

## **Race Relations in Halifax, Nova Scotia, During the Mid-Victorian Quest for Reform**

David A. Sutherland

Volume 7, numéro 1, 1996

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031101ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/031101ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Sutherland, D. A. (1996). Race Relations in Halifax, Nova Scotia, During the Mid-Victorian Quest for Reform. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 7(1), 35–54.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/031101ar>

### Résumé de l'article

L'auteur analyse la dynamique raciale dans la capitale de la Nouvelle-Écosse pendant la décennie de 1840 et au début des années 1850. Les Noirs de Halifax ont cherché activement à sortir de leur marginalité en participant aux politiques réformistes, s'attaquant par le fait même à l'oligarchie néo-écossaise et à l'esclavage en Amérique. La société blanche réagit de façon contradictoire en se montrant tantôt inflexible, tantôt prête au compromis. La ségrégation finit par prévaloir sur l'intégration, aboutissement qui correspondait plus aux préjugés des Blancs qu'aux souhaits des Noirs.

## Race Relations in Halifax, Nova Scotia, During the Mid-Victorian Quest for Reform

DAVID A. SUTHERLAND

ON 29 JULY 1847, RACIAL CONFLICT DRAMATICALLY ERUPTED IN HALIFAX, Nova Scotia. Several hundred black and white colonials fought in the streets of the city's downtown core. According to one observer, "the *mêlée* was frightful." Having started in the market square, fighting moved through several downtown streets. For two hours disorder prevailed, featuring "racing and chasing, flying of missiles, crashing of windows, thumping and striking with fists and clubs, levelling of combatants, wounded heads and faces."<sup>1</sup> While minor in comparison with many of the riots taking place elsewhere in mid-century British America, the incident alarmed contemporaries, who feared their city was becoming host to mounting ethnic, sectarian and military unrest. As it turned out, large-scale racial strife would not become a feature of life in pre-Confederation Nova Scotia.<sup>2</sup> The 1847 incident is significant, however, primarily because it demonstrated a determination, emerging within Halifax's black community, to become involved with mainstream politics. July's violence also indicated that demands for racial equality would not go uncontested. Black assertion provoked white resistance, launching a struggle destined to endure in Nova Scotia. The purpose of this paper is to explore the genesis and legacy of the July 1847 racial confrontation in Nova Scotia's capital.

Existing studies say little about black involvement in the overall campaign for reform in mid-nineteenth century Nova Scotia. In part, this neglect

---

This paper has benefited from comments provided by participants in the Graduate/Faculty Seminar in History at Dalhousie University and, in particular, from the observations of Judith Fingard and David States.

1 The foregoing description was drawn from these Halifax newspapers: *Acadian Recorder*, 31 July 1847; *Morning Post*, 30 July 1847; *Sun*, 30 July 1847; and *Times*, 3 August 1847.

2 For comment on a major riot involving soldiers from the garrison, see the *Sun*, 10 May 1847, and the *Times*, 11 May 1847. Other incidents of collective violence in Halifax are mentioned in the *Morning Chronicle*, 13 May 1845; the *Sun*, 30 September 1846; and the *Acadian Recorder*, 2 January 1847. All this remained minor in comparison with the ethnic and sectarian warfare in neighbouring Saint John, New Brunswick. Those troubles are analysed by Scott W. See, *Riots in New Brunswick: Orange Nativism and Social Violence in the 1840s* (Toronto, 1993).

derives from scarcity of source material.<sup>3</sup> Gaps in the record continue to impede inquiry into the structure and mentality of Nova Scotia's small and precariously situated black minority, but rigorous sifting of existing sources, especially the local press, reveals that blacks living within and around Halifax did become engaged in the quest for reform. Far from being inert or simply used as pawns by others, blacks initiated participation in the growing demand for responsible government and opposition to slavery. Any such effort was bound to be controversial since, apart from the colony's Mi'kmaq population, blacks ranked as the most marginalised of all Nova Scotian communities.<sup>4</sup>

The poverty and powerlessness that haunted Nova Scotians of African descent during the 1840s were not a function of recent arrival. A small number of blacks had been present in Halifax since its founding in 1749, serving primarily as domestic slaves. Their numbers and status increased significantly following the American Revolution. Several thousand African-American Loyalists, large numbers of whom had gained their freedom during the war, settled in Nova Scotia. Most became residents of segregated rural communities, two of which, Preston and Hammonds Plains, were located on the outskirts of Halifax. Poor-quality farm land and systemic white racism fostered unrest among these immigrants, so much so that, in 1791, approximately one-third of black Nova Scotians departed for Sierra Leone. A parallel exodus, this one involving black militants from Jamaica, occurred a decade later. Such upheavals left Nova Scotia's black community small, scattered and internally disorganised. The one major improvement in their collective position involved a gradual withering away of the institution of slavery, as humanitarian attitudes among the judiciary made it increasingly difficult for slave owners to enforce their property rights.<sup>5</sup>

During the closing months of the War of 1812, another major influx of blacks into Nova Scotia occurred. These were people from coastal Virginia and Maryland, who sought freedom amidst the chaos of a British invasion. Carried north aboard vessels of the Royal Navy, they initially found work in Halifax and later joined surviving black settlers in segregated clusters east and west of peninsular Halifax. Promised land, along with government supplies of tools,

---

3 Most surviving government records relating to Halifax blacks are found in Charles B. Ferguson, ed., *A Documentary Study of the Establishment of the Negroes in Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1948). Extant private records appear as extracts in Frank S. Boyd, Jr., ed., *McKerrow: A Brief History of Blacks in Nova Scotia, 1783-1895* (Halifax, 1976).

4 For interaction between the Mi'kmaq and Nova Scotian white society, see Jennifer Reid, *Myth, Symbol, and Colonial Encounter: British and Mi'kmaq in Acadia, 1700-1867* (Ottawa, 1985) and L.F.S. Upton, *Micmacs and Colonists: Indian-White Relations in the Maritimes, 1713-1867* (Vancouver, 1979).

