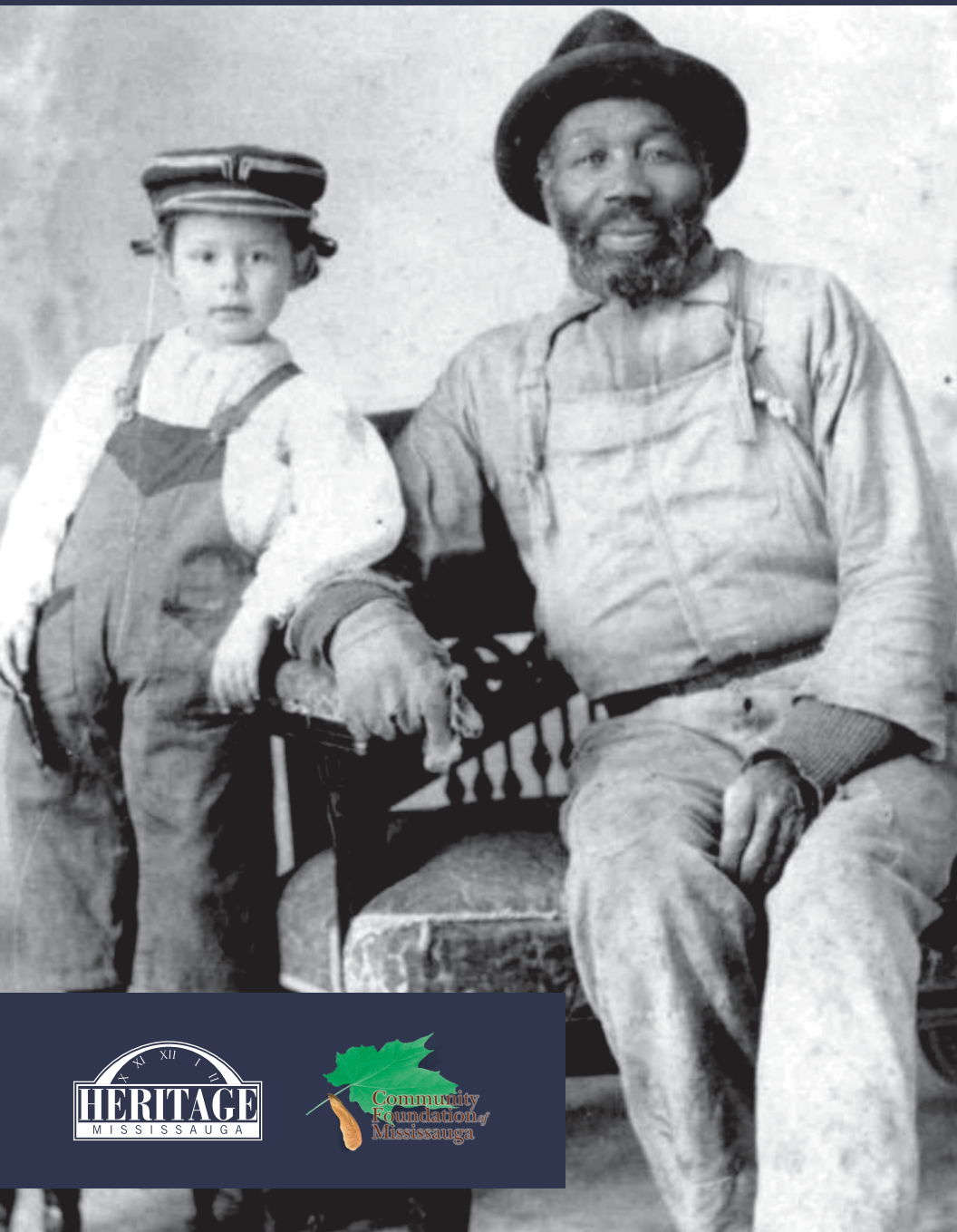


# A Forgotten Past?

*Early Black History in Mississauga*





## Introduction

With the abolition of slavery in the British Empire on August 1, 1834, the movement of former and fugitive slaves into Canada began in earnest. Canada was seen as a land of freedom and a place to start a new

