

WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE IN THE BACKWOODS?

Suppose that you move to a remote forested land to start a new life. You are surrounded by forests with wild animals such as deer and bear. There are no towns or roads, and your few neighbours live far away. This is what the settlers experienced when they arrived in **the backwoods** of Canada in the early 1800s.

ARRIVING IN A NEW HOME

As you read in Chapter 4, British settlers known as Loyalists made their way to the British colonies in Canada after the American Revolution. Some took jobs in towns, but most settled in the backwoods and cleared land to start farms. The area we know today as southeastern Ontario had many forests and trails, but few buildings and roads. Many Loyalists took boats up the St. Lawrence River into Lake Ontario. They travelled by wagon along trails into the backwoods to their assigned pieces of land. Examine **Figure 5.14**, which shows a group of Loyalists on their way to Upper Canada after the American Revolution. What message do you think the artist is trying to convey about the Loyalist experience at that time?

the backwoods remote, uncleared, forested land

FIGURE 5.14 C.W. Jefferys painted *Loyalists on Their Way to Upper Canada* in 1945. **Analyze:** What challenges has the artist chosen to show these Loyalists facing during their migration?



Loyalists settled in Upper Canada, in colonies in the Maritimes, and, to a lesser extent, in Lower Canada. Wherever they settled, the first year was very challenging. Most settlers arrived in spring in time to build a log cabin before winter. They would build a small one-and-a-half storey log cabin. A cabin was small enough to be heated by one fireplace. People slept in the attic.

Some early Loyalists were less prepared because they were fleeing war. Mary Barbara Fisher arrived in New Brunswick with her family in 1783 after Britain lost the American Revolution. In **Figure 5.15**, she describes the experience to her granddaughter Georgianna. What challenges did Fisher face?

WORKING IN THE FIELDS

Forested land in the backwoods needed to be cleared to build homes and create farmland. There were no tractors or machines to do the work. Trees had to be chopped by hand with an axe. Several men, horses, or mules were needed to haul logs once the trees were cut down. The logs then needed to be cut into planks to build homes.

After trees and large stones were removed, the soil needed to be turned so that seeds could be planted. Look at the farmer planting seeds between stumps in **Figure 5.16**. After a few years, the stumps rotted and were easier to pull out. Every year, a farm family would try to clear a little more land. Crops included wheat, pumpkins, squash, potatoes, and corn. Although most new settlers farmed, many also made a living from fishing and forestry.

FIGURE 5.16 C.W. Jefferys painted *The Pioneer*, 1784 in 1926. **Analyze:** What evidence can you see of the labour that was done prior to the land being ready for seed planting?

“How we lived through that awful winter I hardly know. There were mothers [who] clasped their infants ... and tried by the warmth of their own bodies to protect them from the bitter cold. Sometimes a part of the family had to remain up during the night to keep the fires burning, so as to keep the rest from freezing. Some destitute people made use of boards, which the older ones kept heating before the fire and applied by turns to the smaller children to keep them warm.”
— Mary Barbara Fisher, backwoods settler

FIGURE 5.15 In this quote, Fisher tells about her first winter in Canada in 1783, in which she and her family lived in a tent. **Analyze:** How prepared does it seem these settlers were for life in their new home?



WORKING IN THE HOME

At the start of the 1800s, the lives of settler women revolved around the home. The few that were employed outside the home had jobs such as domestic help for a wealthy family, or were teachers, nuns (in Catholic areas), dressmakers, or innkeepers. Working in the home was a woman’s main responsibility. She looked after the children, the home, and the family finances. There were many challenging daily chores. They included sewing and knitting, washing clothes with a washboard, ironing, cleaning, and cooking over a fireplace or woodstove. Women spun wool, made candles, cared for farm animals, and planted and tended to vegetable gardens. They also made soap by combining animal fat with lye. Lye is made by boiling wood ash. Examine **Figure 5.17**, which shows a woman boiling lye in a large iron pot. How does this scene compare with household chores in Canada today?

SCHOOLING

Everybody, even children, had to pitch in to help with household chores or work on the farm. Families had an average of seven or eight children, all of whom had multiple chores every day. For example, they carried in wood for the fire or stove, peeled potatoes, churned butter, fetched water, and gathered eggs. During the harvest, they helped collect the hay and crops.

Few children went to school because they helped in the home and on the farm. Also, the private schools that existed charged fees that only wealthy families could afford. Some children learned to read and write from their parents. In 1807, a government act in Upper Canada approved funding for eight public schools located in towns. Each had room for 100 boys. This was the beginning of the public school system that we have in Ontario today.