5 For the history of black Nova Scotia before 1812, see James Walker, *The Black Loyalists* (New York, 1976); Lennox O. Picart, "The Trelawny Maroons and Sir John Wentworth: The Struggle to Maintain Their Culture, 1796-1800," MA thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1993; Bridglal Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land* (Halifax, 1990).

building material, food and clothing, these pioneers hoped to make the frontier a place of economic and social achievement.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, over the next 20 years they experienced great difficulty. Living on small plots of rocky ground to which they had only provisional title, numbed by protracted economic recession and harassed by hostile white neighbours, black residents of Preston, Beechville and Hammonds Plains survived through subsistence farming and the sale of their labour in Halifax. Life remained precarious, and periodically rural black communities found themselves obliged to petition the Assembly for relief against famine.<sup>7</sup>

Assistance was provided, but with considerable reluctance. Nova Scotia's white-dominated government came to regard the colony's black community as a welfare problem. Moreover, as the local labour market became crowded with immigrants from Britain, black workers were viewed as surplus. By the mid-1830s, those in power were demanding the exclusion of new black immigrants and suggesting that existing black settlers be removed to other parts of the Empire. For the most part, however, blacks refused to leave Nova Scotia.<sup>8</sup> Their persistence derived in part from fear of being subjected to slavery, but it also reflected a strengthening of structure within the black community. The 1830s became a decade of institutional rebirth, mainly among the small core of blacks living in Halifax. This urban black presence – of over 500 people by 1838 – consisted largely of labourers, plus a few craftsmen and owners of small businesses. While relatively poor, they had begun to be knit together by marriage and shared experience. Eventually, an emerging sense of group identity led to demands for collective self-determination.<sup>9</sup>

---

6 The process of black settlement after 1815 is detailed by Fergusson, ed., *A Documentary Study*, 34-37. See also James Walker, "The Establishment of a Free Black Community in Nova Scotia, 1783-1840," in *The African Diaspora: Interpretive Essays*. M. L. Kilson and R. Rotberg, eds. (Cambridge, MA, 1976), 205-37.

7 For examples of relief petitions, see Public Archives of Nova Scotia, RG 5, series "P," Vol. 7 (1846), No. 22; Vol. 83 (1847), Nos. 117, 129, 130; Vol. 84 (1848), No. 70; Vol. 85 (1849), Nos. 8, 21, 85. Distress in white frontier settlements is explored by Robert Morgan, "'Poverty, Wretchedness, and Misery': The Great Famine in Cape Breton, 1845-1851," *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 6 (1986): 88-104.

8 White antagonism towards blacks is assessed by George E. Clarke, "White Niggers, Black Slavery: Slavery, Race, and Class in T.C. Haliburton's *The Clockmaker*," *Nova Scotia Historical Review* 14 (1994): 13-40. For American parallels, see Bette Fladeland, *Men and Brothers: Anglo-American Antislavery Cooperation* (Urbana, 1972), 91-92 and Robert L. Allen, *Reluctant Reformers: Racism and Social Reform Movements in the United States* (Washington, 1974), 13-14.

9 The Nova Scotian census of 1838 identifies 578 persons living in 138 "coloured" households: see Public Archives of Nova Scotia, RG 1, Vol. 448. The patronising and sometimes exploitive character of white philanthropy in early-nineteenth-century Halifax is assessed by Judith Fingard, "Attitudes Towards the Education of the Poor in Colonial Halifax," *Acadiensis* 2, 2 (Spring 1973): 15-42.

The leading exponent of reviving black consciousness was Richard Preston. A man probably of mixed-race ancestry, born into slavery in Virginia about 1791, Preston bought his freedom and, about 1816, arrived in Nova Scotia. Tall, literate and with a commanding personality, Preston quickly emerged as a leader within the local black population. Seeing organised religion as an avenue of opportunity, Preston became a lay preacher and then, in 1831, with backing from his own people, he travelled to London where he secured ordination as a Baptist minister. In the imperial capital, Preston made contact with leaders of the British antislavery movement, such as William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. These white philanthropists became a vital source of funds and moral encouragement for black activists in Nova Scotia. Returning to Nova Scotia in 1832, Preston brought an endowment of £600, money that made possible the construction of the Cornwallis Street African Chapel, housing Halifax's first all-black congregation. There Preston would serve as minister until his death in 1861.<sup>10</sup>

Lack of evidence impedes detailed reconstruction of activities within Halifax's black community during the 1830s. It is clear, however, that the African Chapel became the prime focus of black institutional activity. Its simple and cramped quarters were used for religious and educational services, as well as meetings of black secular organisations. The earliest of these, the African Friendly Society, was set up about 1831 for recreational activity and the provision of mutual welfare.<sup>11</sup> High on the agenda of black activists was projection of an image of black respectability, which could then be used to justify demands for expanded civil rights. Thus for Halifax blacks, a major triumph occurred in June 1838, when the African Friendly Society marched with whites in a parade held to commemorate Victoria's coronation. Most importantly, Nova Scotia's lieutenant-governor met with black leaders and accepted their address of congratulations to the new queen.<sup>12</sup>

Formal entry into Government House by black leaders came at a time when most whites viewed their "coloured" neighbours in decidedly negative terms. A British visitor to Halifax summed up mainstream opinion when he

---

10 Frank S. Boyd, Jr., "Richard Preston," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 8 (Toronto, 1985), 968-70. Boyd suggests that this leader's surname was changed to Preston following his arrival in Nova Scotia.

11 Fergusson, ed., *A Documentary Study*, 38-64; Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* (Montreal, 1971), 125-37; Walker, "The Establishment of a Free Black community," 230-36; Boyd, ed., *McKerrow*, 11-17. *The Morning Post*, 2 August 1846, reported that the Friendly Society then had a membership of 300.

12 The black marchers were described as being dressed in purple and carrying pink and blue flags: see the *Novascotian*, 5 July 1838. A parallel assertion of respectability had come in 1834, when the African Chapel petitioned the Assembly for help in setting up a Sunday School: see Public Archives of Nova Scotia, RG 5, series "P," Vol. 72, No. 44.

referred to the city's Negroes as being "dirty" and "ill-clad" folk who, since their arrival in Nova Scotia, had "made little or no improvement in their condition."<sup>13</sup> By the 1830s, however, such prejudice was being challenged, thanks to the spread of liberal and humanitarian ideals throughout the North Atlantic world. Enthusiasm for reform was in the ascendant and at least some reformers insisted that black emancipation should be high on the agenda for change. The first major breakthrough came in Britain when, in 1833, a reform-dominated Parliament abolished slavery throughout the Empire. That bold innovation led to a sustained campaign against the slave trade, which combined with growing agitation in the United States for an end to Southern slavery.<sup>14</sup> Events abroad impinged on the consciousness of Halifax blacks, as is revealed by the coronation street parade of 1838. On that occasion, the African Friendly Society carried a banner emblazoned with the words "Victoria and Freedom."<sup>15</sup>

Reform consciousness was also building in Nova Scotia, especially within its capital. By the late 1830s, Halifax's press was full of discussion of social and political innovation, ranging from curbs on the liquor trade to establishment of elected institutions of municipal government. In 1836, a heterogeneous collection of reformers, campaigning for "power to the people," gained control of the colony's House of Assembly.<sup>16</sup> During the election campaign, reform spokesmen said nothing about race relations, but in Halifax on voting day blacks appeared at the polls in support of reform leader Joseph Howe. None voted, since their "tickets of location" were deemed to be inferior to freehold title.<sup>17</sup> But the incident marked the dawning of black determination to become involved in provincial politics.

