

Richard Pierpoint

In 1821, Sir Peregrine Maitland, Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, received the following petition from a long-time resident of the colony:

The Petition of Richard Pierpoint, now of the Town of Niagara, a Man of Colour, a native of Africa, and an inhabitant of this Province since the year 1780.

Most humbly showeth,

That Your Excellency's Petitioner is a native of Bondu in Africa; that at the age of Sixteen Years he was made a Prisoner and sold as a Slave; that he was conveyed to America about the year 1760, and sold to a British officer; that he served his Majesty during the American Revolutionary War in the Corps called Butler's Rangers; and again during the late American War in a Corps of Colour raised on the Niagara Frontier.

That Your Excellency's Petitioner is now old and without property; that he finds it difficult to obtain a livelihood by his labour; that he is above all things desirous to return to his native Country; that His Majesty's Government be graciously pleased to grant him any relief, he wishes it may be by affording him the means to proceed to England and from thence to a Settlement near the Gambia or Senegal Rivers, from whence he could return to Bondou [*sic*]...¹

York Upper Canada
21st July 1821²

Richard Pierpoint, the petitioner, was in his late 70s and did not wish to begin once again clearing land³ so he could settle and farm on the 100 acres granted to him as a veteran of the War of 1812. He wished to go home. This historic document has given us a window into the life of a man who, otherwise, most would probably have slipped into obscurity. He is important because of the key role he is believed to have played in the founding of the Coloured Corps.⁴

Here is his story. According to his own words, he was born in the small African state of Bondu, in what is now Senegal, around 1744. He was captured and sold into slavery sometime around 1760 and after surviving the Atlantic crossing in a slave ship, was sold to a British officer somewhere in British North America. He is listed as a soldier/militiaman in Butler's Rangers in 1780, a successful fighting unit on the British side of the American Revolutionary War (1775 – 1783). How he gained his freedom is not known: he may have escaped slavery,⁵ he may have been granted freedom by his owner, or he may have earned his freedom by fighting for the British.⁶ However he came to be a member of Butler's Rangers, by 1780 he was stationed at Fort Niagara.⁷ The unit engaged in battles on the New York and Pennsylvania frontiers, but when the war ended, Pierpoint is believed to have remained in Upper Canada. Butler's Rangers were disbanded in 1784.⁸

As a veteran, Richard Pierpoint was entitled to a land grant. In 1791, he is recorded as the recipient of two 100-acre lots in Grantham Township (near present-day St. Catharines).⁹ A land grant of this size was unusual for privates who customarily received a single 100-acre lot, as grants of 200 acres were usually reserved for officers.¹⁰

The earliest map of Grantham Township shows a "Richard Pierpont" on Lots 12 and 13 on Concession 6. Pierpoint's land included a small tributary of Twelve Mile Creek that came to be known as "Dick's Creek."¹¹ It is believed that Pierpoint was well-known and well-respected by Blacks and whites alike. Around the age of 47 – after his formative years as a child and youth in his native country, enslavement in British North America, and finally, the relative freedom of a soldier in military service – Richard Pierpoint became a property owner in a place quite foreign to the

land of his birth.

The next record we find of Richard Pierpoint is in a 1794 petition to Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe.¹² His name appears along with those of 18 other Black residents who requested the opportunity to settle beside each other, so that they could support one another in their efforts to clear their land, build their homes and fulfill all the other required duties to gain land title.¹³

Their request was turned down. Despite Simcoe's efforts to decrease slavery in the colony, he was not sympathetic to their plea. It is important to remember that in 1794, slavery was alive and well in Upper Canada. Simcoe's attempt to abolish it outright was resisted by the province's well-heeled and powerful slave holders, many of whom held offices within the government. It could be that a segregated settlement of Blacks would be seen as threatening to the white slaveholders, upsetting what they regarded as the status quo; these men regarded Blacks as inherently subservient to whites.