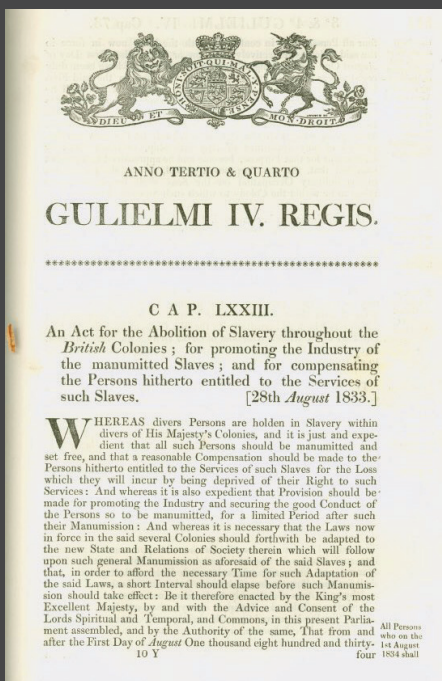
life. The growing abolitionist movement in the United States, the birth of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, and the development of the Underground Railroad aided the travel of Blacks into Canada.

A few Black families came to live in historic Mississauga (formerly Toronto Township). Distance from the American border and relative geographic obscurity were incentives. Those that came included Black Loyalists, emancipated former slaves, fugitive slaves and free Blacks looking for a new home and protection under British rule. There is very little tangible evidence of these historic connections. Early census records, council records, birth, marriage and death certificates provide a glimpse into this part of our City's past. Much of this story is sparsely documented, and photographs are few and far between. Some fugitive slaves, like Benedict Duncan, found their way to Canada via the Underground Railroad and developed some connections here, and in neighbouring communities like Oakville. Elsewhere in the Province, predominantly Black communities were established, such as the Wilberforce, Dawn, Oro and Buxton settlements.

Front Cover: From the Purnell Collection, courtesy of the Archives of Ontario.

Above: Act for the Abolition of Slavery in the British Colonies, August 28, 1833 (into effect on August 1, 1834)

Above: Unknown picture, possibly from Toronto Township, Port Credit Scrapbook, Mississauga Library System.



# Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was a name given to an informal network of secret routes, safe houses, and “conductors” (people) that focused on assisting former and fugitive Black slaves to escape from the United States into Canada, where many abolitionists were sympathetic to their plight. Houses and buildings that offered safe refuge along the route were often lit with a solitary lantern in an attic window during the night as a signal.

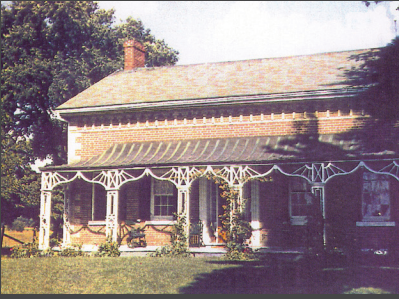
The Underground Railroad operated from about 1820 until 1865, and was at its height just prior to and during the American Civil War. Estimates suggest that between 30,000 and 100,000 slaves escaped to Canada via the “Railroad”. The routes taken by slaves were varied, and harbours and actual railroads were often used. Local to historic Mississauga, for example, the harbour at neighbouring Oakville was one terminus, while Orangeville was rumoured to be another. From these locations, escaped slaves often dispersed, settled nearby, or joined established Black communities elsewhere in Southern Ontario.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 in the United States sought to stem the tide of those seeking to escape slavery. Slave catchers, emboldened by the Act, were documented in Toronto, and in part led to gaining support for the formation of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada in 1850. At the same time, abolitionist newspapers such as *The North Star*, *Voice of the Fugitive* and the *Provincial Freeman* championed the abolitionist movement, published slave narratives, and promoted the freedom offered in Canada. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published in 1852, helped to propel the abolitionist movement.



Above: Runaway Slaves, artwork from the Underground Railroad, from History.com

## Cedar Park Farm



One of the best documented early Black families in historic Mississauga was the Ross family of Cedar Park Farm. The Ross farm was located near the modern intersection of Cawthra and Burnhamthorpe roads, and Rayfield Park is located on the former Ross

farm. George Woodford Ross (c1796-1878) was an emancipated former slave from Urbanna, Virginia. His father and slave-owner was James Ross, a Scottish-born land-owner. It is difficult to come to terms with a relationship between a slave-owner and enslaved children. James Ross emancipated his children, of which three half-brothers came to Canada in the 1830s, adopting the Ross surname (George Woodford, William Woodford and Corbin Lane).