CREATING COMMUNITIES

When possible, settlers tried to live close together so that they could form strong community connections. When they were part of a community, families were better able to meet the many challenges of living in the backwoods. Settler families worked hard to help each other in times of need. They hoped that eventually a community could support a mill, a general store, a church, and a school.

FIGURE 5.17 C.W. Jefferys created this illustration in 1945 depicting a woman stirring a pot of boiling lye in the early 1800s. **Analyze:** Based on this illustration, what were some challenges of making soap?



What other types of evidence could help you better understand Gourlay’s concerns?

Crown reserve land set aside to finance the government

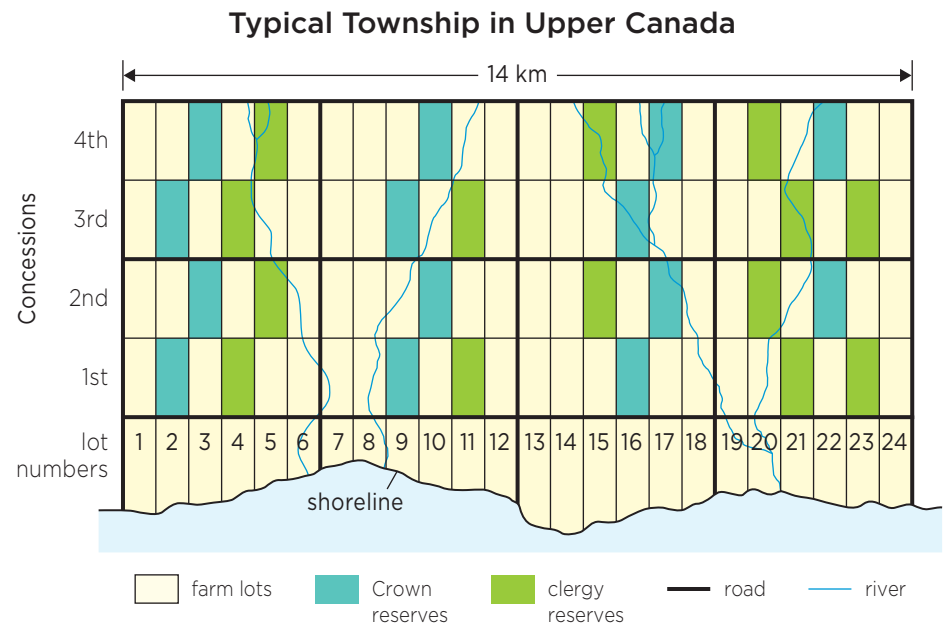
clergy reserve land set aside to finance Protestant churches

FIGURE 5.18 This diagram shows a government plan for dividing up land for settlement. Rows of lots were called concessions. **Analyze:** Who would be your neighbours if you lived on lot 3 in the third concession?

GOVERNMENT PLANNING

In many cases, the British government’s planning of towns made it difficult to create connected communities. Robert Fleming Gourlay was a Scottish farmer who came to Upper Canada in 1817 to settle a plot of land. He wrote a guide to help other immigrant farmers. He noticed that government-controlled lands stood in the way of settlers being able to build roads that could connect them to villages and each other.

Look at **Figure 5.18**. This is how the land was assigned in a typical township in Upper Canada. The government kept **Crown reserves**, land which it sold off from time to time to bring in revenue. **Clergy reserves** were set aside to make sure that many Protestant churches were present in Upper Canada. Land was also set aside for other uses, such as providing timber to Britain’s Royal Navy. How would this plan hinder the development of communities?



Gourlay surveyed the local farmers and brought complaints to the colonial government on their behalf. Colonial officials did not respond well to Gourlay’s concerns. In 1819, they banished him from Upper Canada for encouraging rebellion. His banishment ended in 1839. However, Gourlay’s concerns were shared by many people in Upper Canada. Read **Figure 5.19**. What were the consequences of the Crown and clergy reserves?

FIGURE 5.19 This quote by Buchanan was included in an 1839 British government report proposing reforms in Upper and Lower Canada. **Analyze:** Why does Buchanan describe settlers as being in an “almost hopeless condition”?

“These blocks of wild land place the actual settler in an almost hopeless condition, he can hardly expect during his lifetime, to see his neighbourhood contain a population sufficiently dense to support mills, schools, post-offices, places of worship, markets or shops; and, without these, civilization [erodes].... The inconvenience arising from the want [lack] of roads is very great.”

