

Richard Pierpoint, Freed Black Loyalist; Served in the American Revolutionary War, the War of 1812 (1744-1837)



Richard Pierpoint was born in 1744 in Bundu, in what is now Senegal. When he was approximately 16 years old he was captured and sold to a slave trader. He was sent by ship across the Atlantic Ocean, and having survived the difficult voyage, was sold to a British officer in New England named Pierpoint in 1760. Richard Pierpoint would have acted as the Officer's personal servant. In his life he was also known as Black Dick and Captain Dick. It is important to note that his African name is unknown, because upon purchase it was discarded and he was

given the Christian name Richard.

In 1776 the American Revolution broke out, and many African American slaves were offered freedom on the condition that they fought as Loyalists with the British forces. Pierpoint became one of approximately a dozen former black slaves who fought for the British with the Butler's Rangers, a loyalist battalion located in Fort Niagara, New York. When the British lost the American War of Independence Pierpoint evacuated across the Niagara River to Upper Canada along with scores of fellow loyalists. When he arrived in Canada, he became a free man for the first time since he was 16.

Very little is known about Richard Pierpoint's life. His real name is unknown, no drawings or paintings were made of him, so his appearance is unknown. He never married or had children, and it is unknown whether he could read or write. What is known is that the majority of his life was spent as a slave, a farmer, and general labourer for hire.

What is known about Richard Pierpoint's life emerges from a series of petitions he signed and/or sent to the Upper Canadian government. For example, in 1794, when he was 50 he signed the "Petition of Free Negroes" which requested that free blacks who served as British Loyalists in the American Revolutionary War be given land adjacent to each other, so that they may live close together and grow as a community. The petition was rejected, and he abandoned the small plot of land he was given. It is assumed that he survived as a labourer until the War of 1812 broke out, because he disappears from the historical record until this point.

When the War of 1812 broke out, Pierpoint sent a petition to the government of Upper Canada offering to raise a group of "coloured men" to fight under the British banner for Upper Canada against the Americans. The petition was initially rejected, but when not enough white volunteers offered to serve in the military, the "Coloured Corps of Upper Canada" was approved. Richard Pierpoint immediately signed up to serve with the corps, despite being 68 years of age. Despite his leadership and wealth of experience engaging in combat with Americans, Pierpoint was overlooked for command in favour of a white tavern owner, and Pierpoint diligently served as a private in the battle group he was instrumental in creating.

The Coloured Corps participated in many battles along the Niagara region, and in 1813 were upgraded from a simple infantry unit to an elite branch of the Royal Engineers. When the war concluded the unit was disbanded in 1815. At this time all veterans were eligible for 100 acres of dense forest for them to

clear and homestead. At his advanced age and failing health, Pierpoint did not want to live in an isolated cabin in the woods to end his days. He sent a final petition to the Upper Canada government that essentially revealed everything that is known about Pierpoint, including his birthplace, the details of his enslavement, and his heroic service in two wars. However, the petition request was not for a less secluded homestead; it was for one-way passage by ship back to his original home of Bundu. This petition was likewise rejected, but Pierpoint persevered to improve his living situation. Despite his age he was able to clear away the forest surrounding his land grant and built a homestead near what is now the town of Fergus, becoming a property owner for the first time in 1822, at the age of 78.

It is possible he lived long enough to see the Coloured Corps reformed in 1837 to defend the Upper Canada from William Lyon Mackenzie's rebels. Five Coloured Corps companies were raised and the unit stayed in the field in one form or another until 1851, one of the longest and most distinguished service records of any Canadian militia unit.

When he died, Pierpoint was buried on his own land; unfortunately, the exact site of his grave has been long forgotten. But he left behind a paper trail that intrigues and tantalizes history buffs to this day. Pierpoint's legacy also helps to remind us that the War of 1812 was not a just another Anglo civil war.