

1812 illustration of a Black drummer

Private Henry Grant, drummer of the 104th New Brunswick Regiment of Foot in Ontario

When the Americans threatened Canada in 1812, the 104th Regiment of Foot turned to its black community for pioneers—16 volunteered

to form an all black pioneer unit. It was customary for infantry battalion to have a pioneer section of around 10 skilled men whose duties included road-making, bridge-building, construction and repair. They were sturdy men who knew how to wield an axe, a spade, a mattock and a saw. The other black member of the 104th was Henry Grant, the imposing bass drummer of the regimental band. Ever since Britain's campaign in Egypt in 1801, it had been a mark of status for a regiment to have a Black bass drummer or cymbalist (the 100th Regiment had a Black cymbal player). When the intrepid men of the 104th marched out of Fredericton on a 52 day overland winter march to Kingston, 14 drummers and buglers played "The Girl I Left Behind Me" as Private Henry Grant beat the marching pace on the bass drum. The 104th used snow shoes and toboggans on their slow progress to assist in the defence of Upper Canada. Private Henry was up daily before dawn to sound reveille along with the buglers. The temperatures fell to -32 Celsius, snow drifts were metres higher than the fence posts; the frozen rapids on the St. Lawrence River proved difficult. In the midst of this joyless journey, Henry provided his fellow soldiers with a moment of mirth. "Our big black drummer straddled the big drum, which was











lashed to a toboggan, to try the experiment of a slide but it jumped the track shooting him off at a high velocity and the sable African came up some distance from where he disappeared a white man from head to foot." In spite of this humorous incident, Henry faced the same dangers as all the other soldiers. He and the band of the 104th Foot participated in the Battle of Sackets Harbour where several bandsmen were killed. Pioneer, Private John Baker was wounded at Sackets Harbour but recovered to fight on at other battles of the 104th — for which Private Henry Grant most likely beat his bass drum. The 104th was at Beaver Dam, Lundy's Lane, Chippawa, Fort George and the Fort Erie. From earliest Canadian history onwards, Black defenders have played their part in the defence of Canada.