— Alexander Carlisle Buchanan, chief agent for the Superintendence of Emigration to Canada

ANALYZING AND CONTEXTUALIZING
TEXT SOURCES

When you analyze text sources, it is important to contextualize, or study them in their historical context. Thinking about the time period in which a source was written, and who it was written by, can help you understand how and why it was created. It can also help you understand its significance today. For example, we know very little about the children of the past: what they did each day, what they thought about, and how they felt about their lives. Before there were public schools, only children who had a wealthy or well-educated family learned how to read and write. Letters, diaries, and drawings created by these children are treasured by historians because they reveal how the children saw their lives and offer different perspectives.

Eleanora Hallen, one of 10 children, was born in England in 1823. Her father was an Anglican clergyman. In England, the family had servants to cook and to care for the children, and a live-in governess to teach the children. The children studied reading and writing, arithmetic, Latin, geography, drawing, music, and dancing. To support such a large household, the family decided to move to Canada in 1835, where there would be new and possibly better opportunities to succeed.

In this activity, you will analyze and contextualize excerpts from Hallen’s diary in **Figures 5.20** and **5.21**. Use the evidence to help you answer the following inquiry question: What was life like for some children in Canada during the 1800s?

HOW TO ANALYZE AND CONTEXTUALIZE A TEXT SOURCE

Start by closely reading **Figure 5.20** and **Figure 5.21**, using the steps outlined on page 57. What type of source is it? When and where was it created? Also examine the word choice the author uses and the details she includes. Compare the methods Hallen uses to record her thoughts and experiences with the technologies that you would use today.

STEP 1

Review the events and conditions occurring at the time. What was happening in Upper Canada in this period? Hallen rarely mentions events that were happening in the wider world in her diary. Why do you think this may be?

STEP 2

Examine what the source reveals about life at the time. What details does Hallen include about her daily life? How was her life in Upper Canada different from her life back in England?

STEP 3

Examine Hallen’s position in society. What do these diary excerpts suggest about the ways in which boys’ lives differed from girls’ lives in settler families?

STEP 4

Compare the source to the present day. How was Hallen’s life as a settler in Upper Canada different from your life today? Are there ways in which her life sounds similar to yours?

STEP 5

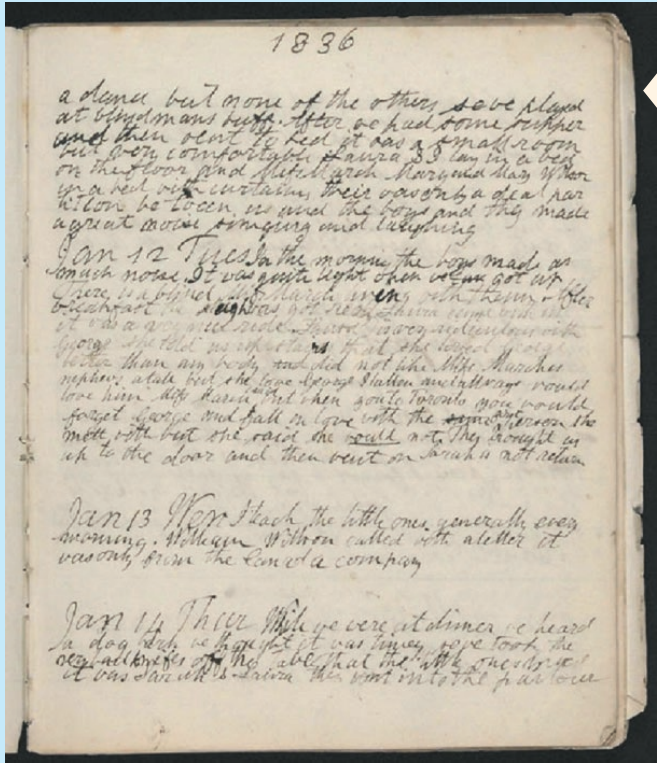


FIGURE 5.20 These excerpts from Eleanora Hallen’s diary include entries from November 1835, when the Hallens first arrived at their new home in Upper Canada, and end several months later, in March 1836.