In 1840, Nova Scotian public affairs underwent a major transformation. Reacting to rebellion in the Canadas and Durham's call for a liberalisation of authority across British America, London sent a reform-minded lieutenant-

---

13 James S. Buckingham, *Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and the Other British Provinces in America* (London, 1843), 340-41. For the comments of other outsiders of this era, see Hugh Murray, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of British America* (Edinburgh, 1839), 214 and Campbell Hardy, *Sporting Adventures in the New World* (London, 1855), 19.

14 The British abolitionist campaign of the 1830s is assessed by Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns* (London, 1992); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707- 1837* (London, 1994), 350-60.

15 *Novascotian*, 5 July 1838.

16 The mobilisation of reform sentiment in Nova Scotia during the 1830s has been explored by J. Murray Beck, *Joseph Howe* (Kingston/Montreal, 1982/83), Vol. 1, Chapters 7-10 and Brian Cuthbertson, *Johnny Bluenose at the Polls* (Halifax, 1994), Chapter 10.

17 The only account of what happened in 1836 comes from a speech made by Howe before a black audience during the election of 1847. He argued that the oligarchy had treated blacks as "paupers, and niggers [*sic*], and broom merchants, without souls to be saved or rights to be regarded." Howe's listeners shouted out their approval. The exchange is reported in the *Novascotian*, 10 May 1847.

governor to Nova Scotia. At year's end, after Howe and other political moderates had been appointed to office, the new administration sought a mandate from the electorate.<sup>18</sup> In Halifax, the election had as one of its features a partisan struggle for the allegiance of the local black community. The contestants were an early version of what would quickly evolve into two rival parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives.

Few black adult males in and around the Nova Scotian capital were qualified to vote in 1840. But, as the white power structure became internally polarised, every vote counted. Moreover, even the unenfranchised could be used as a cheering section or an instrument for the intimidation of one's opponents. Well endowed with money but short on manpower, Howe's political foes made overtures to Halifax blacks through Richard Preston, naming him to their constituency organising committee. Why Preston agreed to serve is hinted at in a speech given by one of the local Conservative candidates. Rural blacks, he said, "lived in a state of grievous want," largely because the reform-dominated Assembly elected in 1836 had neglected to convert their provisional land titles into freeholds.<sup>19</sup> It was also alleged that some Liberals were republicans in disguise, intent on carrying Nova Scotia into the United States. In effect, black Haligonians were being told that the freedom they derived from the British connection might disappear, should Liberals prevail at the polls.<sup>20</sup>

Liberal organisers countered by working through other leaders within the black community, particularly Septimus Clarke, Sr., an ambitious farmer from Preston.<sup>21</sup> No record has survived of the arguments used by Clarke and his political allies, but presumably they stressed that Howe, now a confidant of Lieutenant-Governor Falkland, would be in a position to reward his supporters after the election. Liberal persuasion and organisational tactics prevailed. On voting day Howe's friends chartered one of the harbour ferries and used it to bring rural blacks into downtown Halifax. On landing, "the African gentry . . . formed themselves into a procession, and . . . with colours flying" marched

---

18 For Falkland's mission and the political transformation it precipitated in Nova Scotia, see Peter Burroughs, "Lucius B. Cary," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 11 (Toronto, 1982), 155-56 and D. A. Sutherland, "James W. Johnston," *ibid.*, Vol. 10 (Toronto, 1972), 383-88.

19 *Novascotian*, 29 October 1840. The speaker was Beamish Murdoch, a sometime reformer. His career is explored by K.G. Pryke, "Beamish Murdoch," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 10 (Toronto, 1972), 539-40.

20 For Liberal and Conservative jockeying for position in 1840, see D.A. Sutherland, "The Merchants of Halifax, 1815-1850: A Commercial Class in Pursuit of Metropolitan Status," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1975, chapter 7.

21 Clarke, born in 1787, settled on a ten-acre farm outside Halifax in 1816. Almost immediately he began petitioning for additional land, but got nothing until 1841. For a profile of this black activist, see Frank Boyd, Jr., "Septimus D. Clarke," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 8 (Toronto, 1985), 159-60.

to the Court House, there taking "complete possession of the passage for the entrée and the exit of the voters."<sup>22</sup> Most likely, few blacks got to vote, but their high profile in the 1840 election suggests that Nova Scotian politics had entered an era of racial integration. Conservative spokesmen did not protest this innovation since they too had attempted to recruit the black community.<sup>23</sup>

The 1840 election ended in a decisive Liberal victory and, for a time, Howe emerged as the most important of Falkland's executive advisors. At year's end, some 200 black friends of the new government dined and then danced at a party in Preston that lasted until dawn.<sup>24</sup> Expectations that reform politics would serve black interests were quickly confirmed. Within months Howe had secured changes in government land policy, such that most black settlers became freeholders, often with title to much more than their original ten-acre plots.<sup>25</sup> Responding to this achievement at a New Year's Day banquet in January 1843, black leaders from in and around Halifax ended the festivities with toasts to all their heroes, beginning with William Wilberforce and ending with Joseph Howe. The Liberal leader, it was announced, deserved to be celebrated as "the vindicator and protector of our privileges."<sup>26</sup>

Black pride drew reinforcement from events beyond the sphere of politics. For example, in December 1841, the African Friendly Society paraded with whites to celebrate the birth of a male heir to the British crown. As in 1838, black leaders were welcomed into Government House, there to present a formal address which boasted of how their community enjoyed "the blessings of a wise and enlightened government."<sup>27</sup> But such flourishes came against a background of persistent white hostility. The increasingly influential

---

22 *Morning Post*, 5 November 1840. No poll books have survived, and election results were reported in so general a manner that it is impossible to estimate how many blacks voted or whom they supported.

23 *Times*, 10 November 1840, complained of voter intimidation at the polls, but did not direct its observations against blacks.

24 *Acadian Recorder*, 16 January 1841. The *Morning Herald* of 28 December 1840 reported that, on Christmas Day, 100 black supporters of the Conservatives had dined at the city home of Scipio Cooper, a black truckman. The *Sun* of 23 January 1846 suggests this may have been an annual event.

25 Fergusson, ed., *A Documentary Study*, 46-54; *Novascotian*, 9 January 1843. Security of title had the ironic effect of allowing people to sell out at Preston and move from there either to the less-overcrowded Hammonds Plains or into the city of Halifax. Some of the migrants may have pioneered in the settlement of Africville, a quasi-rural community at the north end of the Halifax peninsula. For background on this controversial black enclave, see Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis W. Magill, *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community*, rev. ed. (Toronto, 1987).

26 *Novascotian*, 9 January 1843. This was a meeting of the Africa Constitutional Society, which seems to have been a short-lived organisation set up to promote the Liberal cause.