Pierpoint enters the public record again in 1806 when he sold one of his lots to the head of the province's land office, Robert Hamilton. The other he traded to Garret Schram for 100 acres in the neighbouring township of Louth, receiving parts of Lots 7 and 8 on Concession 2. Garret was the son of Frederick Schram who had also been a member of Butler's Rangers during the American Revolutionary War.¹⁴ It could be that Pierpoint and the Schrams had kept in touch and the land trade was made between friends, suggesting that the trade was in some way advantageous for Pierpoint. When these two parcels of land next appear in the land records in July 1826, they are recorded as being sold by a John Thompson to an Adam Haynes.¹⁵ The earliest map on record

indicates that these properties were owned by Adam Haynes; it is not known when the land in Louth was transferred from Pierpoint to Thompson, but this most probably happened before his petition of 1821, and perhaps even before the forming of the Coloured Corps in 1812.

There is no record of Pierpoint between 1806 and 1812. It is thought that during this time he was making a living working for others – presumably white farmers. He was widely known in the community as “Captain Dick.”

When war broke out with the United States in 1812, Richard Pierpoint was roughly 68 years old. It is believed that it was he who suggested to General Isaac Brock that a “Corps of men of colour” be formed.¹⁶ Whether or not this was case, Pierpoint is listed as a member of that unique military unit – the first of its kind in British North America (see *Coloured Corps*).¹⁷ Pierpoint was a well-seasoned veteran with an impressive list of credentials, and despite his age, he was still a valuable asset. Pierpoint’s military experience certainly began in Bondu: having been captured at the age of 16 (ca. 1760),¹⁸ he would have already entered adulthood and would have been eligible for military service.¹⁹ After crossing the Atlantic, Pierpoint was purchased by a British military officer (ca. 1760);²⁰ this exposed him to additional military training, as well as British discipline and tactics. Additionally, as a member of Butler’s Rangers from about 1779 to 1784,²¹ Pierpoint would have been engaged in both organized and guerrilla initiatives during the American Revolutionary War.²²

Richard Pierpoint survived the War, and in 1820 was granted a 100-acre lot on the Grand River in what is now the village of Fergus.²³ It is at this time that he submitted his petition to Sir Peregrine

Maitland requesting to be sent back to his land of birth. It is understandable that being in his late 70s and a veteran of two wars, Pierpoint would be looking for solace and peace. In addition, the grant of a new tract of land meant that Pierpoint would again have to fulfill settlement requirements, and so he requested passage home instead. When his petition was left unanswered, Pierpoint did take up residency on his 100-acre lot on the Grand River in 1822, but with some assistance. A younger man named Deaf Moses²⁴ helped the elderly Pierpoint complete the duties attached to receiving title for his land. In order to survive, Pierpoint would have had to carry out some of the everyday tasks of farming such as raising crops and keeping livestock.²⁵ It is thought that due to the harsh winter weather conditions of this part of the province, this elderly man spent the winters in the warmer Niagara area where he would have had many friends and support networks from his earlier years spent living in both Grantham and Louth.

In 1828, Pierpoint had his will drawn up, and from this document we are offered a final glimpse into this veteran's life. The will was scribed by an old friend in Louth Township, Henry Pawling.²⁶ Pawling and the two witnesses, Peter and John Ten Broeck, were descendants of men who had fought with Butler's Rangers. This highlights that even at the end of his life, the impact and connections that Pierpoint made were held with honour and respect. Pierpoint, having "no heirs nor relations" named Grantham Township resident, Lemuel Brown, both his "heir and executor."²⁷ It is not known how Pierpoint came to make this decision as this is the only record of their relationship. Perhaps Lemuel Brown was one of those who took this elderly man under his wing. Pierpoint would live another nine or ten years, dying in the winter of 1837/38.²⁸ He died a respected member of the African Canadian community – a "griot,"²⁹ an elder, a war veteran. He also died poor, and far away from the home to which he had so longed to return.

¹ Bondu is the accepted spelling among current scholars; however, it may be found in some documents and research as 'Bondou' or 'Bundu'. Joseph Mensah, Professor of Geography and International Development Studies at York University, states: "This is very common in African place names – different spellings often reflect the background of the speaker, be it colonial French, English, Native or Arabic, etc."

