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## CANADIAN TERMINALS ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

by Shannon Ricketts

The Underground Railroad is not something that most people immediately recognize as integral to Canadian History. However, during the fierce battles over slavery during the nineteenth century, Canada found itself intellectually front and centre in the debate over abolition and physically on the front lines of the secret routes followed by refugees fleeing enslavement in the American South. Between the 1820s and the 1860s, some 20,000 refugees are estimated to have reached the growing towns and villages in present-day southwestern Ontario. After the arrival of the Loyalists in the eighteenth century, this was one of the earliest waves of political refugees into Canada. Then as now, the arrival of a new group of people provoked heated debate and became part of the election issues of the day. Now we look back on it as part of our legacy of tolerance and diversity.

The Underground Railroad was "run" by an informal group of people who used any means at hand to help Blacks escape enslavement. Their methods were so successful that the process was described by terminology from the cutting-edge technology of the day, the railroad. It brought refugees to various parts of pre-Confederation Canada from as far east as Nova Scotia to as far west as the new Crown Colony of British Columbia, but by far the largest influx

occurred in the Toronto - Windsor - Niagara Falls triangle. By the 1850s the situation in the United States was becoming critical. Even Black Americans who were legally free, some having been brought up in families free for generations, were worried. In 1851, the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law made it possible for any Black American to be arrested and sent south into slavery unless they could prove that they were free. Since the word of a White person was always taken over that of a Black person, legal recourse was limited. This led to

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numbers of free African Americans joining the northward stream of former slaves.

These new settlers were a diverse group. A few came with some capital, education and marketable skills, while the majority arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs. Many immediately sought work in the villages and towns near crossing points at either end of Lake Erie or on farms in the area. In time, some of



these wage-earners moved to larger centres such as Toronto where opportunities were more extensive, while others bought their own farms. In a few instances, schemes were mounted to create Black settlements where groups of refugees could help each other to establish self-sufficient farms.

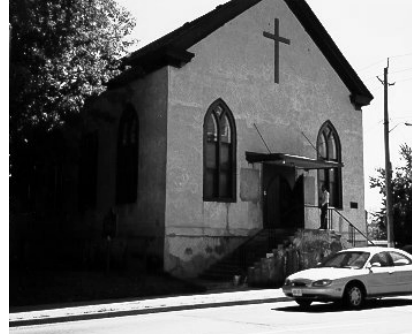
Architectural and archaeological survivals from these communities tell a story which, until recently, was little known to most Canadians. There is an astonishing wealth of Underground Railroad sites in southwestern Ontario and, for some time, bus tours have been bringing tourists to the small churches, historic houses, and museums where descendants of these indomitable settlers explain this History. Many of the visitors are African Americans who are amazed to find so much evidence of "their" History in Canada. Recently, Parks Canada has been working with the U.S. National Park Service in a joint initiative to commemorate this shared History and to make it better known. While the Underground Railroad in Canada was first designated of national historic importance in 1925 (marked by a Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque to the Fugitive Slaves at Windsor, Ontario), during the past few years, the Government of Canada also has designated related persons and sites.

The building type most likely to survive has been the church, representing the institution central to the lives of the UGRR settlers. One of the new national historic sites is the



Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal Church in Amherstburg. Through its handmade, fieldstone construction, this evocative vernacular structure tells the story of the small congregation who lovingly raised the walls within which they found strength and community through a wrenching period of adjustment and in the difficult years that were to follow. The church is now managed by the North American Black Historical Museum. With the national designation came badly needed financial assistance that the museum was able to match with locally raised funds and technical help. The restoration of this building has proven to be a process that has not only assured the survival of the historic structure but also has helped to knit the contemporary community closer together.

Other notable churches in the border communities include the First Baptist Church in Sandwich, the R. Nathaniel Dett AME Church in Niagara Falls, and the Salem Chapel in St. Catharines, the Canadian home of the remarkable UGRR conductor, Harriet Tubman.

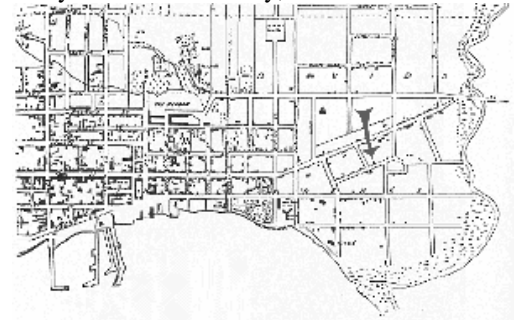


Evidence of the home-life of the refugees is harder to find. In the towns and cities where many UGRR refugees settled, most first generation homes have disappeared, victims of Canada's sustained urban growth. However, an early farmstead was discovered by the Hamilton Region Conservation Authority. Named Griffin House after its UGRR owners, it has been restored and is operated by the Fieldcote Memorial Museum in Ancaster.



