

# WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN A TOWN?

Think about walking on a crowded city street. What sights, smells, and noises come to mind? Towns in the early 1800s had busy streets, too. The streets were muddier and people had to watch out for horses rather than cars. Those who lived in towns had many opportunities to create relationships because people lived close together and created strong communities.

## TOWN LOCATIONS AND POPULATIONS

The larger, more established communities were located on the East Coast and in Lower Canada. Look at **Figure 5.1**, which is a map of communities in Canada in 1800. The towns varied greatly in population size. Québec City, founded in 1608, was Canada's largest community. What patterns can you see on the map in terms of population size and languages spoken? What do they tell you about life in Canada?

**FIGURE 5.1** This map shows communities in Canada in 1800. **Analyze:** What other settlement patterns can you see?



## LIFE FOR THE UPPER CLASS

Societies can be organized using a class structure. **Class structure** is determined through social or economic status. The upper class consists of wealthy people with power. Most wealthy people in towns were from Britain. Many had inherited money from their families. These people included government officials, bankers, lawyers, and merchants who controlled the sales and exports of goods.

Elizabeth Simcoe was married to John Graves Simcoe, who was Upper Canada's first lieutenant-governor from 1791 to 1796. She travelled with her husband across Upper and Lower Canada and kept detailed diaries that included descriptions of the places she saw and the people she met. Read an excerpt from her diary in **Figure 5.2**. How might Simcoe's high status as the wife of a lieutenant-governor have affected her experience as a visitor to Montréal?

People who lived in Canadian towns had access to many services and goods. However, only wealthy townspeople could pay for these goods and services. They could afford to hire servants and send their children to school. Their money could buy food, clothing, and jewellery. They had time to socialize with family and friends, and attend parties.

**Figure 5.3** shows a social dance with wealthy families.

Social dances were common in England and France. This dance was held in Château St. Louis in Québec City. The château had been an official residence to many upper-class people, including the French governor of New France, the British governor of Québec, and the lieutenant-governor of Lower Canada. What details in the painting show wealth and status?

**class structure** a system for ordering society based on social or economic status

"We arrived in Montréal ... and I was delighted by the size and loftiness of the rooms, which are so much better than any I have been in at Québec ... The town of Montréal is large, and the spires of the churches, covered with tin, give a brilliancy to the scene and look like mosques. The country around is much cultivated, and orchards cover nearly all the top of the mountain."

— Elizabeth Simcoe, wife of Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe

**FIGURE 5.2** Simcoe wrote this entry in her diary in 1792. **Analyze:** What might someone with a different social status have written about instead?



**FIGURE 5.3** This painting, entitled *Dance in the Château St. Louis*, was painted by George Heriot in 1801. **Analyze:** Do you think the workers, such as the musicians, are from wealthy families? Why, or why not?





**FIGURE 5.4** James Pattison Cockburn painted *Cutting Ice for the Summer at Quebec City, Lower Canada* in 1830. **Analyze:** What reasons do you think the workers could have had for cutting ice?

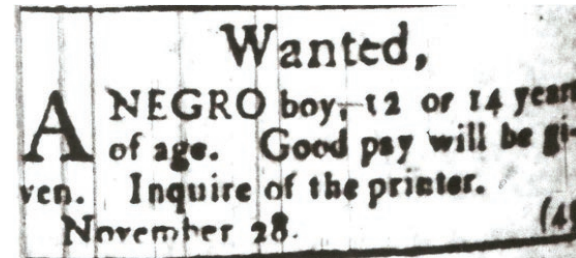
## LIFE FOR THE MIDDLE AND LOWER CLASSES

Most townspeople in the early 1800s in Canada belonged to the middle and lower classes. Compared to the upper class, which was mostly made up of wealthy British people, the middle class in Lower Canada was mainly made up of Canadiens. They worked as independent shopkeepers, bakers, blacksmiths, dressmakers, glassblowers, and grocers. Their standard of living varied. Some people just scraped by, while others managed well because their skills were in demand.

Some people had permanent positions as domestic servants, such as housekeepers and nannies. Many servants worked for wealthy families and had little time for themselves or their own families. Servant positions were filled quickly because jobs were hard to find.

The jobs that paid very little usually involved hard labour. Examine **Figure 5.4**, which shows workers cutting ice in Québec City. What would make this job difficult and dangerous?

**FIGURE 5.5** This advertisement appeared in the *Niagara Herald* from November 18, 1801, until January 9, 1802. “Good pay” does not refer to wages but to the selling price. **Analyze:** What does the publication of this ad tell you about Canadian society in the early 1800s?



How does Peggy's story help us to better understand views of other enslaved people?

## SLAVERY IN EARLY CANADA

Between 1671 and 1833, about 4200 people were enslaved in Canada. Two-thirds were First Nations people, and one-third were Black. Enslaved people were considered property. Owners could buy them, sell them, and even pass them down to their children in their wills. People placed advertisements in local newspapers to buy and sell people, and to offer rewards for the return of enslaved people who had run away.