27 *Morning Herald*, 31 December 1841.



newspapers of early-Victorian Halifax persistently referred to blacks as “niggers” or “blackberries,” and often ridiculed them with quotes in what passed for black dialect. Press comment on race relations implied that blacks remained inferior to whites in both intellect and character. One local editor, after describing black Nova Scotians as “an unproductive, destitute, and *begging* class,” bluntly argued that “we have often felt doubt whether the Slavery of the Southern States was not in *truth* and *practicality*, a more suitable life for the Negro than the miserable state they live in at Preston.”<sup>28</sup> Blacks who migrated to the city and found gainful employment also came under attack. For example, an anonymous correspondent complained about the “dark harpies” who allegedly came “prowling about the streets at night, calling aloud after persons, and making use of the most disgusting language.”<sup>29</sup> Significantly, negrophobic comments appeared in newspapers of every political persuasion.

Black efforts to project a positive image were compromised in the early 1840s by internal factional strife. Lack of evidence makes it difficult to assess the situation, but it does appear that Richard Preston had critics within the black Baptist flock. On occasion these differences led to violence. For example, in July 1842, members of one group seized possession of the African Chapel, only to have their opponents smash in the front door and drive them out. The affair ended with black partisans being arrested and brought before the courts, charged with assault. It did not help that women had been in the forefront of the violence.<sup>30</sup>

Black aspirations faced other obstacles, perhaps the most ominous of which related to the growing presence in Halifax of Irish Roman Catholics. By the 1840s, thanks to sustained immigration, these newcomers made up almost 40 per cent of Halifax’s population. Poor but infused with a strong collective consciousness, Irish Catholics increasingly crowded into the downtown parts of the city, where they sought both living space and opportunities for work. Often, it appears, both came at the expense of blacks.<sup>31</sup> Irish Catholic assertion

---

28 *Morning Post*, 27 May 1843. For other examples of derogatory comments, see the *Morning Post* of 22 July 1841, 18 February 1843, and 8 January 1845, and the *Morning Herald*, of 12 May 1843.

29 *Morning Herald*, 8 September 1843. On this occasion, nine women were arrested, convicted of disorderly behaviour and sent to jail. A graphic expression of white neurosis about the predatory behaviour of black females is provided by a short story entitled “The Halifax Murder, a Tale of the Colonies.” Written by an officer in the garrison, it appears in the *Sun* of 7 May 1845.

30 *Morning Herald*, 6 October 1841; *Morning Post*, 2 July 1842. The *Morning Herald* of 12 June 1843, reported that Septimus Clarke, Jr. had been hired as a special constable to deal with breaches of the peace within the urban black community.

31 The *Morning Post* of 7 May 1842, describing black waterfront labourers singing work songs as they unloaded incoming vessels, reported: “[A]nother bale is just landed – and the broad grin and the loud laugh passes among those light hearted descendants of Africa.” The aggressive behaviour of newly arrived Irish Roman Catholics is detailed in Terrence Punch, *Irish Halifax: The Immigrant Generation, 1815-1859* (Halifax, 1981).

also extended into the political realm. In the election of 1843, they used block voting tactics to get one of their spokesmen onto the Liberal ticket and into the Assembly as a member for Halifax. Howe's affiliation with the city's Irish Roman Catholics, a group advocating repeal of the parliamentary union between Britain and Ireland, contributed to his ousting from Falkland's government early in 1844.<sup>32</sup> Halifax blacks then faced a strategic dilemma. Should they continue to back Howe, now that he lacked power and had formed an alliance with immigrants whose competitive presence jeopardised black aspirations? This question would not be answered with any certainty until the climactic election of 1847.

In the meantime, Halifax's black community continued to develop in terms of its organisational infrastructure. In January 1846, women of the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal congregation organised a "soirée" to raise funds for building a church. Held at a public hall, the affair attracted 200 participants, some white but the majority black. "All," a local paper reported, were "comfortably, and in some instances tastefully dressed." Prominent among those in attendance was Richard Preston, whose presence suggested that denominational differences did not seriously divide black society in Halifax. After the serving of fruit, cakes, tea and coffee, followed by the singing of hymns, Preston prayed "long and loud for the happiness of the African race, morally, politically, socially, and spiritually." Other speakers followed, including Joseph Howe, who boasted "about one colored man being equal to twelve white, in case a war should make it necessary to fight the Yankees."<sup>33</sup>

Arising out of this get-together was the decision to establish the African Abolition Society, an auxiliary of a parent society in Boston. Its first meeting took place in July 1846. With Richard Preston presiding as chair, members and guests listened to a series of testimonies from those who had lived as slaves in the United States. Identification with developments in the neighbouring republic would remain a prominent feature of the Society's activities over the next 15 years. Echoing what had become a tradition among black New Englanders, Halifax abolitionists decided to have an annual gathering to commemorate the 1833 liberation of slaves throughout the British Empire.<sup>34</sup>

---

32 The *Novascotian* of 27 November 1843 claimed that most Preston-area blacks supported the Liberals in this contest. Black support for the Conservatives was reported in the *Times* on 9 January 1844. A somewhat jaundiced *Morning Herald*, 17 November 1843, commented, "It is astonishing how soon the value of a coloured man is discovered during the election."

33 *Sun*, 23-26 January 1846; *Morning Post*, 29 January 1846. The events leading up to the establishment of a black Methodist congregation are explained by T. Watson Smith, *History of the Methodist Church*, Vol. 2 (Halifax, 1890), 316.

34 *Novascotian*, 10 August 1846. No records of the African Abolition Society have survived. *Belcher's Farmer's Almanack* reported it as being in existence until 1862. For American celebration of 1833, see G.A. Levesque, *Black Boston* (New York, 1994), 328-29.

Halifax had its inaugural celebration of emancipation day on 3 August 1846. Following the example of many other local organisations, the Abolition Society made its summer gathering as public as possible. Proceedings began with gospel hymns and prayers at the African Meeting House. Richard Preston again played a key leadership role, offering an impassioned sermon that linked black pride with Christian mission. At the close of his address, the assembly erupted with cheers for Queen Victoria. Then, amidst waving flags and songs of praise, the company marched north to The Grove, a farm owned by the lieutenant-governor. Hundreds attended the event, including several notables from the white community. Press reports noted that “rational amusement,” in the form of games and dancing, lasted until mid-afternoon, when participants sat down for a lavish meal. The affair concluded with 14 toasts, dedicated to everything from “Africa, land of our forefathers,” through heroes of the abolitionist movement, to Nova Scotia and its benevolent Queen.<sup>35</sup>