² Petition of Richard Pierpoint, July 21, 1821, 26441-26443, Civil Secretary's Correspondence, Upper Canada Sundries, July – September 1821, RG 5, A1, vol. 53, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC) microfilm C-4607, Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO).

³ Clearing the land would have involved preparing at least 5 acres of land for farming, clearing his portion of the road frontage, and building a log structure (a minimum of 16 feet by 20 feet in size). For more information see Lillian F. Gates, *Land Policies of Upper Canada* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1968).

⁴ Two excellent resources are: Peter and David Meyler, *A Stolen Life: Searching for Richard Pierpoint* (Toronto, ON: Natural Heritage Books, 1999) and Steve Pitt, *Stand and Fight Together: Richard Pierpoint and the Coloured Corps of Upper Canada* (Toronto, ON: Dundurn Group, 2008).

⁵ The Meylers propose that by 1779 "either as an escaped slave, or as a free man sold back into slavery, Pierpoint now had a clear motive for joining the British following the emancipation offer of the summer of 1779," 60-65.

⁶ Pitt highlights Pierpoint's service in Butler's Rangers as his source of freedom: "In 1784 Richard Pierpoint was given an honourable discharge, and for the first time in nearly a quarter of a century he was a free man," 48.

⁷ Meyler and Meyler, 60.

⁸ Major Alan D. Woolley, "Butler's Rangers," accessed October 10, 2012, <http://www.iaw.on.ca/~awoolley/brang/brang.html>.

⁹ Richard Pierpoint Grantham Township Land Grant, 1791, 208, British Military and Naval Records "C" Series, RG 8, vol. 1701, LAC microfilm C-3839, AO.

¹⁰ Meyler and Meyler, 76.

¹¹ Map of Grantham Township, ca. 1978, Patent Plans, RG 1-100, AO.

¹² Petition of Free Negroes, June 29, 1794, 68, Upper Canada Land Petitions, RG 1, L 3, vol. 196, F Bundle Miscellaneous, LAC microfilm C-2022, AO.

¹³ Meyler and Meyler, 73-74; Pitt, 138.

¹⁴ Meyler and Meyler, 78; Pitt, 138.

¹⁵ Meyler and Meyler, 78.

¹⁶ Petition of Richard Pierpoint, July 21, 1821.

¹⁷ Robert Runchey Capt., October 24, 1812, 191-192, British Military and Naval Records “C” Series, RG 8, vol. 1701, LAC microfilm C-3839, AO.

¹⁸ Petition of Richard Pierpoint, July 21, 1821.

¹⁹ Meyler and Meyler, 23.

²⁰ Petition of Richard Pierpoint , July 21, 1821.

²¹ Meyler and Meyler, 65-67.

²² Lieutenant Colonel William A. Smy, “An Annotated Nominal Roll of Butler's Rangers 1777-1784 With Documentary Sources,” *The Loyalist Gazette* 43:1 (Spring 2005): 53.

²³ Map of East & West Garafraxa Township, ca. 1978, Patent Plans, RG 1-100, AO.

²⁴ Meyler and Meyler, 108.

²⁵ Meyler and Meyler, 108.

²⁶ Will of Richard Pierpoint, January 28, 1828, Lincoln County Surrogate Court Estate Files, RG 22-235, MS 8416, AO.

²⁷ Will of Richard Pierpoint, January 28, 1828.

²⁸ Meyler and Meyler, 116; Pitt, 139. On September 28, 1838, Lemuel Brown enacted his duties as the executor of Pierpoint’s last will and testament. Last Will and Testament of Pierpoint executed by Lemuel Brown, September 28, 1838, Lincoln County Surrogate Court Estate Files, RG 22-235, MS 8416, AO.

²⁹ Griot definition: “a member of a class of travelling poets, musicians, and storytellers who maintain a tradition of oral history in parts of West Africa.” Angus Stevenson, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), accessed November 9, 2012, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/griot>.