The advertisement in **Figure 5.5** appeared in the *Niagara Herald* in 1801. How do you think it would have felt to be bought and sold through newspaper ads?

Most enslaved people in Canada worked as domestic servants in wealthy households in towns. This meant that they lived in the same house as their masters and were closely supervised. Peter Russell was a government official in Upper Canada in 1801. He lived with his sister Elizabeth in York (present-day Toronto). A woman named Peggy and her

children were enslaved in Russell's household. Read **Figure 5.6**, an excerpt from a letter that Russell wrote to complain about Peggy's “troublesome” behaviour. Historians have described such behaviour as deliberate resistance to slavery. Are Russell's views more understandable in 1801 than they would be today?

“My slave Peggy ... is now at large, being not permitted by my sister to enter this house, and shows a disposition at times to be very troublesome, which may perhaps compel me to commit her again to prison. I shall be glad that you would either take her away immediately, or return to me the bill of sale I gave you to enable you to do so.”

— Peter Russell, government official in Upper Canada

**FIGURE 5.6** This is an excerpt from a letter that Russell wrote in 1801 about an enslaved woman in his household named Peggy. **Analyze:** What might Peggy be trying to say through her actions?

Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe opposed slavery. He passed the 1793 *Act to Limit Slavery*, which made it illegal to import enslaved people into Upper Canada. It meant that everyone who came to Upper Canada would be free. The word spread, and many Black people from the United States made the long journey north.

Although Simcoe's law made slavery uncommon in Canada, it did not end it completely. That did not happen until Britain banned slavery in 1833.



# HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

To understand people from the past, a historian needs to take a historical perspective. This means trying to see the world from their point of view. It does not mean agreeing with their thoughts, feelings, and motivations. It means working to *understand* their thoughts, feelings, and motivations. To do this, a historian must try to consider the historical context in which people lived.

When you attempt to understand the people of the past, you can ask the following questions:

- What were the beliefs, values, perspectives, and motivations of people who lived at that time?
- How do those beliefs and values differ from today's beliefs and values?
- Did the people make understandable decisions based on the information they had available to them?
- What beliefs, values, and ideas do I already have that affect how I think about this event, period, or person?
- What inferences can I make about the person's thoughts, feelings, and motivations from the evidence I have?

## CASE STUDY: DEBTORS' PRISON

In the early 1800s, prisons in Canada housed not only criminals but also debtors: people who could not or would not pay back money that they owed to a lender. The laws of the day gave merchants and banks the power to bring a debtor to court. If the debtor could not pay back the loan, she or he would go to prison until the loan was paid. In some prisons, nearly half of the prisoners were debtors. Debtors were imprisoned alongside thieves, murderers, and other criminals.

In Canada today, a court might force a debtor to give up belongings or wages but does not send her or him to jail. Look at the jail cell in **Figure 5.7**. How might this photo help you understand the experience of debtors imprisoned in the 1800s?



**FIGURE 5.7** This is a prison cell in the first Québec City Common Gaol (prison). The prison was in operation from 1813 to 1868. **Analyze:** How would you feel walking toward this cell because you were unable to pay back a loan?

Read **Figure 5.8**, an excerpt from a letter written by John Woolstencroft about life as a jailed debtor. What can you infer from this excerpt about his thoughts and feelings about his experience in jail?

“Our situation is in some respects more appalling than a Criminal imprisoned for murder, he is allowed a straw bed, blankets, bread and fuel, and knows the termination of his imprisonment, we poor wretches ... have not so much as a bench to sit on, a shelf or cupboard to place a loaf of bread upon, not even a straw bed to lay on, no blanket to cover us, no fire to warm us.”

— John Woolstencroft, jailed debtor

**FIGURE 5.8** Woolstencroft wrote this plea in 1831 for debtors' prison reform from his jail cell in York. **Analyze:** What reasons could there be that murderers were given more comfort in jail than debtors?

A person imprisoned for debt would have had a different perspective on debtors' prison than a merchant who was trying to get a loan repaid. Merchants often took large risks by loaning money to people who had no possessions to guarantee their loan. Prison represented security for these merchants because they knew that a debtor would be sent to jail if a loan was not repaid. Why might a merchant's perspective on debtors' prison be different from Woolstencroft's?

Mohawk leader Thayendanegea, also known as Joseph Brant, was a war hero from the American Revolution and a Loyalist. Read Thayendanegea's perspective on debtors' prison in **Figure 5.9**. He had a unique view of debtors' prisons because of his deep immersion in two cultures: the Haudenosaunee society in which he was born and raised, and the British colonial society that he later embraced. As well, Thayendanegea had converted to Christianity.

“Yet for what are many of your prisoners confined?—for debt!—astonishing! ... —here is no crime, nor even a fault; and yet your laws put it in the power of the [lender] to throw the debtor into prison and confine him there for life! A punishment infinitely worse than death to a brave man! ... Cease, then, to call yourselves Christians, lest you publish to the world your hypocrisy. Cease, too, to call other nations savage when you are tenfold more the children of cruelty than they.”