The Abolition Society quickly became the most prominent institution within Halifax’s black community. Meeting usually once a month through the next several years, it used advertising to promote a lively agenda of speakers and entertainment. Whites occasionally came out to meetings and were welcome to speak, but the Society pursued a blacks-only policy when electing its executive.<sup>36</sup> Press coverage of abolitionist gatherings, while sometimes tinged with bias, offers clues about race relations and the character of black activism in early-Victorian Halifax. For example, in April 1847 it was noted that “a numerous and motley assemblage of all classes and all colours” had convened at Harmonic Hall to raise money on behalf of Robert A. Tripp, a recently arrived fugitive from slavery in the American South. Later, in June 1847, it was reported that members of an interracial audience “were kept in a perpetual roar of laughter by the lively sallies of wit” from abolitionist speakers. Moreover, press accounts noted that “the Ladies and Gentlemen of Color who composed the choir enhanced the amusement by their brilliant performance.” Such comments indicate that abolitionists employed a dynamic blend of indignation, humour and music to promote a message that, at least to some degree, crossed racial, class and gender lines within the city.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> *Sun*, 5 August 1846; *Morning Post*, 4 August 1846. Inspired by this achievement, the Society vowed to continue in operation “until the entire abolition of slavery has been secured”: *Nova-scotian*, 24 August 1846 (a reference kindly provided by Allen P. Stouffer). The Halifax group shifted its celebration to 1 August in 1855: see the *British Colonist*, 26 July 1855.

<sup>36</sup> In the period 1848-1854, a total of 36 men held executive office in the three black organisations listed in local directories. Of these, only eight appear in the 1838 or 1871 censuses as household heads. Their occupations included three farmers, three labourers, two barbers, plus a sailor and a shoemaker. Fees for participation in group activities ranged from 3 pence, to over 4 shillings. For an example of Society advertising, see the *British Colonist* of 15 January 1850.

<sup>37</sup> *Morning Post*, 7 April 1847. See also the *Times*, 6 April and 29 June 1847. Robert Tripp stayed in Halifax, becoming an executive officer of both the African Abolition Society and the African Union Society.

The highlight of abolitionist activities in Halifax involved the Society's summer picnic. In 1847 the affair began with a rally downtown, starting at 10:30 a.m. On this occasion, the commander of the British army garrison stationed in Halifax provided a military band, which led Society members through the streets *en route* to Government House. There, abolitionist leaders presented a formal address to the new Lieutenant-Governor, Sir John Harvey, and in return received vice-regal recognition in the form of a donation to their funds. Members cheered and then proceeded, without any expression of white resistance, to their picnic site, again at The Grove.<sup>38</sup>

Collective and public assertion of black consciousness carried risks, however, as was demonstrated in the provincial election of 1847. Building on the precedents of 1840 and 1843, black leaders made a determined effort to engage in mainstream Nova Scotian politics. On this occasion, the key role was played by Richard Preston, who again endorsed the Conservatives, now Nova Scotia's governing party. The premier, J.W. Johnston, could claim to be a friend of the black community, thanks to his insistence that blacks be admitted to membership on the grand jury of Halifax County.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, Howe, the leader of the opposition, had insulted blacks by suggesting that one of them could be hired "to horsewhip" retiring Lieutenant-Governor Falkland, as punishment for his meddling in partisan politics.<sup>40</sup> With Liberal newspapers assailing the Johnston administration for opening public office to black citizens, many of whom allegedly ranked no higher than "barbers . . . truckmen . . . brothel keepers . . . and convicted felons," Reverend Preston could make a persuasive argument that his people must support the party in power. Desperation may also have contributed to black alliance with the ruling Conservatives. Potato blight, spreading from Europe to Nova Scotia, had wiped out the major subsistence crop in black rural communities, rendering them dependent on public and private charity.<sup>41</sup>

---

38 *Times*, 27 July and 3 August 1847.

39 *The Sun*, 24 March 1845, saw this reform as being "too democratic," such as to make a "mockery" of responsible government. *The Morning Chronicle*, 7 June 1845, noted that blacks had also gained access to petit juries, one of them becoming foreman of the jury that decided an assault case against the controversial editor of the *Morning Post*.

40 *Sun*, 23 February 1846; *Novascotian*, 23 February 1846. The incident led to a formal reprimand of Howe by the House of Assembly. Black resentment of Howe's behaviour was articulated in the election of 1847. *The Standard*, 14 May 1847, reported Howe's long-time ally, Septimus Clarke, Sr., as complaining, "that gave me more pain than any thing he [Howe] could have said." Sensitivity on this point among Halifax blacks is expressed in an address to the Queen, elaborating their personal experience with slavery: see the *Morning Post*, 3 May 1847.

41 *Acadian Recorder*, 22 March 1845. Preston's campaign rhetoric in 1847 is reported in the *Standard*, 14 May 1847. *The Times* of 30 March 1847 commented that, in outlying black settlements, "some exist from week to week, ALTOGETHER on what they beg on a Saturday in the city."

Unanimity did not, however, prevail among Halifax-area blacks. A group led by Septimus Clarke, Sr. again declared in favour of Howe and the Liberals.<sup>42</sup> Uncertainty as to how the black vote would go prompted both parties to make a particularly vigorous effort to appeal to black electors, who lived mainly in the segregated rural communities of Preston and Hammonds Plains. Starting in May 1847, partisan delegations came out from the city to promote their cause before black audiences. In one incident at Hammonds Plains, blacks of a Liberal persuasion marched to the local schoolhouse, carrying a banner inscribed with the familiar words "Victoria and British Liberty." While awaiting the arrival of Howe, they were confronted by blacks who backed the Conservatives. Insults were exchanged between Septimus Clarke, Sr. and Richard Preston. While they were separated before blows could be landed, others engaged in a vigorous shoving match. Eventually, Howe's allies retreated, having salvaged their party insignia. This violence, internal to the black community, became a forerunner of a more serious confrontation, pitting blacks against whites.<sup>43</sup>

In the Halifax ridings, nominations for the upcoming general election took place on 29 July 1847. As a means of bolstering rank-and-file confidence and also intimidating their opponents, both parties made strenuous efforts to muster a large contingent of supporters. For Liberals, this meant assembling a partisan crowd drawn largely from among the city's Irish Catholic population. The Conservatives, who lacked strength among the white labouring poor, compensated by mustering their black allies. Some of these people came from the city, but another 300 were recruited from outlying rural settlements, particularly Hammonds Plains and Preston. Brought to the waterfront by steamer, this black cheering section, which consisted of men, women and children, rallied downtown at mid-morning. Equipped with blue ribands and party banners, black demonstrators paraded into the market-place, which by then held over 1,000 Liberals, almost all of whom were white. By prior agreement, the two factions took up positions on opposite sides of the square.

Despite some shoves and curses, relative order prevailed throughout the morning. At one o'clock everyone retired for refreshments and to escape the heat of midday. Returning about an hour later, after consuming both food and liquor, members of the crowd tried to resume the positions they had occupied

---

42 Septimus Clarke, Sr. appears to have shifted his position during the campaign. After initially supporting the Conservatives, he returned to an alliance with Howe. On this, see the *Standard*, 14 May 1847. Boyd, "Septimus D. Clarke," indicates that Clarke and Preston were more often friends than enemies.

