

# Ghosts of Africville

Denise Izzard Allen

**Former residents of Africville are still fighting municipal planning decisions in Nova Scotia.**

**M**ORE than 150 years after Black Loyalists brought hopes for better lives to Nova Scotia, their descendants are still struggling against social and economic marginalization, including environmental racism.

In Halifax's North End, residents are fighting a municipal government plan to locate a privately run sewage treatment plant in their neighbourhood. This area of town is one of Canada's most notoriously ghettoized communities. Home to a large black community, aboriginal peoples, low-income earners and new immigrants, the North End has usually been passed over in improvement and beautification projects carried out by the city

and targeted for environmentally destructive projects, including the siting of toxic facilities.

The North End is where many residents of Africville were forcibly relocated after their community was destroyed in the late 1960s to make way for industrial development in Halifax. Now officially recognized as a tragic mistake, the destruction of Africville was the legacy of colonial racism that, it seems, continues to impact the lives of the black community today.

Black Loyalists were lured to Canada by British promises of a helping hand at the time of the American Revolution. Settlers were given lands to farm, but unlike the white United Empire Loyalists, who were given the most fertile agricultural land, black Loyalists were placed on the least desirable plots.

Despite tremendous barriers, settlers nonetheless made Africville – as the area came to be known – their home. Donald Clairmont, author of several books on Africville, writes, "Africville was always a viable community with some fine houses, plenty of space, some small-scale entrepreneurs and a strong community spirit."

But government decisions created new obstacles to the community's well-being. Soon after the community was established, city officials approved, within walking distance of Africville homes, three systems of railway tracks, an open city dump, toxic waste disposal pits, an infectious diseases hospital, a stone and coal crushing plant, an abattoir, a bone-meal plant, a cotton factory, a rolling mill/nail factory, a slaughterhouse, sewage disposal units, a trachoma hospital and a port facility for handling coal.

Not only had city leaders surrounded Africville with unwanted, dirty and dangerous facilities, they had also, by 1915, made explicit their intention to use land occupied by Africville residents for industrial expansion. As Clairmont writes, "Throughout this period, from the end of the First World War to the time of relocation, the city's attitude towards Africville did not change. The emphasis was on eliminating the community rather than helping it."

In the 1950s, Halifax's major dump was moved to within 100 meters from the westernmost group of Africville homes. By the late 1960s, Halifax had displaced the residents of Africville to allow industrial expansion, using every means of coercion and manipulation at their disposal. Sometimes houses were bulldozed to the ground with all of the owners' belongings still inside, and without their permission or knowledge. Adding insult to injury, some residents were dumped by garbage trucks into substandard or condemned homes.

## Chronology

### 1780s-1800s

Black loyalists who would eventually settle Africville come to Canada from the US, Jamaica and other British Empire settlements.

### 1848

Although people lived in Africville long before, the first recorded deeds appeared in 1848.

### 1853-1950s

Numerous undesirable facilities are located in the community, which remains without running water, street lights, public transportation, paved roads, garbage collection or a sewage system. Land was expropriated to make way for three tracks of railroad systems.

### 1956

Schools desegregated for the first time. Until that time it was illegal for black children to attend elementary schools with non-black children.

### 1964-1970

Africville cleared to make way for a bridge to Dartmouth. Garbage trucks are used to move some families and their belongings.

### 1994-2001


Edward and Victory Carvery campaign for compensation by occupying the lands. In 1995 former Africville residents sue the City of Halifax for compensation.

### 2002

Heritage Minister Sheila Copps unveils a plaque in Seaview Park commemorating Africville.

Former Africville residents, many now residents of Halifax's North End, are still waiting for compensation for the homes and possessions lost during the relocation. The campaign for compensation has included a nearly ten-year occupation of the ex-Africville land by previous Africville residents Edward and Victory Carvery. In 1995, a class action lawsuit was launched to demand compensation for the health risks posed by the toxic industries deliberately located within walking distance of Africville homes, school, play areas, wells and church.

The toxic legacy of environmental racism continues to this day, as do the efforts of black Nova Scotians for justice.

In March 2002, a complaint against the Halifax Regional Municipality was registered with the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission contending that the process leading to the siting of the Halifax North sewage treatment plant was discriminatory. A decision is still pending. 