— Thayendanegea, Mohawk leader

**FIGURE 5.9** Thayendanegea spoke these words to his biographer before his death in 1807. Note that *hypocrisy* means to do things that you tell others not to. **Analyze:** What do you think were Thayendanegea's feelings about people who called First Nations “savages”?

## TRY IT

1. Consider the sources presented here. What can you learn about attitudes during this time?
2. What beliefs, values, or ideas do you have that might help or hinder your research on debtors' prison in the early 1800s?
3. How might Thayendanegea's Haudenosaunee upbringing, his immersion in British colonial society, and his conversion to Christianity affect his perspective on debtors' prison?



## OTHER CHALLENGES OF TOWN LIFE

In the early 1800s, towns were exciting, bustling places, but they were also dirty, crowded, and crime-ridden. Without sewage treatment or garbage collection, the air smelled bad. Without water filtration plants, the water carried diseases. Because of poor housing, fires spread quickly.

### FIRES

Homes were not built like they are today in Canada. Many buildings were made of wood and burned quickly if a fire broke out. Examine **Figure 5.10**, which depicts soldiers trying to put out a fire in St. Andrews, New Brunswick. Although this is a country scene, how does it illustrate the challenge of trying to put out a raging fire with no water hoses, using only the firefighting equipment that was available in the early 1800s?

In towns, buildings were close to one another. If one building caught fire, others could go up in flames very quickly. Many towns and cities have stories of a “Great Fire” in their history. In St. John’s, Newfoundland, there were three fires in 1816 and 1817, which drove one-quarter of the population from their homes. Québec City had two fires in 1845, which left over 15 000 people homeless. As towns grew, the need for firefighters, police officers, and other services also grew.

### DISEASES

People living in towns were in constant danger of catching deadly contagious diseases, such as smallpox. In part, the problem was a lack of understanding about diseases. What does the excerpt in **Figure 5.11** by Father Pierre Frechette tell you about what he blamed for the spread of diseases?

The spread of disease had been a major challenge in Europe for hundreds of years. Because of this, diseases were often carried to Canada by European settlers. Various contagious diseases are spread through air, water, insects, and physical contact. If people live close together and do not wash their hands, diseases can spread quickly. For centuries in Europe and in early Canada, many people did not wash themselves often. Some historians link this behaviour to the plague. Starting in 1347, the plague killed more than one-third of the population of Europe. At the time, some people thought it was spread by contact with water, so they avoided bathing regularly. Today, we know that the plague was spread through fleas on rats.



**FIGURE 5.10** This 1854 watercolour painting by James Clark is entitled *Detachment of the 76th Regiment Putting out a Fire, St. Andrew's*. It shows soldiers fighting a fire. **Analyze:** What equipment and strategies are the soldiers using to fight the fire?

“Last winter a sort of grippe [flu] and scarlet fever made the rounds.... Many people died, especially young people.... I put somewhat of a stop to the balls and dances last winter by representing to the people the above mentioned sickness as a punishment for their disorders and debaucherie [immoral, improper behaviour].”  
— Father Pierre Frechette

**FIGURE 5.11** This excerpt is from a letter written by Father Frechette to his superiors in 1786. **Analyze:** Why would Father Frechette believe that disease was punishment for behaviour he saw as improper?

## THE CHURCH AND THE COMMUNITY

In the early 1800s, the government did not provide social services, such as healthcare, education, and care of seniors. Instead, people organized themselves to help one another. Churches provided social services, such as help for those in need and leadership in times of crisis. **Figure 5.12** shows Notre-Dame-des-Victoires, which is the oldest church in North America. It was built in 1688 and is still located in a square in Québec City’s lower town.

The Catholic Church was a central part of community life for virtually all Canadiens. The priests provided spiritual guidance. The nuns provided essential services, such as nursing and education, and took care of orphans. Read **Figure 5.13**. How does Elizabeth Simcoe help us to understand the importance of nuns to the community?

Do you think the role of the church has changed or stayed the same in present-day Canada?



**FIGURE 5.12** This photo shows Notre-Dame-des-Victoires today. **Analyze:** What do the location of the church and the people outside suggest about the church’s importance to the community?

“The nuns [at the Convent des Ursulines] ... carry cleanliness and neatness to the greatest pitch of perfection in every part of the convent.... They educate children at this convent.... all the desserts in Québec are [made and sold] by the nuns.... Another convent is called the Hotel Dieu, for the reception of the sick, whether English or French.”  
— Elizabeth Simcoe, wife of Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe

**FIGURE 5.13** This is an excerpt from Simcoe’s diary during her visit to Montréal in 1791. **Analyze:** What words does Simcoe use that show how the nuns did not exclude anyone?

## CHECK-IN

- INTERPRET AND ANALYZE** Looking at the evidence in this chapter so far, what were some positive aspects about life in a town? What were some negative aspects?
- COMMUNICATE** Suppose that online media existed in the early 1800s. Create a series of postings for a website about town life in the early 1800s. Include different perspectives. Each posting can be only 140 characters long.
- HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE** Can studying the lives of people in towns in the early 1800s help us cope with the challenges of urban life in Canada today? Use an example to support your position.