43 *Sun*, 28 July 1847; *Novascotian*, 26 July 1847; *Acadian Recorder*, 31 July 1847. Earlier meetings in black neighbourhoods are mentioned in the *Standard*, 7, 14 and 28 May and 4 June 1847. Comments reported in the *Novascotian* of 10 May 1847 suggest that factionalism within the black community derived in part from rural resentment of the economic advantages enjoyed by their urban brethren.

before the break. But in the process arguments erupted. Angry words escalated into blows with fists and party banners. Quickly “a general row ensued,” which turned into a running battle, as the outnumbered blacks conducted a strategic retreat to the waterfront. Although several people were seriously wounded by flying cobblestones, no one died and property damage was negligible.<sup>44</sup> But the conflict had been serious enough to trigger heated debate over black involvement in the political process.

Conservative newspapers insisted that blacks were citizens who had a right to express their political opinions, particularly since many of them met the property qualification required to vote. Liberal editors countered by claiming that blacks were mercenaries, who had been drawn downtown by offers of free food. As for the issue of voting credentials, Halifax’s leading Irish Catholic newspaper insisted that the law was being interpreted in a manner that denied natural justice. Why, the editor asked, should some black man, living “in a miserable hut” and occupying “a five acre lot, scarcely fit for a sheep pasture,” be able to vote, when productive white labourers had no franchise, simply because they lived in rented accommodation.<sup>45</sup> This discussion, which raised fundamental questions about how to define “the people,” quickly became smothered by wrangling over the results of the election, held on 5 August 1847.

While voting patterns in the Halifax area cannot be reconstructed in complete detail, it appears that most urban black electors, along with those from Hammonds Plains, declared for the Conservatives. The people of Preston divided their support about evenly between government and opposition.<sup>46</sup> Overall among blacks, Richard Preston had proven to be more influential than Septimus Clarke, Sr. But a majority of white voters preferred Howe to Johnston. All the Halifax seats and a slim majority across the province went Liberal. Thus, when the new legislature met in February 1848, a non-confidence vote quickly ended Johnston’s tenure as premier. The Liberals came to power and would govern Nova Scotia throughout the next decade.<sup>47</sup> For blacks, the

---

44 The foregoing account has been drawn from the *Acadian Recorder*, 31 July 1847; the *Sun*, 30 July 1847; the *Morning Post*, 30 July 1847; the *Times*, 3 August 1847; and the *Standard*, 30 July 1847.

45 *Sun*, 4 August 1847; *Times* 3 August 1847. The Liberal-leaning *Sun* would return to the right-to-vote issue after the election. On 26 February 1851, it commented, “Shall illiterate Negro beggars, hundreds of them hardly raised in intellectual capacity above the inferior order of the animal creation, continue to be invested with the Elective Franchise, and the intelligent handicraftsmen, and labourers in masses – remain, as now shut out?” See also the *Sun* of 17 January 1851.

46 The *Times* of 10 August 1847 gives some detail on the voting pattern by geographic location within Halifax County. Analysis of interest-group alignment, and the events of 1848 can be found in Cuthbertson, *Johnny Bluenose*, 89-92; Beck, *Joseph Howe*, Vol. 1, Chapter 19.

47 J. Murray Beck, *Politics of Nova Scotia*, Vol. 1 (Tantallon, 1985), Chapters 5-6.

situation carried risks. Their sustained struggle to engage in the politics of responsible government had created a situation where key black leaders and a majority within the black community had become identified with the party now excluded from office. Most ominously, the negrophobic rhetoric found in the Liberal press suggested that the new administration might discriminate against Nova Scotia's black community.

Room for reconciliation between the governing Liberals and Halifax blacks did exist, however, particularly as long as Joseph Howe, the new Provincial Secretary, remained a dominant force in government. Energetic and imbued with a delight for the common pleasures of life, Howe seemed to bear no grudge towards black leaders, such as Richard Preston.<sup>48</sup> A significant demonstration of Howe's broad-mindedness came in August 1850, when he turned Belmont, the Howe family estate, over to the African Abolition Society for its annual picnic. While Society advertising declared that all "Friends of Freedom" would be welcome, the only white to attend was Joseph Howe, who arrived in a wagon filled with black clerics and their families. Howe's willingness to engage publicly in interracial social contact immediately provoked censure. Opportunistically appealing to white prejudice, Conservative newspapers insisted that Howe had demeaned his high office by appearing in public sitting "on the knee" of a black person. Such familiarity with people of African descent, it was said, violated the "gradation of rank" required in civilised society.<sup>49</sup> This incident demonstrated a fundamental dilemma faced by Nova Scotian blacks. Every time they became involved in the mainstream political process, one party or the other was likely to react by calling for segregation of the races.

Black vulnerability derived in part from lack of numbers. Always a small minority, in the early 1850s black Nova Scotians further declined as a component of the electorate when the franchise was broadened to include all adult males. This reform meant that, in constituencies such as Halifax, elections would increasingly be won by those backed by the white working class.<sup>50</sup>

---

48 Howe's lack of decorum is portrayed by anecdotes in P.B. Waite, *Canada, 1874-1896* (Toronto, 1971), 3. Immediately after the new government came to power, black activists lobbied Lieutenant-Governor Harvey to investigate the fate of a black sailor serving on board a Nova Scotian vessel, who allegedly had been abandoned in the Caribbean. This incident is discussed by Allen P. Stouffer, "Societies, Soirées, and Processions: African British North American Associational Activity in Mid Nineteenth Century Halifax," unpublished paper, 1994, 16-17.

49 *British Colonist*, 3 August 1850. In reply, the *Novascotian* of 5 August 1850 commented, "It is but justice to the Coloured population of this city to say, they are second to no class in the community in all that constitutes good citizens, and ordinary members of Society." Howe's behaviour was unusual, since even white American abolitionists were hesitant to endorse interracial physical contact. On this, see Leon F. Litwack, "The Emancipation of the Negro Abolitionist," in *The Antislavery Vanguard*. Martin Duberman, ed. (Princeton, 1965), 137-55.

50 The dramatic broadening of the franchise that came in the early 1850s is discussed by John Garner, *The Franchise and Politics in British North America, 1755-1867* (Toronto, 1969), 30-33.