*Denise Izzard Allen is vice president of the Africville Genealogical Society.*

### Follow up

For more history on Africville, visit the CBC Archives – click on Life & Society: Africville: <http://archives.cbc.ca/> 

# Introducing Equity Peter Montague

**The multidimensional environmental justice movement is transforming mainstream environmentalism in the US.**

**S**INCE 1980, an alternative to the traditional environmental movement has been slowly forming in the US, though so far it has gained little national visibility. It is called the "environmental justice" movement, and though it has some problems of its own, it represents a different approach to environmental protection, one that speaks to people about protecting the places where they live, work and play.

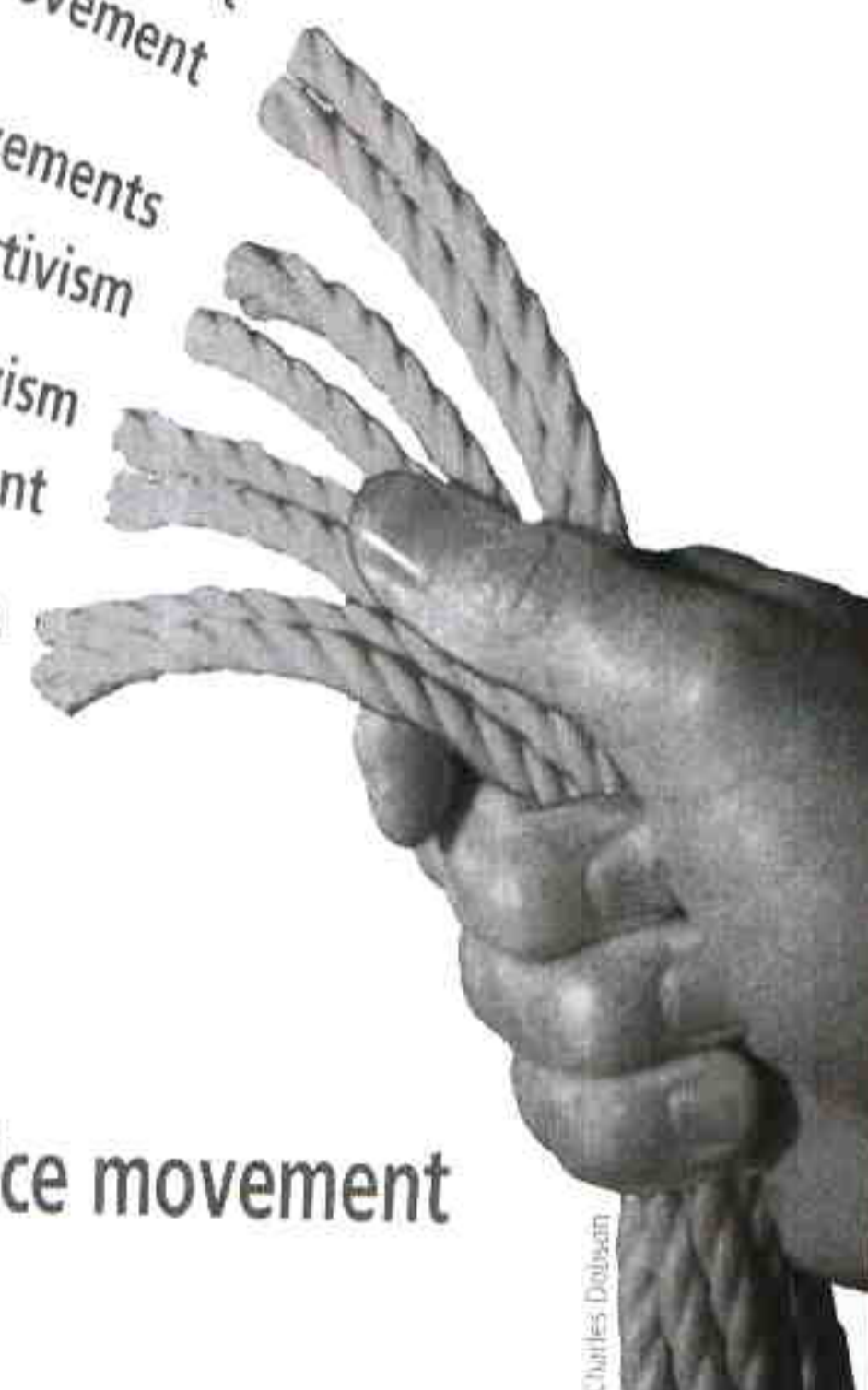
As Daniel Faber and Deborah McCarthy have documented, the fabric of the US environmental justice movement is woven from six strands:<sup>1</sup>

**The civil rights movement.** Apartheid officially ended in the US in 1964, but environmental racism is still all too common. The environmental regulatory system created during the 1970s and 1980s had the unintended effect of funneling pollutants into communities of color. Well-off white people can usually buy their way out of polluted neighborhoods, but people of colour and the poor often cannot. Pollution trading schemes, being promoted by some traditional environmentalists, may be economically efficient but they tend to heap additional burdens and injustices on the poor and people of colour.

