

Diversity in Canada's Town Criers

Dressed in elaborate livery which typically emulates 18th or nineteenth century European military garb, town criers in Canada today are generally seen as archaic symbols of British colonialism. While it is true that the town crier tradition survives more in Great Britain and its former colonies than anywhere else, town criers have been an integral part of communication systems throughout the world for millennia. Like village chiefs, medicine men, and hunters, criers helped facilitate harmony within the community. Whether it be to report the news, tell stories, or provide military intelligence, their job was to keep people informed and entertained.

The West African crier history includes the Griots, also known as a Jelis, born in the Malinke Empire of the fourteenth century, which extended from central Africa to West Africa - Chad and Niger to Mali and Senegal.

In Mande Society, the Jeli was an historian, advisor, arbitrator, praise singer (patronage) and storyteller. Essentially, these musicians were walking history books.¹

The griot tradition came to North America when the West Africans were captured, enslaved and sold to British, French and American citizens on the other side of the ocean. They remain today an important influence in Black American culture and music.

The particularly British town crier tradition evolved out of Greek and Roman traditions that were heavily influenced by the many divergent cultures they had encountered in building their empires. It was introduced to North America by settlers who began emigrating from the British Isles in the 16th century. However, unbeknownst to the colonizers, the "New World" already enjoyed a long tradition of Indigenous town criers, notably the Eyapaha of the Lakota First Nation.

¹ "The Griot, the Preserver of African traditions," *Afrolegends.com*, <https://afrolegends.com>>201

In traditional Lakota society the Eyapaha (Announcer - crier), pronounced ee-yah pah-hah, “was charged with spreading the news and information of the day. The role even evolved over time to include masters of ceremony at wacipis, meetings, and other gatherings.”²

Besides the moccasin telegraph, our tribes have always had mass communication within the villages. In the various Siouan tribes there was an eyapaha, the village crier, who would go around the camp giving important news or announcing plans of the chiefs or headmen.”³

In the old days, the eyapaha was the town crier, the person who would meet incoming warriors after a battle, ask them what happened so they wouldn’t have to speak of their glories, then tell the people the news.”⁴

In Canada, the understanding of diversity within the community of Town Criers is exemplified by the remarkable story of John ‘Daddy’ Hall, the town of Owen Sound’s first town crier.

John Hall was believed to have been born in 1783 near Amherstburg, Upper Canada (now Ontario) and grew up with the Ojibwe, Potawatomi, and Odawa peoples of the Walpole Island First Nation on Walpole Island in southwestern Ontario. His father was said to have been a member of the Mohawk First Nation of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy; his mother was born in, or was the child of someone born in, West Africa, and had escaped from slavery in the United States. While fighting for the British in the War of 1812, Hall was wounded, captured and taken to the U.S. He spent several years enslaved in Virginia and Kentucky before escaping back to Canada. Hall made his way to Newmarket and fought the insurgents in the 1837 Rebellion, before spending time with the “Chippewas of Saugeen” at Rocky Saugeen Reserve

² www.nativesunnews.today/eyapaha-today

³ Charles Trimble (Oglala Lakota), *The Native Press: Telling our Own Stories*, Feb. 9, 2010.

⁴ David Heska Wanbi Weiden, *Winter Counts*, (Ecco/HarperCollins 2020)

on the Bruce Peninsula. John Hall is alleged to have been the first Black person to settle in Sydenham (now Owen Sound) when he moved there around 1850.

John 'Daddy' Hall immediately became a vibrant and integral part of the community as it grew around him, and is referred to as Owen Sound's first Town Crier. His mixed African and Indigenous heritage would have contributed to his unique understanding of the position. The fact that some of his five or six wives (he fathered as many as 21 children) were Black and Indigenous would also have influenced his choices. In spite of spending as many as fifty years or so of his life in Owen Sound, Hall was never granted title to the land he settled at the north end of Victoria Park, then known as the Pleasure Grounds. Officials tried to evict him several times, but he refused, and held on to his land until his death in 1900, when he would have been 117 or 118 years old..

Hall is buried in Greenwood Cemetery in what is known as Potter's Field, where a large monument was unveiled in 2021 in honour of the approximately 1,200 people buried in the previously unmarked plot.⁵



⁵ Peter Meyler, "Daddy Hall's Incredible Story Through the Years," *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal*, Vol. 3, 2005-6

Like John Hall, town criers in Canada today endeavour to present a unique understanding of our history. Our mission is to enhance all social, artistic, or love-related endeavours by adding colour and elegance. We take pride in presenting our communities and their populations at every event we take part in.