt in nearby Haiti, the British finally succeeded in defeating the runaway slaves militarily and finally forced them to surrender in 1796.

To rid themselves of the problem once and for all, the authorities decided to send some Maroons away—to Nova Scotia. Approval for this move was received from the authorities in London and the Jamaican government promised financial support until the Maroons were settled in their new home.

Accordingly, on June 26, 1796, the transports *Dover*, *Mary* and *Anne* sailed from Port Royal, Jamaica to Halifax, arriving about a month later. On board were 568 men, women and children, as well as two commissioners—Colonel William Quarrell and Alexander Ochterloney—and a surgeon.

These two gentlemen had a credit of £25,000 from the government of Jamaica to settle and maintain their charges. Their first act was to spend £3,000 for 5,000 acres of land in the woods behind Dartmouth and start erecting buildings there; the beginnings of the community of Preston. While land was being cleared for homes, the Maroons were housed in a nearby barracks erected for them.

It was the original intention of the authorities to settle the Maroons throughout the province, so they could build homes of their own. But the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir John Wentworth had other ideas. He wanted to settle them together, so some of them could be used on his new great estate some eight kilometers from Halifax.

On a commanding hilltop in Preston, Wentworth and his enchanting wife, Fanny, had recently created a new estate. This was the result of handing over their Bedford Basin one to Prince Edward as a love nest for the Prince and his mistress, Madame Julie de St-Laurent. Fanny also had an affair with Prince Edward, which her husband did not try to stop.

Sir John viewed the Maroons as a source of free labour for his estate and immediately lodged 50 of them there. He talked of “disseminating piety, morality and loyalty amongst them.”

The Prince also had his ideas about the Maroons. At the time, Britain was at war with revolutionary France and there was an urgent requirement to improve the long-neglected fortifications of Halifax as a French invasion was feared. Unfortunately, that same war had drawn off much of the labour pool, both military and civilian.

Edward immediately hired the strongest of the Maroons to work on the Citadel at nine pence a day, with food and clothing included. Accommodation was provided in wooden barracks and tents erected near the Citadel. The Maroons laboured hard and faithfully at a task new to them for the rest of that building season. They constructed one of the bastions, named the “Maroon

Bastion” after them. Made of logs, it was later demolished to build the fourth and last Citadel.

The fighting spirit of the Maroons manifested itself shortly after their arrival when they organized self-governing military units, complete with new military coats and vests ordered for their use. The insignia on their buttons and badges was an alligator holding a sheaf of wheat and an olive branch. Wentworth advised the authorities in England that he thought the Maroons would be a “useful and loyal corps to oppose an invading army.”

The recognized leader of the Maroons was Captain Montague James and Wentworth created additional officers by the names of Bailey, Jarrett, Johnson, Mayers and Montague. Despite their fierce reputation, Sir John had complete trust in them. He told his friends that when he was at his estate, he was “often without a sentry and without a door or window locked, and still they did no mischief.”

Meanwhile, most of the Maroons were not impressed with their new home. After the first winter, which was particularly severe, they began agitating for their removal. They wanted to be sent to warmer climate and begged Wentworth to “give us our arms, and ammunition, put us ashore, and we will take care of ourselves.”

The farming they were expected to undertake seemed servile to them, accustomed as they were to the freedom and independence of the Jamaican hills. One of them confided to Wentworth that “yams, bananas, and cocoa would not grow” on his farm and “there were no wild hogs to hunt either.” For men in the habit of waging war, living in peace was not an attractive option.

The winters of the next two years, 1797 and 1798, were just as bad as the previous one. As discontent grew amongst the Maroons, they refused to work to protest their conditions. In the spring of 1799, Sir John sent 50 men of the Royal Nova Scotia Regiment to Preston to maintain order, withholding supplies from the most stubborn of the Maroons until they gave in and started to work again.

As the Maroons’ complaints increased, the money provided for their support decreased. Wentworth soon became concerned they might become a burden on the public purse. And the more the Maroons agitated for their removal— “Send us anywhere else” became their cry—the more the Lieutenant-Governor became disillusioned with the possibility of ever turning them into farmers. Something had to be done, and sending them elsewhere appealed to him.

Before the Maroons had arrived in Nova Scotia in 1796, one of the places suggested for them to settle was Sierra Leone, on the west coast of Africa. The English had founded this colony a few years earlier as a place where slaves brought to Britain and who were subsequently freed, or who fought on the British side during the American Revolution, could be repatriated.

Among the first people to take advantage of this offer was a group of free blacks who came to Nova Scotia from the United States with the Loyalist influx after the Revolutionary War. In early 1792, 15 ships carried almost 1,200 of them from Halifax to Sierra Leone.

But the Sierra Leone Company, which ran the colony for the British, was not in favour of taking the Maroons “whose reputation could not be held to warrant such a step.” By 1800 the company changed its mind however, as the original settlers were in a rebellious state and the fighting qualities of the Maroons were seen as useful in putting them down.

The majority of the Maroons left Halifax, arriving in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, on October 1, 1800, there to begin a new life in a climate more suited to them. Two years after their arrival in Sierra Leone, word was received in Nova Scotia of their peaceful settling down in their new home, where they were respected for their courage, fighting qualities and independence.

The Maroons and other returned Africans, or Creoles as they came to be called, were from all parts of Africa. Cut off from their homes and traditions by slavery, they had assimilated the British way of life and soon built a flourishing trade on the West African coast.

But not all the Maroons sailed away to Africa. Some stayed, and their legacy remained in their descendants still living in Nova Scotia today. In the words of Harry Chapman, author of *In the Wake of the Alderney*, a history Dartmouth, the Maroons and other blacks who remained “contributed to the community and laid the foundation for future growth and development.”