

Ontario Is Rich in Black History

Black history month is a time for us to reflect on our people's past. How did people of African Descent come to settle in Canada? What were their struggles? Who were the individuals that were front and center in the fight and who were the allies along the way?

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

In 1793, the British Government gave Royal Assent to a colonial Act "to prevent the further introduction of Slaves." While this act did not abolish slavery, it did contain measures to stop the expansion of slavery. One such measure stipulated that any slave brought into Upper Canada by their owners, or arriving by their own efforts after 1793 were automatically free.

Although the Underground Railroad had been in operation since about 1585, this Act gave blacks a reason to look to Canada for refuge. It is estimated that some 20,000+ people arrived in Canada by way of the Underground Railroad. They settled all across Canada, from Nova Scotia to British Columbia. However, the majority came to Ontario, with the largest concentrations in Kent and Essex Counties. It is here that we find a rich history of our roots.

PEOPLE AND PLACES

Uncle Tom's Cabin, written by American author Harriet Beecher Stowe was based on the life of Josiah Henson. After saving for years to obtain the \$350 required to buy his freedom, Henson gave the money to his master only to be informed that the cost was now \$1000. Cheated out of his money and fearful of being sold, Henson escaped to Canada. He eventually purchased 200 acres in Dawn Township, where he founded the Dawn Settlement with a labourer's school for fugitive slaves. He became a Methodist preacher and an abolitionist speaker. The cabin that was his home for much of his life remains on 5 acres as Uncle Tom's Cabin Historical Site. Henson was the first black man to be featured on a Canadian stamp.

Not all blacks seeking refuge in Canada were former slaves. The United States Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which obligated authorities in "free" states to return escaped slaves to their owners, also meant that "born free" blacks could be kidnapped and sent to the south as runaways! Many fled to Canada to avoid being caught in this scenario. One individual was Mary Ann Shad. Shad and her brother Isaac moved from Delaware to Windsor, Ont. She opened the first integrated school in Canada and became the first female newspaper editor in North America (The Provincial Freeman). She was an outspoken abolitionist, making public speeches and fighting for equality and integration. In 1858 Mary and Isaac held secret meetings with John Brown in Chatham, where he was staging his ill fated raid at Harper's Ferry. Shad returned to the US in 1861 and in 1883, at the age of 60, she graduated as a lawyer from Howard University School of Law.

The Elgin Settlement, now North Buxton, was founded by Rev. William King as a refuge for the slaves he inherited from his father-in-law and other fugitive slaves. The 9,000 acre settlement became a thriving community. A museum, the old school house, a log cabin and the Presbyterian Church still remain. Each year, on Labour Day weekend, North Buxton holds its Homecoming Celebration. For 85 years, this four day event has given former residents and their descendants, from across Canada and the United States, an opportunity to visit their past, celebrate their roots and renew old acquaintances.

EXPLORE BLACK HISTORY WHERE YOU LIVE

These are just a few examples. Our history is rich and investigating. The internet is a great place to start. Do some searches. Find some sites. Plan a trip. Visit our past; you just may be surprised at what you find.

In Solidarity,



Fred Turner
National union representative

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