

Almost forgotten: Black History in Oxford

By Heather A. Rennalls

The Underground Railroad, escaping slaves posing as master and servant, slaves being smuggled into a church attic during the night, black schools and churches. Are these images that occurred in the Southern States? Although these scenes played themselves out in many parts of the United States prior to the American Civil War, they were also commonplace here in Oxford County during the 1800s.

February is Black History Month in Canada. Like many parts of Canada, Oxford County was home to a number of black communities that have since disappeared and are largely forgotten. Few monuments commemorate these long-gone hamlets of early black settlers. Black History Month is the one time of year these communities are brought back to life and remembered as the thriving settlements they once were. As a volunteer at the Oxford Historical Society, Mary Evans has been researching black history in Oxford County for the last ten years. She feels Black History Month is important, if you "talk about Canada being a multicultural country, every race and colour must be included in its history. Right in the very beginning we had Native people, French and English." This was the beginning of multiculturalism in this country.

Black History Month itself is due to the efforts of Dr. Carter Godwin Woodson; a noted black American scholar and historian who worked to educate the public on black culture and history that was being ignored or misrepresented in American history. February was designated as the official month in the United States in 1926. It was chosen as it coincided with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass (Feb. 14, 1817) a black freedom fighter who published his remarkable autobiography, *From Slave to Statesman*, in 1845 and Abraham Lincoln (Feb. 12, 1809) American President who freed slaves with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

Although the railroad porters brought the celebration of black history to Toronto in the 1950s, it was not until 1996, thanks to the Ontario Black History Society, that February was designated as Black History Month in Canada. Today, Black History Month is celebrated all over North America. The month is meant to educate the public on black people's struggles, triumphs and the contributions they have made to Canadian society. At 92 years of age, Fred Smith is a long-time black resident of Woodstock; he states that "there is a lot of sadness in black history, for they had their troubles and worked hard".

In Southwestern Ontario, Ingersoll was second only to Chatham in the size of its black community during the mid-1800s. Of the town's 2,000 residents, 400 were black. The former Wesleyan Methodist Church, built in 1854 on Oxford Street in Ingersoll, was a terminus for the Underground Railroad for southwestern Ontario. The Underground Railroad was the unofficial name for a movement that helped American slaves escape to freedom by following the "North Star" to Canada. Fred Smith's grandparents, Peter and Maude Smith, came to Canada via the Underground Railroad from Virginia.

During the night, escaping slaves were smuggled into the attic of the Ingersoll church. Anti-slavery supporters would then claim they were transporting them to other areas to work, so the escapees could safely reach their destinations. In 1956, the Wesleyan Methodist Church was destroyed to make room for a car wash. Today, no remnants exist to indicate the role Ingersoll once played in aiding slaves to their freedom.

Norwich was another early settlement in black history. It is reported that blacks settled in Norwich Township as early as 1829. The reason for black settlement here can be attributed to Norwich Quaker Frederick Stover. The Quakers assisted blacks in Cincinnati by arranging settlement in Canada and Stover was a land agent. Many black settlers were free blacks, mainly from New York State, who had the means to purchase property.

The first registered black landowner was Samuel Jones, who purchased Lot 16, Concession 7, in Norwich in 1833. In 1842, the village's S.S. No. 18 school was attended exclusively by black students. The school was a log cabin, 15 feet by 20 feet and it was situated on property that was owned by a black settler named Charles Joiner who also ran a sawmill in the area. Records indicated that in 1853, 41 students attended the school that consisted of 24 boys and 17 girls. When Norwich Township was split into North and South Norwich in the 1850s, the schools were rearranged and S.S. No. 18 disappeared.

Otterville was another important area in black history in Oxford County. Land was purchased here in 1856; five years later, black slaves built a church and named it the African Methodist Episcopal Church. This name was later changed to the British Methodist Episcopal Church. Although no pictures exist, the church was described as a white-framed structure that became debt-free by 1864.

Until the early 1900s, large camp meetings called "bush meetings" were held at the church. Many people, black and white, would attend, travelling from as far away as Ingersoll, Tillsonburg, Brantford, and even Windsor. A black preacher from Woodstock, Reverend Lucas, would sometimes speak at these meetings. The church is long gone; the area that was used as its cemetery now has trees covering unmarked graves. Nevertheless, a plaque and cairn was erected in 1982, to commemorate the British Methodist Episcopal Church and the black settlement in Norwich Township.

Despite these three locations of early black settlements, the cairn in Otterville is the only commemorative monument in Oxford County that acknowledges black settlements in this area. Mary Evans believes the reason for this is because "nobody has taken the time to do [research] except people in Otterville, that is how they got that, Joyce Pettigrew (Otterville's local historian) put [the research] together. At that time people didn't think there were any blacks in the North part of the county." Mary Evans states the written word is one way to prevent losing history; "if it is not written, how are people going to know? The written word is still to me, a little more authentic, for you have to prove everything. Very important to get things written down."

There are still many missing pages to the black settlements in Oxford County. For example, who were the anti-slavery supporters in Ingersoll and why was there an exodus of black people around 1871? Continued research is needed to answer these and many more questions on black history in Oxford County.