Excerpts from Eleanora Hallen’s Diary
Nov. 5, 1835 I suppose it is a nice little log house, all with the bare logs
Nov. 13 We have 20 fowls [fowls] that I feed we have also two pigs
Nov. 16 We have only the sofa 3 rickety stools and two chairs to sit on
Nov. 18 My father and George are chopping in the wood
Jan. 13, 1836 ... I teach the little ones generally every morning
Jan. 19 It is my birthday we had some sauce for dinner I am thirteen
Jan. 22 In the morning I gett up be fore the rest generally and put breakfast after breakfast Mary washes the tea things Sarah generally puts dinner and then Sarah and Mary washes it up Mary and I make the beds. either of us put tea and I wash them up.
Jan. 31 we have but three dishes one of them very much cracked
Feb. 1 It is dreadfully cold we can hardly keep ourselves warm.
Feb. 5 the oil is frozen in the lamps we had rice and aples for dinner The little ones have dinner in the parlour [as] the table cant hold all of us. The cat has burn her back quite brown
Mar. 8 In the morning I went into the wood with the sleigh and made a slide up & down a hill. When I came in their were too haunches of venison the Indian had come again & he had had some pork instead
Mar. 12 Saturday is a busy day as we have to make it tidy for Sunday
Mar. 14 I began to make a pair of mokasins for myself [as] I have no shoes to fit me

FIGURE 5.21 This page from Hallen’s diary, written in March 1836, includes sketches of 10 of the Hallen children. The children are organized by age, from left to right. Sarah was the oldest, and Grace was the youngest. One child, Edith, died before the family moved to Upper Canada.



FIGURE 5.22 A logging bee is depicted in this lithograph of William P. Kay's 1834 painting called *Process of Clearing the Town Plot at Stanley*. It was published by George Ackermann in 1836. **Analyze:** What can you learn about logging bees and the workers by looking closely at this painting?

working bee an occasion when neighbours work together to accomplish a major task for one member of the community

WORKING BEES

In some communities today, the school, community centre, or place of worship is where people come together to raise funds, socialize, and celebrate. Because there were few of these places in the backwoods of early Canada, social events were rare.

A **working bee** was an event that allowed early settlers to socialize while accomplishing a large task at the same time. Working bees were held for building barns, shearing sheep, picking apples, and cutting down trees. Twenty men with five oxen could clear about two hectares of land in one day (a hectare is about the size of a football field). Look at **Figure 5.22**, which shows a group of men working at a logging bee. What might make a logging bee different from other working bee events?

Preparing for a working bee took a lot of effort. Women would bake, cook, and clean for two to three days, preparing for the celebratory meal and party that often followed. In **Figures 5.23** and **5.24**, settler Susanna Moodie and historian Catherine Anne Wilson offer their views of working bees. How do these views compare?

“In the bush, where hands are few, and labour commands an enormous rate of wages, [working bees] are considered indispensable, and much has been written in their praise; but to me, they present the most disgusting picture of a bush life. They are noisy, riotous, drunken meetings, often terminating in violent quarrels, sometimes even in bloodshed. Accidents of the most serious nature often occur, and very little work is done.”

— Susanna Moodie, *backwoods settler and author*

“Through reciprocal [mutual] labour, the farm family was able to [increase the value of their land]. It was also better able to cope with risks.... This was especially true in newly settled areas where population was highly dispersed and kin networks were not yet established. If your barn burnt, your fields were flooded, or your husband was killed, you needed to be able to rely on reciprocal aid rather than face these disasters on your own.”

— Catherine Anne Wilson, *historian*

FIGURE 5.23 In her 1852 book, *Roughing It in the Bush*, Moodie describes her experience as a settler in Upper Canada in the 1830s. In this excerpt, Moodie gives her view of working bees. **Analyze:** Why would a historian studying working bees value Moodie's eyewitness account?

FIGURE 5.24 In 2001, Wilson, a historian, gives her view of working bees. **Analyze:** How is a historian's account different from an eyewitness account?

HISTORY AT WORK

RESEARCHER

Have you ever noticed a building in your neighbourhood that looks like it came from another era? Maybe it did. Some old buildings are protected from demolition because they are valuable evidence of our past. The government and other agencies, such as the Ontario Heritage Trust, help to determine which buildings to protect.

Erin Semande (**Figure 5.25**) is a researcher with the Ontario Heritage Trust. Her job is to assess the historical significance of a property and help determine if the government should protect it. To do this, Semande examines primary and secondary sources. She interviews people knowledgeable about the property and the time period when the building was constructed. Semande has travelled to

almost every corner of the province to visit buildings she is assessing—sometimes even exploring buildings that have been boarded up for decades.

After her research is complete, Semande writes her assessment, which is called a Statement of Significance report. By using the same criteria for every property, Semande makes sure her assessments are fair. She has helped to preserve and protect many important buildings in Ontario, including many that date back to the mid-1800s.

Semande has always had a passion for history. She grew up visiting local museums and historical sites and studied history in university. She completed a Master's Degree in Public History. Semande's work highlights how an interest in Canadian history can lead to a satisfying career.