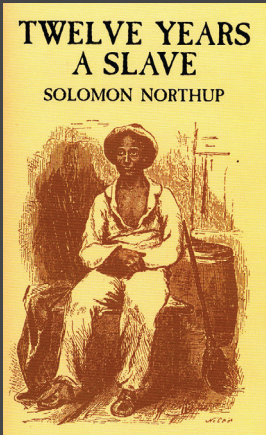
*“I, James Ross of Town of Urbanna in the County of Middlesex, considering that my mulatto slave, Mary Woodford (now deceased) and her daughter, Nancy Woodford, were the gifts of my two good friends, the late Clement Nicholson and Annie his wife as by their Deed recorded. DO EMANCIPATE and SET FREE all the children of the said Mary, to wit, Nancy Woodford, Frances Woodford, William Woodford, David Woodford, and George Woodford.”*

In James Ross’ will from 1825, the Cedar Park Farm plantation in Virginia was to be divided among the Woodford children. It is likely that the capital from this allowed George Woodford Ross to come to Canada and eventually purchase his own farm here in historic Mississauga.

George’s wife was Didamia Paul, who had been a school teacher at the Wilberforce Settlement near what is now London, Ontario. Didamia’s father, Benjamin Paul, had helped to establish Wilberforce. George and Didamia were married in 1834, and in 1836 purchased a 200-acre farm in historic Mississauga. George and Didamia Ross had 11 children: Benjamin Paul (born 1836), Elizabeth Adelaide “Eliza” (c1840), Charles Warburton (1843), Kate Mytilene (1845), Corbin Levi (1847), Didemia Anne (1848), Celestine Sarah “Cessa” (1850), James Woodford (1852), Rebecca Evangeline “Eva” (1854), Alexander Campbell (1855) and Georgina (1857). The family remained in the community for several generations. Rebecca’s son, Private Wilfred Arthur Winstanley Cook of Cookville, served and fell during the First World War.

Above: Ross-Cook House, Cedar Park Farm, built circa 1836 by George Woodford Ross, brick veneer added circa 1870s, purchased by Henry Cook in 1919, demolished circa 1975.





During the time that Cedar Park Farm existed, Solomon Northup, author of *Twelve Years a Slave*, a memoir and slave narrative first published in 1853, visited Streetsville in August of 1857, where he was not warmly welcomed and a hostile reception prevented him from speaking at the Town Hall. *The Globe* newspaper recounted the violent opposition he encountered. Hotel keeper, Robert Stephens, is credited with ensuring Solomon's safety. Others in this community were likely supporters of the

Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, championed largely by Reform Politician George Brown of *The Globe*. These supporters included the local Reform politician for Peel County, James Cox Aikins and Charles Willcox, a well-to-do local farmer and friend of the Ross family. However, the incident involving Solomon Northup in Streetsville highlights that there remained deep social divisions regarding the treatment of Blacks.

## Samuel Carter

Samuel Carter was a fugitive slave who arrived in Port Credit after 1861. As a result of his flight from slavery he lost both his legs due to the exposure to cold. Little is known of Samuel. In Port Credit Samuel was befriended by James Shaw (1811-1908), a well-known and respected resident. James secured a horse for Samuel, along with a lift that allowed Samuel to get on a horse, and using the horse to pull a small wagon Samuel assisted in transporting people to Sunday service at the First Methodist Church.

Samuel lived in a small cabin near the Methodist Manse on a tree-lined dirt laneway that was locally known as "Old Sam's Lane". The lane was eventually widened, paved and renamed "Wesley Avenue". Samuel was apparently well thought of in Port Credit. When he fell ill in the fall of 1887, town residents banded together to make sure he was looked after. On at least one occasion Port Credit Council made money available for Samuel, and in early 1888 Council passed this resolution:

"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, Port Credit Council covered his internment expenses.

## Dr. Ben

Every community has its stories of colourful or beloved “characters” who, in one way or another, connected with the residents of the place. One such story is that of “Dr. Ben” in Port Credit. “Dr. Ben” was described as a “white-headed old negro who lived in a cottage with his white-headed wife” in Port Credit. According to some early Port Credit histories, “Dr. Ben” was noted as having been born in Africa, where he was captured and sold into slavery in Virginia, and escaped to Canada in the 1840s. Very little is known for certain.

