

The Duncan Family

By Erin Brubacher for Heritage Mississauga

In 1856, Benedict Duncan was captured by Benjamin Drew, as described in his book "The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada".¹ 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."² He left out of fear of being sold when his master's business was going downhill. He became a Methodist, and remained so until his death. 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.³

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 1859 they had their first child, Harriet Delia Duncan, born in the Toronto Townships.⁴ However, the 1861 census shows record of only one child, Jeremia, born that year. The loss of a child was all too common for settlers during this time period. 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. Their family can be found in both the 1881, and the 1901 censuses in Oakville. They eventually had at least 6 children; Ben Scott, Levi, Margaret, Amon, Alexander and Mary are all listed on the 1881 census, going to school.⁵ One of his descendants, Alvin Duncan, was an active local Oakville resident and historian.

The Oakville Museums at the Erchless Estate has wonderful resources relating to early black history in Oakville and Ontario.

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

² Ibid 110.

³ Government of Upper Canada, 1861 census, Peel Region: Toronto Township, District 4, pg. 64. Records obtained at The Region of Peel Archives, Brampton, Ontario.

⁴ The United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives and The Halton-Peel Branch, Ontario Genealogical Society, Wesleyan- Methodist Baptismal Register, (Ontario, 2001) register # 952

⁵ Government of Ontario, 1881 census, Halton Region: Oakville, Sub-district D, pg. 32 Records obtained from online census records at familysearch.org.