

Background: Black History in Ontario

By Erin Brubacher



“I had rather have a day free, than a week of life in slavery: I think slavery is the worst evil that ever was ... Sometimes I did not get enough to eat, nor have clothes enough to make me comfortable ... I never had any bed ... The other hands were not so well used, the truth is, I was rather ahead of them. They used to get whipped with hickories or a club: I never had any severe punishment.”¹

-Benedict Duncan circa 1856

Have you ever really considered the life of a slave? These are the words of one such slave who escaped in the mid-nineteenth century, and made his way to Peel Region. Not so long ago in North America, people were bought and sold like property, and often treated with less regard. Many people are surprised to learn that slavery was not a phenomenon of the United States alone. The slavery of the African people also took place in Canada, not only by white people, but also by Native Americans. There are early records which cite Joseph Brant, an Iroquoian Chief, as a slave owner, among others.² However, in 1793 under the influence of Lieutenant Governor Sir John Graves Simcoe, a bill was passed in the House of Commons for the gradual abolition of slavery in Upper Canada. Any men and women currently enslaved would stay that way until their death. However, children born to those slaves after 1793 would be free after the age of 25. No slaves could be imported, but could still be exported across borders.³ While this Act was far from satisfactory for abolitionists, it was step in the right direction. In 1834 the British Government freed all slaves within their empire and outlawed slavery. At this time, Upper Canada had only a handful of men and women still enslaved; estimates have been set at less than fifty people.⁴

“Tell the Republicans on your side of the line that we do not know men by their colour; if you come to us, you will be entitled to all the privileges of the rest of His Majesty's subjects.”⁵

-John Colbourne, the Lieutenant-Governor of Canada West (Ontario) circa 1830

¹ Benjamin Drew, The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada (Boston: John P. Jewett and Co., 1856) 110.

² Rose Heffernan, “Queen’s Bush Settlement,” Black History in Guelph and Wellington County, Guelph Museums, 2001-2005 <<http://guelph.ca/museum/BlackHistory/queens.htm>>.

³ Robin W. Winks, The Blacks in Canada: A History, Second Edition (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) 98.

⁴ Ibid 110.

⁵ Ibid 155-56.

With the abolition of slavery in Upper Canada (now Ontario), the movement of fugitive slaves into Canada began in earnest. When the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850, Canada became the only place safe from the torments of slavery. The Act allowed for fugitive slaves to be perused into the “free states” in the Northern United States. It required citizens to assist in the recovery of fugitive slaves and denied the right of a fugitive to have a fair trial by jury.⁶ Under the act, cases would be tried by a special commissioner who would be paid \$5 if the supposed fugitive is let free, and \$10 if returning the slave to bondage.⁷ Under this law, even free men and women could be captured and claimed as a “fugitive slave”. This made Canada the only safe haven for all blacks, free or not. In this way, Canada was seen as a land of freedom and a place to start a new life. Even today, Canada can be called a land of refugees. As in the past, people often come here today looking for a better life.

It was a difficult life for a black settler in 19th Century Upper Canada. Many came to Canada as fugitive slaves. Many others came as free men and women with idealistic hopes of solidarity and acceptance by white society. It is estimated that at its peak, the black population in Upper Canada totalled around thirty five to forty thousand.⁸ This made up only a small percentage of the overall population of Upper Canada. Most of these hopeful settlers landed in areas where there was already a black presence such as Chatham, St. Catherines or predominately black communities such as the Wilberforce Settlement. As black populations became more solidified in certain areas, very few men and women branched out into new communities on their own.

Wilberforce was the earliest known all black settlement in Upper Canada. There were a few other such settlements, mostly in south western Ontario. The Elgin Settlement, in Kent County, was successful in its time, however declined in the years following the American Civil War. This became the reality for most black communities; many black settlers in Canada jumped at the chance to return to their homeland, and start similar communities amongst newly freed slaves. St. Catherines, Chatham and the Amherstburg area all had large black populations, but these declined after the American Civil War.

Part of the black experience in Upper Canada was a newspaper called the Provincial Freeman. It was published weekly between March 24, 1853 to September 20, 1857, first in Windsor, then in Toronto and finally in Chatham. Its purpose was to give black settlers in Canada a voice, and promote welfare,

⁶ Yale Law School, “Fugitive Slave Act of 1850” [The Avalon Project](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/fugitive.htm), Section 4, 30 August 2006, 1996 <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/fugitive.htm>>

⁷ Yale Law School, Section 8.

⁸ [The Provincial Freeman \(Toronto\)](#), 29 April 1854: 1.

education and integration in their new communities. It was edited by Samuel R. Ward and Mary Ann Shadd Carey (the first female editor in Canada). It set the tone for many black people living in Upper Canada, and was subscribed to by both blacks and whites all over. The records of this newspaper gives a fascinating depiction of a passionate, educated community, contradictory to the stereotypical ignorant fugitive slave that many of the time believed to be the norm.

The degree to which the black settlers experienced racism is indistinct. It depended greatly on where they settled and the individuals' actions in their communities. The abolitionist movement was alive and well in Canada, but the overall feeling towards black people was mixed. In communities where the black population did not threaten the power the whites held, they generally found it fairly agreeable. In places where black settlers began to challenge the number of whites, tensions often arose. One such area was Amherstburg and surrounds in Upper Canada. When a black, convicted cow thief fled the province, the chief justice is recorded as saying "I would leave him where he is. There are too many such people about Amherstburg already."⁹ Consequently, as the century went by and migration of black settlers increased in the 1840's and 1850's, a general feeling of unwelcome seemed to descend onto more areas of the province.

Native Americans and Native Canadians also seemed to inherit many prejudices towards black people. In 1844, during a council meeting at the Credit Reserve, the band passed resolution that no person of colour should be allowed to settle within the boundaries of their land.¹⁰ As mentioned before, Joseph Brant was a slave owner. He bought Sophia Burthen from slave owners in Fishkill, New York, sometime in the early nineteenth century. She worked for the Brant family for twelve or thirteen years, before he sold her for one-hundred dollars to Samuel Hatt. She gained her freedom in 1834, with the British Imperial Act of 1833.¹¹ Racism existed in some form in all communities during this time. This coupled with the unfamiliar environments of Upper Canada, and being away from family and friends down south, created a decidedly difficult situation for a black settler. In some cities, such as Toronto, it was easier for a black person to make their way, in others those who stayed and thrived can be deemed truly remarkable.

⁹ Patrick Brode, Sir John Beverly Robinson: Bone and Sinew of the Family Compact (Canada: The Osgood Society, 1984) 265.

¹⁰ Donald Smith, Sacred Feathers (Canada: University of Toronto, 1987) 207.

¹¹ Heffernan, Queen's Bush Settlement .