It is possible that “Dr. Ben” was Benjamin Workman (c1810-1885), who appeared in the census for the Port Credit area between 1851 until 1881. Benjamin Workman was listed as negro, born in the United States, a farm labourer by profession, and Methodist in religion. Benjamin and his wife, Hannah, were married in Virginia c1828. However we have no specific information on their escape from slavery and arrival in Canada, other than census records that show they were residents of Port Credit.

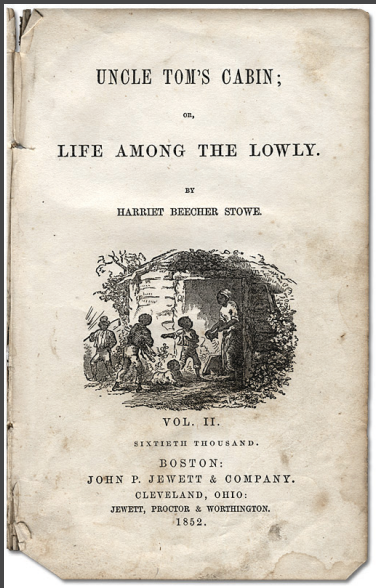


## Life & Times

Scattered family histories and census records reveal other names connected to historic Mississauga, such as Alexander Hunter in Port Credit, Mary Ann and William Bell of Erindale, and John Sheppard, of whom we know very little. Others such as Dinah Green, Fanny

Paul and Lettie Paul, who were domestic servants in the Silverthorn household over time, have left other small clues behind, such as a newspaper reference to the 1894 marriage between Lettie Paul and William Hutchinson:

*“On Wednesday September 15th at 5 o’clock at the pretty little church of St. John Dixie was a day to be long remembered by those whose happy lot of fell to be there. It was the marriage of Ms. Lettie Paul, (coloured) to Mr. Wm. Hutchinson (coloured) of Toronto Township. The bride was attired in a red cashmere dress, tan shoes and hose, drab hat and a smiling countenance. The groom wore a black suit, dude pants, open vest, Prince Albert coat, knock-about hat, red tie and Piccadilly shoes. The knot was tied by the Rev. Ralph Hinds. The church was crowded to the doors. There were people from all parts of the section, some came them a distance of five miles to pay their respect to our esteemed citizens ...”*



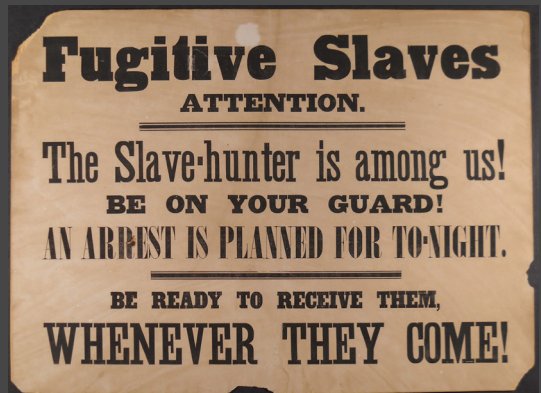
With the growth of the abolitionist movement leading up to the American Civil War, interest developed in many communities to hold Emancipation Day gatherings to recognize the freedoms of Black people in the British Empire. The legacy of Emancipation Day continues with the Toronto Caribbean Festival (Caribana) in celebration of a wider African and Caribbean diaspora.

Like the historic Anti-Slavery societies, the formation of anti-racist movements like Black Lives Matter and the creation of the

Anti-Racism Directorate in Toronto serve to uphold civil rights and freedoms. Others organizations, like the Black Community Action Network (BCAN) in Peel and the Congress of Black Women (Mississauga Chapter), seek the betterment and social well-being of Blacks in Mississauga by working to address racial inequalities, injustices and misrepresentations, much akin to the early traditions of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada.

Mississauga has historic connections to former and fugitive slaves, the abolitionist and anti-slavery movements, and to the Underground Railroad, although they are not well known and evidence is scarce.

We are seeking to further document this forgotten chapter of our story, and hope that you will be able to share discovered materials with us to help ensure that these stories are preserved.



Above: Cover of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by Harriet Beecher Stowe, first published in 1852.

Bottom: Notice for Fugitive Slaves warning of Slave Catchers, 1850, from Rauner Special Collections Library.

Back Cover: Unknown woman, courtesy of the Archives of Ontario.



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