

Dinah Green

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Dinah Green might have been one of the earliest Black people living in the Peel Region. According to the local historian Kathleen Hicks, Dinah Green was a longtime servant to the Chisholm family of the Niagara Region, in the late eighteenth century. The Chisholms were a prominent family for their time, even more so when John Chisholm fought alongside General Isaac Brock during the war of 1812.¹ It is likely that Dinah Green came to the family as a slave and cared for the Chisholm children, and at some point gained her freedom, either at the time of the abolition of slavery in Upper Canada in 1834, or beforehand, though this is unclear.

Jane Chisholm, the oldest daughter of John Chisholm, married Joseph Silverthorn on March 17th 1807. According to Hicks, when they set out for Toronto Township in April of 1807, they brought Jane's childhood nurse, Dinah, with them to assist Jane in her new life.³ They settled in lot 11 NDS, Toronto Township, living in a small log cabin constructed by Joseph himself. It was a difficult life, with very few other settlers and a harsh climate. Her daily life would have included spinning, looking after the children, cleaning and cooking. Dinah would have assisted Jane in preparing everything from scratch, including soap, candles and clothing.⁴ Jane must have been very glad indeed to have Dinah around for company, and to make life a little easier.

Apparently, Dinah was a fairly plump individual, who loved to eat and cook.⁵ She passed on her skills to Jane and probably got her through that first winter in more ways than one. When Jane went into labour that first winter, there was no doctor to help so Dinah Green was next in line.⁶ She delivered that first baby, and probably many more after. Dinah died prior to the American Civil War in 1861.⁷ She is supposedly buried in the family plot at Dixie Union Church, alongside the Silverthorn family.⁸ There is no stone to mark her place (not uncommon for the time), or known record of her burial, however it seems likely, considering her place in the family.

¹ Kathleen Hicks, "Cooksville: County to City" (Mississauga: Friends of the Mississauga Library System, 2005) 7.

² Kathleen Hicks, "The Life and Times of the Silverthorns of Cherry Hill" (Mississauga: The Mississauga Library System, 1999) 229.

³ Ibid 27.

⁴ Ibid 42.

⁵ Ibid 229.

⁶ Ibid 43.

⁷ Ibid 229.

⁸ Ibid 229.

There are however, contradicting reports of Dinah Green. In Hazel Matthew's unpublished work "The Chisholms of Croy", Dinah is portrayed in a very different way. In this version, Dinah Green is called "Diana Green", and she didn't live with John and Jane Silverthorn at all.

"George Chisholm married Mary Ann who was reputedly fond of a gay time. It is said that George went on a hunting trip with some British officers and lost his inheritance including the homestead in a game of cards. Thereafter he disappeared and nothing is known of him or Mary Ann. Years later their five children were found in Norwich under the care of Diana, the family slave for whom John Chisholm had made provision in his will. After bequeathing to his son George 'the homestead or farm whereon I now live,' John's will continues: 'Also I do will, order, and direct, that my said Son George shall comfortable keep, and maintain in meat, drink, clothes, washing, and lodging, Diana Green during her natural life provided the said Diana shall continue in the family.' The children were taken away from Diana, she lost her reason and died in Norwich gaol."⁹

This is a much crueller twist of fate for our poor Dinah. George was a brother to Jane Silverthorn. It is possible that she lived with both families for a time, however these are conflicting stories.

According to Hicks, throughout Dinah's lifetime she likely came to be considered as a member of the family. She had been present for every major milestone and had helped the family through the difficult period of creating a home in historic Mississauga.¹⁰ However, what Dinah thought of this situation is unknown. Her lifelong servitude to the Chisholm and Silverthorn families has been interpreted by some as a sign of devotion, yet it is unlikely she had much say in the matter as Black Canadians, whether enslaved or free, had very little agency in this period. More research is needed to find the truth behind the life and death of Dinah Green.

⁹ Hazel Chisholm Matthews, "Chisholms of Croy" (Unpublished: Oakville Historical Society) Quote obtained from George Chisholm, President of the Oakville Historical Society.

¹⁰ Kathleen Hicks, "The Life and Times of the Silverthorns of Cherry Hill" (Mississauga: The Mississauga Library System, 1999) 229.