

Background: Black History in Ontario

By Erin Brubacher

Edits by Matthew Wilkinson and Justine Lyn



*"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 freedom seekers. 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 Rev. Samuel Ringgold 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 Black and white residents. The records of this newspaper gives a fascinating depiction of a passionate, educated community, contradictory to the stereo-typical ignorant fugitive slave narrative that many of the time believed to be the norm.

Interestingly, the March 1852 edition of the *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper, founded and edited by freedom seeker Henry Bibb, published a letter from Rev. Samuel Ringgold Ward describing his journeys through Southern Ontario. He writes of passing through Peel County and Toronto Township, among other locales. Ward praises the abundant and prosperous farm fields, but also warns that, "anti-slavery finds enough work to do."⁹ Ward, like Bibb, was a former slave and abolitionist highly involved with the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada. He routinely went on speaking tours preaching for equality in the United States, Canada, and England. Ward was outspoken in his views that abolition was not solely about slavery, but also the treatment of Black peoples once free. In 1852, the Society likewise emphasized refugees should be fairly treated as they are, "quiet, industrious and worthy citizens."¹⁰

It was not an accident that Ward ended up in historic Mississauga either. Rev. Robert Ure of Streetsville's St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church is listed as being a Vice-President of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1852. Certainly, Toronto Township would have been known to those in the Society. As such, we can very much think of historic Mississauga as playing a small part in the national fight for equality and justice in Canada's early Black community.

While Black communities certainly experienced discrimination in one form or another, 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 seemingly challenge the number of whites, tensions often arose.

⁹ Henry Bibb, *Voice of a Fugitive*, March 11, 1852

¹⁰ *First Annual Report Presented to the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, by its Executive Committee*, Toronto, March 24, 1852.

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."¹¹ 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.¹² 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 1833.¹³

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.

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

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

13 Heffernan, Queen's Bush Settlement .

A Fugitive Past: Black History in Mississauga

By Erin Brubacher; Edits by Matthew Wilkinson and Justine Lyn

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 Spencer family in the Toronto Township 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's story was captured by author Benjamin Drew in 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 privileged 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 his family, and likely to augment whatever income he may have received as a labourer. 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. By 1871 the family had moved to Oakville, where they were members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Turner Chapel) in Oakville, which was also home to a larger Black community at the time. There, the Duncans became cornerstones of Oakville's Black community. One of Benedict's descendants was noted Oakville historian Alvin Duncan (1913-2009).

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. On the 1861 census both he and Didamia were listed as mixed. 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. While it is possible that this change may be a result of the different ways in which the census enumerator asked the family race-based questions, it is also possible that 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.

These revelations seem 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.