**The occupational safety and health movement.** The US passed its first national job safety law in 1970, but since then enforcement has been lax or nonexistent.

civil rights movement  
 occupational health & safety movement  
 indigenous peoples' movements  
 community social and economic activism  
 third world activism  
 toxics movement  
 afflicted peoples' activism  
 clean production movement

The environmental justice movement



Charles Droussin



Furthermore, the law excludes tens of millions of workers, such as farmworkers. At least 60,000 workers die each year as a result of injuries and illnesses related to dangerous working conditions. Another 850,000 are made sick.<sup>2</sup> At least 35 million non-union workers say they would join a union if they could, to protect themselves, but US laws violate international human rights standards by making unionization an uphill battle. Added to existing unions, those 35 million would create the largest union movement the US has ever known, effectively shifting the balance of power between the corporate elite and wage earners.

**The indigenous peoples' and native land rights movements**, made up of Native Americans, Chicanos, African Americans, and other marginalized indigenous communities struggling to retain and protect their traditional lands. Partly these groups are fighting to control land resources, and partly they are trying to retain cultural lifeways that are threatened with extinction by the dominant society.

**The toxics movement** (also known as the environmental health movement) has been fighting for the clean-up of thousands of contaminated waste sites across the country since 1978. The toxics movement has also taken the initiative in discouraging toxic technologies such as municipal garbage incinerators, pesticides, so-called "low-level" radioactive waste dumps, coal-burning power plants, buried gasoline tanks, toxicants dumped by the military and more.

**Solidarity movements, human rights movements, and environmental activists in the Third World** are providing powerful allies and examples of extraordinary, fearless activism. In South Africa, Mexico, Burma, Indonesia, Nigeria, Central America, the former Soviet Union and elsewhere, local groups are fighting the same battles being fought in the US but with fewer resources and against greater odds – sometimes sacrificing their lives in their persistent demand for environmental protection, sustainability, self-determination and justice.

**Community-based activists** working for social and economic justice have traditionally focused on issues of housing, public transportation, crime and police conduct, access to jobs, a living wage, redlining and lender practices, affordable daycare, deteriorating schools and dozens

of other neighborhood issues. They have not traditionally viewed their work as "environmental" but now when they work on lead poisoning, cleaning up abandoned toxic sites ("brownfields"), poor air quality, childhood asthma and other issues with an environmental component, they are indisputably a part of the "environmental justice" movement.

In addition to these six strands, we see a powerful, burgeoning seventh – people whose health has been affected by multiple chemical sensitivities, birth defects, breast cancer, endometriosis, lymphoma, diabetes, chronic fatigue, veterans affected by Agent Orange and Gulf War Syndrome and many others.

An eighth strand includes the international "zero waste" and "clean production" movements, which are quietly revolutionizing the material basis of the industrial enterprise.

This powerful environmental justice movement – which clearly has the potential to become a new political mass movement – is still in its infancy. To grow to its potential it will need to be fed, nurtured, cared for. It will need resources. In their report, "Green Of Another Color," Faber and McCarthy show that, of all funds available for environmental work during the period 1996 to 1999, some 96 percent went to the lawyers and scientists of the traditional environmental movement, and only four percent went to all the thousands of groups working to build the "environmental justice" movement.<sup>3</sup> To really protect the environment (and overcome the political power of the anti-environment "conservatives"), these funding priorities would have to change substantially. ♻️

Peter Montague is editor of **Rachel's Environment & Health News** and director of Environmental Research Foundation, Annapolis, Maryland. This article first appeared in **Rachel's Environment & Health News** #744 (Feb. 14, 2002). Back issues are available at <[www.rachel.org](http://www.rachel.org)>.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> D. R. Faber and D. McCarthy, *Green Of Another Color* (Boston, Mass.: Northeastern University, 2001), p. 2. Available on-line at: <[www.casdn.neu.edu/~socant/DF%20Faber.html](http://www.casdn.neu.edu/~socant/DF%20Faber.html)>.

<sup>2</sup> See *Rachel's Environment & Health News* #578.

<sup>3</sup> Faber and McCarthy, *ibid.*, p.1.

## Follow up

The Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University maintains an active site on US environmental justice news, events and resources: [www.ejrc.cau.edu/](http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/) ♻️