Another disadvantage blacks suffered involved new forms of popular culture. Improved coastal steamer service allowed travelling minstrel shows from the United States to penetrate Halifax. By 1850, white entertainers, performing in the guise of blacks and offering a lively blend of song, dance and jokes, consistently drew large and enthusiastic audiences. These productions offered a crude and demeaning caricature of the black personality. White audiences, however, generally came away thinking that what they had witnessed was an accurate portrayal of their black neighbours. Here were a people, stage imagery suggested, who lived in "perpetual childhood," being sometimes amusing, persistently feckless and on occasion in need of severe discipline.<sup>51</sup> Minstrel entertainment came under attack in Halifax, but not because of its inherent racism. Instead, critics insisted that exposure to black culture offended the sensibilities of genteel white society. One editor complained bitterly about how the "vulgar witticisms and distasteful contortions" of the actors had driven respectable men and women from the theatre.<sup>52</sup> Thus, whether high or low, Halifax whites drew from the minstrel show an essentially negative view of black people, one that provided bogus legitimacy for discrimination and neglect.

In this difficult situation, one development that offered potential for cooperation between the races in Halifax was the escalating controversy over slavery in the United States. Black and white colonials shared an aversion to slavery and that antagonism became heightened in 1850 when the American Congress enacted a Draconian fugitive slave law, as part of a broader compromise designed to preserve the Union. Halifax papers were soon reporting incidents of violence which had erupted in various northern states when slave owners attempted to seize runaway blacks.<sup>53</sup> White editorial comment was decidedly hostile to the notion that fugitive slaves could be forced back into captivity. Blacks, it was argued, must be viewed as human beings, not pieces of property. Black resistance to bondage received support, with one paper announcing that "in physical force and courage, the Negro, as a race, is not inferior to the blonde."<sup>54</sup> Generally, however, the Halifax press spoke of the need for

---

51 The American context of this theme is explored by Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974), 40-86.

52 Criticism of minstrel shows was offered by the *British Colonist* on 29 September 1848; *ibid.*, 16 and 19 August 1851. For relatively positive comments on minstrel performances, see the *Acadian Recorder*, 2 August 1851; the *British North American*, 5 October 1853.

53 *British Colonist*, 19 and 31 October, 28 November 1850; *Sun*, 30 October 1850. The impact of the Fugitive Slave Law across central British America is detailed in Allen P. Stouffer, *The Light of Nature and the Law of God: Anti-Slavery in Ontario, 1833-1867* (Montreal/Kingston, 1992), 108-16.

54 *Sun*, 21 October 1850. Another paper spoke glowingly about how "the down trodden African" should be welcomed to British America, but then cautioned that such people would be better



enlightened compromise to avert a collision between North and South on the slavery issue.

As indignation over what was happening in the United States built up in Halifax, the local Abolition Society became particularly active. In June 1850, it heard personal testimony from an expatriate American cleric about what it was like to live precariously as a freedman in the northern United States. Three months later, the Society played host to two fugitives from slavery, along with those who had assisted in their escape.<sup>55</sup> In November, the celebrated fugitive couple, William and Ellen Craft, passed through Halifax. Said to be one step ahead of "Southern kidnappers," they spoke in the city prior to taking a Cunard steamer to absolute safety in England.<sup>56</sup> Such direct contact with the crisis in America spawned great passion among black Nova Scotians. At one meeting of the Abolition Society, an unnamed black speaker vigorously declared that he "was prepared to embark for Yankee land and give the oppressors musket balls for breakfast, cannon balls for dinner, and bomb shells for tea."<sup>57</sup>

In Nova Scotia, however, the campaign against slavery remained a predominantly black enterprise throughout. Unlike their Toronto counterparts, who reacted to the Fugitive Slave Law by becoming leaders of an abolitionist campaign, Halifax whites remained content to comment from the sidelines. Their lack of zeal may have been related to the fact that Nova Scotia never emerged as a major destination for refugees fleeing north via the "underground railroad." The absence of a racially integrated abolitionist movement was unfortunate since, without a white presence to drive home the message that slavery was an issue of fundamental importance, Halifax editors tended to lose interest in the issue. Indignation gave way to scepticism, allowing the appearance of editorials that, for example, asked how "bunkum speeches" made by Halifax blacks would "benefit their oppressed fellows in the land of Liberty."<sup>58</sup>

Black efforts to win from whites recognition of their citizenship rights persisted in Nova Scotia through the middle years of the nineteenth century. From time to time, successes were achieved. In 1849, blacks gained admission to the public parade held to commemorate the centennial of Halifax's founding. Three years later, they joined the procession that accompanied the body

---

off in Canada than Nova Scotia, since the interior of British America had an abundance of "wide forests": see the *Acadian Recorder*, 2 November 1850. Colonial hostility to black refugees is explored by Jason H. Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests: Canada West's Response to American Fugitive Slaves, 1800- 1865* (Millwood, NY, 1985).

<sup>55</sup> *British Colonist*, 16 September 1850.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28 November 1850. For background on the Crafts, see Midgley, *Women Against Slavery*, 139-43.

<sup>57</sup> *Novascotian*, 11 November 1850.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* The *British Colonist* of 29 April 1851 reported that the Abolition Society had spent a "large sum" the previous winter to support fugitive slaves living in Halifax.

of Lieutenant-Governor Harvey to the military burying ground. Annually, the Abolition Society combined a visit to Government House with its celebration of emancipation day.<sup>59</sup> As a complement to these ventures into public places, black activists engaged in an ambitious round of self-help initiatives. For example, women from Halifax's two black congregations set up a society of their own to raise funds for community betterment, most notably establishment of an all-black school.<sup>60</sup> As well, in 1854 Richard Preston took the lead in establishing a federation of urban and rural black churches.<sup>61</sup>

Black enterprise sometimes won recognition from white authority figures. In April 1854, in a funeral oration delivered by a white Methodist pastor for a black member of his congregation, it was said that the deceased had displayed great "rectitude of character" and possessed those attributes that made him "though a poor man . . . a real gentleman." This "kind husband and affectionate father" had combined Christian faith with "economic and fair-dealing habits," such that he died owing money to no one. So moved was the predominantly white congregation that they donated over £20 so that construction on their "brother's" home could be completed.<sup>62</sup> White praise for blacks proved rare, however. Newspapers in the Nova Scotian capital, which both reflected and shaped public opinion, usually mentioned blacks only in the context of something absurd or criminal. For example, when reporting on a homicide in a downtown brothel, the *Morning Chronicle* described one of the accused, a black man, as being "a type of his race" who "wore an air of nonchalance . . . seeming not to have a care in the world."<sup>63</sup> This and similar manipulation of the news suggested that blacks could never achieve more than a veneer of decency and thus deserved to be kept subordinate to whites.

Perhaps the best demonstration of the gulf between the races which persisted in mid-Victorian Halifax arose out of reaction to Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery tract, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Laden with New Testament symbolism and presenting a black slave as a latter-day surrogate for Christ, the novel

---

59 *Acadian Recorder*, 9 June 1849; *Morning Chronicle*, 30 March 1852. By the 1850s, the fee to participate in the Society's annual picnic had been reduced to 7 1/2 pence. Further, to facilitate mass participation, the Society requested that white employers give their black help the day off. On this, see the *Sun*, 21 July 1851.