Also, in the 1980s archaeologist Karolyn Smardz identified a Toronto homestead built by Thornton and Lucie Blackburn. Famed as principals in the "Blackburn" riots occasioned by their arrest and subsequent escape from Detroit, they became respected citizens of Toronto, active in the refugee community and funders of the city's first cab service. The site is on the grounds of a downtown school and has little above ground to suggest its UGRR history. The remains of the foundations show a barn where Thornton kept his horse and cab, and a house which suggests a relation to

vernacular house design common in many nineteenth-century, African



American communities. Since the archaeological remains are protected, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recommended that the Blackburns be designated as persons of national historic importance, representative of the many urban UGRR settlers, and that an exhibit on the experience of UGRR settlers be mounted in Toronto.

By contrast, the site of the former Elgin Settlement, a planned rural community of UGRR refugees now known as the "Buxton Settlement," has survived with a very powerful sense of place. Located on the north shore of Lake Erie and encompassing some 7,000 acres, the Buxton Settlement has been designated a national historic site because of the important survival of its settlement form, defined by field, road and drainage ditch patterns and by a wealth of original structures including houses, churches, a school, and artifacts exhibited in the Buxton Museum. Descendants of the original settlers still live at Buxton, some continuing to farm, and all witnesses to their forebearers' achievements. 1999 marked the settlement's 150th anniversary and the unveiling of the



Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque during the annual Labour Day weekend "Homecoming" celebration. Since 1924, this event has been bringing friends, relatives and visitors to Buxton to celebrate this remarkable community.

In the nearby town of Chatham, the amazing Mary Ann Shadd (Cary) published *The Provincial Freeman*, a mid-nineteenth century newspaper serving the UGRR community. As the first-known black female editor and publisher, Mary Ann spoke out for equal rights for all, irrespective of race or gender. She is a rare representative in this country of the inextricably linked battles for the abolition of slavery and for women's rights, a linkage more immediately evident in the United States than in Canada. Mary Ann Shadd's importance to Canadian History has been recognized both provincially and nationally.

Just northeast of Chatham, near the small town of Dresden, another UGRR community leader, Josiah Henson, is commemorated at Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site. Operated by the St. Clair Parkway Commission, this site preserves what is believed to be Henson's final home. Henson was an important leader who was central to the establishment of the Dawn Settlement, and of the British American Institute, a manual arts training school for refugees and their children. Henson traveled widely, raising funds and marketing the products of the refugee-run industries as far afield as

the court of Queen Victoria. Ironically, it is as inspiration for the character of Uncle Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe's hugely influential anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that Henson is best-known. Henson is also designated as both provincially and nationally significant with commemorative plaques at the site.

UGRR refugees came to Upper Canada because, under British law, they were guaranteed freedom and civil rights. Despite frequent challenges brought by American slave owners, the courts, in all but one known instance, defended the refugees' right to remain in Canada. Although full civil rights were more difficult to achieve, the battles for equal rights and for the abolition of slavery everywhere became powerful issues in the consciousness of the emerging nation. African Canadians actively defended those freedoms by joining militia groups in 1812 and again in 1837. This aspect of UGRR History is associated with the long-established national historic sites of Fort George at Niagara-on-the-Lake and Fort Malden at Amherstburg and is now officially acknowledged. The role of the courts in defending the refugees against extradition charges has been recognized at Osgoode Hall National Historic Site as is the important abolitionist activity which took place at St. Lawrence Hall National Historic Site, both in Toronto. Also in Toronto, the home of George Brown, renowned newspaper editor, politician, and Father of Confederation, is another established national historic site which will now be able to more fully present its intimate association with the UGRR community and its role in helping to launch his political career.

Research in this area is vigorous and ongoing. We can probably expect further discoveries and official recognition of more sites and persons. Meanwhile, recent research into a



chapter of Canadian History long overlooked has begun a process that has enormous potential for a fuller understanding of Canadian History. Perhaps most significantly, it acknowledges the important role played by these freedom seekers in the early history of our country.

### Ontario Curriculum Relating to the Underground Railroad

Grade 7 History: British North America

- describe the different groups of people (i.e. Black Loyalists, slaves, indentured servants, Aboriginal Loyalists, Maritime Loyalists) who took part in the Loyalists' migration and identify their areas of settlement
- explain Canada's involvement in the "underground railroad"
- locate relevant information about how early settlers met the challenges of the new land, using a variety of sources (i.e. artifacts, journals, letters, Internet, etc.)

Grade 12 History: Canada: History, Identity, and Culture

- describe significant waves of immigration (i.e. Black immigration in the early 1800s...) and settlement patterns, and how they helped shape Canadian identity and culture
- evaluate the extent to which Canada's reputation as a humanitarian nation is merited (i.e. Canada as a destination of escaping slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century)

[www.parkscanada.gc.ca/ugrr/main\\_e.htm](http://www.parkscanada.gc.ca/ugrr/main_e.htm)