FIGURE 5.25 Semande poses in front of Barnum House in Grafton, Ontario. It was built around 1819.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. What criteria would you use to determine if a building is historically significant?
2. What skills would you need to assess the significance of a historic building?

CHOOSING NEIGHBOURS

Many settlers purposefully settled in areas where others from their extended family were living. They also tried to settle in areas with people who spoke the same language, practised the same faith, or had served in the same military regiment. These choices helped settlers achieve a strong sense of community with their neighbours. Settlers who made their requests before their lands were assigned could choose their neighbours. Those who tried to do it afterwards, however, had a more difficult time.

Richard Pierpoint was a Black Loyalist who fought for the British in the American Revolution. **Figure 5.26** is a depiction of Pierpoint in battle. Because of his loyalty to Britain, he, like other Black Loyalists, was given his **emancipation**, or freedom, from slavery. In 1788, Pierpoint received a land grant in the Niagara region, where he was one of the few Black Loyalist settlers.

Pierpoint travelled around Upper Canada as a storyteller in the Black community. Throughout his travels, he noticed that Black Loyalists had received land grants all across the province, making it difficult for them to form a close-knit community. Pierpoint and 18 other Black Loyalists wrote a petition to Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe. Pierpoint's petition came to be known as "The Petition of Free Negroes." Read the petition in **Figure 5.27**. What are the Black Loyalists asking for?

emancipation freedom from slavery



FIGURE 5.26 This 2005 painting by Malcolm Jones shows Black Loyalist Richard Pierpoint. **Analyze:** What personality traits of Pierpoint can you infer from this painting?

Are petitions historically significant, even if they do not succeed?

"There are a number of negroes in this part of the country many of whom have been soldiers during the late war between Great Britain & America, and others who were born free with a few who have come into Canada since the peace.

Your petitioners therefore humbly pray that their situation may be taken into consideration, and if your Excellency should see fit to allow them a tract of country to settle on, separate from the white settlers."

— *Petition by Black Loyalists, including Richard Pierpoint*

FIGURE 5.27 This petition to the government was written in 1794 by a group of Black Loyalists, including Pierpoint. The request in the petition did not succeed. **Analyze:** Why would the petitioners ask for Black settlers to be separate from other settlers?

BECOMING A COMMUNITY OF EQUALS

There were many Loyalist families for whom life in Canada would have felt like a step backwards. They left behind established homes and farms, connected social circles, and an easier lifestyle.

For others, it was a step forward. Government land grants and assistance attracted many settlers. Read **Figure 5.28**, an excerpt from a letter written by Joseph Willcocks to his brother in Ireland. What reasons does Willcocks give for being happy with his new life in Upper Canada? As you read the quote, keep in mind that, in 1800, many societies had social rankings. Often, people with money and status did not treat those with less money and status very well.

What were some intended and unintended consequences of settling in Canada in the early 1800s?

"Dear Brother

Remember me to all my friends, let me know particularly about my dear father's health. I wish he knew how much I am respected here, in fact I feel as if I was regenerated. I am here among rational beings, men though they are high in rank & fortune know themselves to be men & will be friendly & kind to you, [unlike officers, clerks, and busybodies in Dublin who] ... look down [upon] the rest of mankind with contempt."

— *Joseph Willcocks, settler in Upper Canada*

To survive in the backwoods, all settlers, no matter which social class they came from, had to work hard. Farming the land and other large tasks were tough work. In **Figure 5.29**, Loyalist John Kilborn gives his thoughts on the attractions of a settler's life. Although Kilborn is writing in the 1860s, he is reflecting on his 70 years living in Upper Canada. What does he remember fondly?

"[The] state of society, however humble was in many respects superior to the present. All the parties then were more or less dependent on each other for ... assistance, and all felt more or less interested in each others' condition and prosperity.... All were ... friends."

— *John Kilborn, settler in Upper Canada*

FIGURE 5.28 Willcocks wrote this letter to his brother in Dublin, Ireland, in 1800. **Analyze:** What differences does Willcocks describe between life in early Canada and life in Dublin, Ireland, at the time?

FIGURE 5.29 Kilborn reflects on growing up in Upper Canada in the early 1800s. **Analyze:** What does Kilborn think makes up for the "humble" circumstances of settler life?

CHECK-IN

- HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE** Choose one first-person account of life as an early settler that you found interesting. What does it reveal about life in the early 1800s?
- HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE** How do you think the actions of early settlers shaped the community that you live in today?
- FORMULATE QUESTIONS** Develop a set of questions that would help you conduct an inquiry about how communities began in the backwoods. Your questions should ask how, who, what, when, where, and why.