60 The name "Union Society" apparently emerged after Baptist and Methodist women came together to help sustain Halifax's two black churches. Their efforts were noted by the *British Colonist*, 24 July and 6 September 1849; 2 March, 27 June and 13 July 1850; the *Morning Chronicle*, 25 February 1851 and 20 March 1852; the *British Colonist*, 25 November 1852 and 8 July 1854.

61 Formation of the African Baptist Association is discussed in Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds*, 61-70 and Boyd, ed., *McKerrow*, 25-28.

62 *Morning Chronicle*, 1 and 6 April 1854; *Provincial Wesleyan*, 6 April 1854.

63 *Morning Chronicle*, 29 November 1853. American expressions of this mentality are explored by G.M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York, 1971), 97-129.

exerted a powerful appeal for those members of middle-class society of an evangelical persuasion. Halifax editors all endorsed the book, describing it as a "thrilling work" which offered "a graphic and powerfully written story," one bound to "awaken sympathy for the African race."<sup>64</sup> Seeking to take advantage of this situation, the Abolition Society convened, early in 1853, at the best hotel in Halifax. The site was chosen to encourage attendance by leading members of city society. Those who came heard impassioned speeches by "several persons of colour, on the merits of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." Later in the month, abolitionists met again, this time to hear an escaped slave "advocate the principles of Universal Liberty." Then came a visit to Halifax by the illustrious Mrs. Stowe, *en route* from Boston to an ecstatic welcome in Britain.<sup>65</sup> Near-universal enthusiasm for Stowe's literary achievement did not, however, foster much interracial understanding in Nova Scotia.

The extent to which black Haligonians identified with "Uncle Tom" cannot now be determined. Their more discerning leaders may have agreed with American black critics of Stowe, who rejected her call for black passivity and ultimately a black return to Africa.<sup>66</sup> Of more immediate concern to them would have been the way in which white commentators, within their own city, reacted to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by blending repudiation of slavery with a rejection of freed blacks. A vivid example of such behaviour was provided by the *Provincial Magazine*, a journal that had just begun to publish in Halifax. The editor placed a review of Stowe's novel within a larger discussion of race relations in Nova Scotia. Her analysis began with the uncompromising assertion that "every principle of humanity, justice, and Christianity" stood opposed to the human bondage practised in the American South. But then puzzlement was expressed over why Nova Scotian blacks, long endowed with freedom, had "progressed but little from their original condition." The answer, it was claimed, lay in a collective character flaw which allegedly afflicted all people of African origin. "We have no hesitation in pronouncing them far inferior in morality, intelligence, and cleanliness, to the very lowest among the white population," the editor insisted. Readers were told that, while black "gratitude . . . and genuine morality" might flourish under slavery, such positive traits disappeared with the

---

64 *Morning Chronicle*, 5 August 1852; *British North American*, 9 August 1852. The Christian imagery in Stowe's book is discussed by Jane P. Tompkins, "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History," in *The New Feminist Criticism*. Elaine Showalter, ed. (New York, 1985), 81-104.

65 *British North American*, 25 February 1853; *British Colonist*, 29 March 1853; *Morning Chronicle*, 2 April 1853.

66 Stowe's ultimately demeaning "romantic racialism" and American blacks' resistance to calls for their return to Africa are discussed in William L. Van Deberg, *Slavery and Race in American Popular Culture* (Madison, 1984). See also Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800-1850* (Chicago/London, 1981).

coming of freedom. Once emancipated, blacks lapsed into a disreputable blend of self-pity and "insufferable arrogance."<sup>67</sup> Such negrophobic arguments, which echoed the message in minstrel presentations, implied that blacks would never qualify for equal rights in the new Nova Scotia emerging at mid-century.

The *Provincial Magazine* may not have spoken for all white Haligonians, but the views expressed by this periodical appear to have reflected mainstream opinion within the city. A symptom of trends in the area of race relations became evident in October 1854. That month, the city played host to a provincial "industrial exhibition," an event designed to celebrate Nova Scotia's potential for economic development – potential that the government hoped to realise by embarking on an ambitious program of railroad construction. The exhibition opened with a mammoth parade through the streets of Halifax. Virtually every city organisation marched in the procession, with the notable exception of those belonging to the black community. The absence of entities such as the African Abolition Society drew no comment from the press. Such silence implied that, for most whites, blacks did not belong on centre stage. In an era when reform was being supplanted by the pursuit of material progress, blacks could be relegated to near-oblivion.<sup>68</sup>

The all-white parade of 1854 stands as a logical corollary to the street violence that had erupted between blacks and whites seven years earlier. Experimentation with interracial cooperation, inspired by the ideals of democracy and abolitionism, ultimately would not prevail in mid-Victorian Halifax. This failure has sometimes been attributed to black leaders such as Richard Preston, who are said to have opted for a strategy of racial "separatism," which then invited the response of white-engineered segregation.<sup>69</sup> But such an interpretation is not sustained by a survey of race relations in Halifax through the 1830s to the 1850s. Black activists did establish a series of organisations which, at one level, exclusively served those of African descent. But for them, a larger goal had always existed, namely, to make all-black organisations instruments for breaking down barriers between the races. In particular, the African Abolition Society had struggled valiantly to forge an interracial front against the injustice of slavery. But for the most part, whites held back from involvement with blacks, or limited their initiatives to opportunistic partisan manoeuvres.

---

67 *Provincial Magazine*, 2, 1 (January 1853): 5-7. See also *ibid.* 1, 1 (January 1852): 6, 24-29; 2, 5 (May 1853), 196-98. For a profile of the editor, see Lois K. Kernaghan, "Mary Jane Katzman," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 11 (Toronto, 1982), 462-63.

68 *British Colonist*, 5 October 1854; *Morning Journal*, 4 and 6 October 1854. In 1854, Howe shifted the focus of his personal political agenda from responsible government to railroad construction: see Beck, *Joseph Howe*, Vol. 2, Chapter 4.

69 Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 139. For an earlier rebuttal of Winks, see Boyd, ed., *McKerrow*: i-vii.

At mid-century, white discrimination was beginning to be justified in Nova Scotia by appeals to an ideology of racism. As a result, those of African descent found themselves ever more on the defensive. Increasingly, their community institutions, originally created to promote equality, instead became vehicles for group defence. Collective survival was achieved, but for Halifax blacks the dream of securing emancipation through participation in the politics of reform had died.<sup>70</sup>

---

70 The structure of racism persisting into early-twentieth-century Halifax is explored by Michael S. Boudreau, "Crime and Society in a City of Order: Halifax, 1918-1935," PhD thesis, Queen's University, 1996, especially Chapter 6. For black pursuit of accommodation after Confederation, see Judith Fingard, "Race and Respectability in Victorian Halifax," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 20, 2 (May, 1992): 169-95.