

A Fugitive Past: Black History in Mississauga

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"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."

-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. 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. 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.

"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."

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

With the abolition of slavery in Upper Canada (now Ontario), the movement of fugitive slaves into Canada began in earnest. Canada was seen as a land of freedom and a place to start a new life and 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. 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.

But what about our own community? Mississauga (formerly Toronto Township in Peel County) was not one of those places where black people congregated in the early to mid-nineteenth century. In the Region of Peel (what now comprises Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon) there was no African Methodist Church (a sure sign of a black community), no predominantly black schools or established neighbourhoods. One can imagine the difficult decision this must have been to not only leave familiar people and surroundings in the United States, but also chose to resettle in a predominantly white and British settled area such as the Peel Region. Why individuals chose to come to this region is mostly lost to time. Likely for some the distance from the American border was an incentive. Slave catchers would be less likely to search such an unlikely place. For others it was probably a stopover on the way to a better life. Indeed our research shows that most black settlers left this area by the end of the nineteenth Century. With both Oakville and Toronto on either sides (both with more established black populations) the Peel Region would not seem to be the most desirable end point.

But who did come here? Who were some of the early black settlers who chose to make this area their home, even if for a short time? Those that were here left very little proof of their existence in the way of tangible records or documents. Through census records, town council records, birth, death and marriage certificates we have tried to piece together a fascinating depiction of the lives of individual people. There were approximately fifty to sixty recorded black settlers who are known to have lived in the Peel Region in the nineteenth century. They lived from the tip of Port Credit, through to Northern Caledon. Alexander Hunter in Port Credit, the Jackson family, who owned a barber shop in Brampton and the Spenser family in the Toronto Townships are just a few examples of people who made their home here for many years. As previously mentioned, most families only stayed here a short time.

One such family was the Duncan Family in Toronto Township. In 1856, Benedict Duncan was captured by Benjamin Drew, according to his book "The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada". Benedict was a slave in Maryland for 28 years. He had the unusual opportunity to go to school and learn to read and write; a rare privilege for a slave. As he tells it, he had "no trouble getting off ... I walked one-hundred and fifty miles of the way." He must have arrived in Canada about 1855 or 1856. It is not known how he made his way to this region but, but he surfaced again on the 1861 census as living in Peel County. The records show he was renting land and growing wheat, peas and carrots to support him and his family. Renting land was common for black settlers at the time, since many had no opportunity to save money to purchase their own farm land. Benedict Duncan married Elizabeth, and in 1861 the couple had one child, Jeremia. According to the records, he was doing well for himself, with one calf, a horse and two pigs to show for his work. It is hard to know how much time he spent in this area, probably ten to fifteen years. He eventually moved his family to the Oakville area and became a cornerstone of the black community there. One of his descendants, Alvin Duncan still lives in the area and is a noted historian.

As a port town, Port Credit saw its fair share of people from many different places. It is intriguing to imagine how many fugitive slaves made this port a resting stop. There was one man, however, who stayed in Port Credit, and won the hearts of the residents.

Samuel Carter, a fugitive slave, paid a high price for freedom. During his escape, he lost both his legs due to the exposure to cold. Little is known of his life in the town, how long he lived there or where he worked. However we can be sure that whatever his place, it was one of warmth and kindness. When he reached the end of his life, the town residents banded together to make sure he was looked after. All through the year of 1887, it seems Sam Carter was having a hard time making ends meet. The Toronto Township Council on at least one occasion made money available for Mr. Carter, and later in the next year, when his condition worsened, the council took action.

“Moved by Mr. Jackson, and seconded by Mr. Price that the Petition of B.B. Lynd and 22 others be received and that Mr. Lynd and Mr. Oliphant be instructed to have Samuel Carter removed to some place of comfort and have his wants attended to for the present time.”

When Samuel Carter died in October of 1888, the council looked after his needs and his internment expenses. While it is not known where he was interred, before his death it is said he lived at the end of an alder-lined dirt road called “Old Sam’s Lane”. Today there is a modern subdivision there and the street is called Wesley Avenue. This story of residents banding together shows that while black settlers did indeed face racism, they also found kindness in our region.

Our last stop is Cedar Park Farm, formerly at the intersection of Cawthra and Burnhamthorpe. Perhaps one of the most economically successful farms in the area, Cedar Park Farm was home to George Woodford Ross and his wife Didamia (nee Paul) Ross. The origins of George W. Ross are unclear. He came from Virginia some time in the early nineteenth century. There is no record of his family or his past. Didamia Ross was the daughter of Benjamin Paul, a prominent member of the Wilberforce Settlement in South-western Ontario. Wilberforce was an early black community which fell apart in the mid 1830’s due to poor management. Benjamin Paul was a minister in the community from 1831 until his untimely death in 1836. During his short time in Wilberforce, he became entangled in the politics of the colony and allied himself with some questionable characters. He has been portrayed as a proud but stubborn man. He had ten children, Didamia being the fifth child.

George and Didamia were married in 1834 and moved to the Cooksville area between 1834 and 1836. They raised 10 children, some of whom continued to live at the farm until their deaths in the early 20th century. It is not known with certainty if George W. Ross was black. This being said, on the 1861 census both he and Didamia were listed as mixed or “mulatto”. However after this census, it is difficult to find record of them being black at all. Subsequent records have the whole family claiming “Scottish” heritage with no mention of being black. It is difficult to tell whether the Ross family was indeed “passing” as white, as the term went. It does, however, seem likely that at some point someone decided not to disclose their heritage. It is also interesting to note that living descendants of the Ross family knew nothing of their black heritage. This seems to say a lot about the racial climate of the time. It appears that it was easier to feign whiteness than it was to be part white and part black. It is also possible that the lack of black settlers in the area, and their success at farming simply helped them to fit in well with

white settlers. Indeed George W. Ross seemed to have some very well-to-do friends in the area. George W. Ross died in 1878 and Didamia died shortly after. Some of their descendants still live in this area, not far from where their ancestor made his living through working the land.

At first glance, Peel County (now the Region of Peel) seems to have very little early black history. However upon closer inspection, there were many vibrant individuals who made their mark on our communities; Samuel Carter's ability to band the community together; the Ross family's successful farm; Benedict Duncan and his tales of slavery. There are many more individuals and families not mentioned in details here, such as the Barton's who made their home in Chinguacousy; the Stewart of Caledon who lost their son to a fever in 1871; Benjamin and Hannah Workman who lived in Port Credit for most of their lives. There is little information on these people, and one can only imagine the wealth of stories that have been lost with the passage of time. Next time you are walking in Port Credit, or passing the intersection at Cawthra and Dundas, stop to remember these forgotten individuals who came from backgrounds filled with such strife. Our community owes remembrance to these citizens who left behind all that they knew in hopes of finding a better life and made their community their home, even if for a short time.