

## “...and Still I Rise”

By Heather A. Rennalls

Oxford County; a short jaunt east from Windsor and London and a two hour drive west from Toronto. Oxford County; acknowledged as the Diary Capital of Canada and recognized as the agricultural belt of South-western Ontario. This agriculture community once had a large Black population.

Like many parts of Canada in the 1800's, Oxford County was home to a number of thriving Black communities that have long since disappeared and are almost forgotten. Few monuments commemorate these long-gone hamlets neither of early Black settlers nor of the individuals who made contributions to Oxford County.

To commemorate Black History Month, the Woodstock Museum will be hosting the travelling exhibit; "and still I rise: A History of African Canadian Workers in Ontario 1900s to Present." This exhibit chronicles the working experiences of African Canadian workers in Hamilton during the turn of the century. To put this exhibit into our perspective, the Woodstock Museum will be showing Black worker's experiences in the work force throughout Oxford County from the 1800s to the present.

However, in order to understand how and why Black people came to Oxford County, we must understand the history of Canada. Black people first arrived in Canada as slaves by the British around 1608. But the first recorded Black person to arrive on Canadian soil was Mathieu da Costa from Azores. He was not a slave but a linguist, an explorer, a pioneer and a translator between the Micmac Indians and the French explorers with Samuel de Chaplain in 1606. da Costa could possibly have been in Canada as early as 1603. Olivier Le Jeune, a 6 year old boy from Madagascar, was the first recorded slave that came directly from Africa and sold in \*New France in 1628. He had been captured in Africa and later given the surname of one his owners, a priest.

In 1685, the *Code Noir* or “Black Code” became law which provided guidelines on the sale of slaves, their religious instructions and training, and the disposition of their offspring. The slave population increased rapidly in Canada after 1783, when the United Empire Loyalist migrated from the United States to Canada.

On June 19, 1793, Attorney General John White of Upper Canada introduced a bill prohibiting the import of slaves into Upper Canada. However, known as the “Slave Bill” faced great opposition but once passed, Upper Canada became the only British Colony to legislate for the abolition of slavery. This bill prohibited further entry of slaves into the province. Slaves already living in Upper Canada remained slaves for life, their children, born after 1793, could be free at age 25

and their children would be free at birth. It took another 41 years to abolish slavery throughout Canada.

On August 1, 1834, about 781,000 slaves were emancipated throughout British North America by the British Imperial Act. On that day, known as Emancipation Day, a slow exodus of Black people began from United States into Canada.

Between 1840 and 1850, there was a huge influx of Black people exiting the United States due to the passing of The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. (This act was a much stronger act than the earlier Fugitive Slave Law of 1793.) It allowed slave owners to recapture runaways, and even free Blacks, in northern Free states. To escape this controversial act, many Black people followed the North Star to Canada and some came to Oxford County via the Underground Railroad.

Reports indicate anywhere between 30,000 to 60,000 escaped slaves settled in Canada, the probably amount was about 40,000. Whatever the number however, not all Blacks were ex-slaves. Following the American Revolution many free Blacks settled here too. Some Blacks even fought in the War of 1812. Similarly, by the 1800's, many Black people made their way to Oxford County trying to make a living in their communities. They worked in a wide variety of occupations like domestic workers, preachers, blacksmiths, framers, carpenters, barbers, and coopers, just to name but a few.

The once thriving Black communities that existed in Oxford County included Ingersoll, Woodstock, Norwich and Otterville. Some profiles of the individuals who made and continue to make contributions to their communities will be show cased. However, for a full scope on the history of Blacks in Oxford can be found in the local Historian's book by Joyce Pettigrew's *Safe Haven The Story of the Black Settlers of Oxford County*. Through a Trillium grant and support from the South Norwich Historical Society, this book is cumulative years of research by Joyce. *Safe Haven* covers all aspects of the Black communities throughout Oxford County and is the one and only book that accomplishes these historical facts.

### **Ingersoll**

As early as 1820, Ingersoll was established as an unincorporated Village. It was incorporated as a Village in 1852 and as a Town in 1865. The Great Western Railroad was built through Ingersoll in 1853, which helped fugitive slaves to find employment. They cleared the land to build the railroad, stations, bridges and plank roads. According to Joyce, a business man in Ingersoll advertised in the *Voice of the Fugitive*, (A Black newspaper in Toronto) on May 7, 1851" for twenty colored men to work on the plank roads. The pay was \$10.00 in cash each month with board and washing done, or \$10.50 with board and no washing."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Joyce A. Pettigrew. *A Safe Haven The Story of the Black Settlers of Oxford County*. The South Norwich Historical Society 2006. p. 60.

Another place of employment for fugitives to work was at Thomas Brown's tannery. Brown was a member of the Wesleyan Methodist Church which aided ex-slaves.

The history of Black people in Ingersoll is attributed to Mary Evans Smith. By the tedious job of extracting names of Black people, identified as "colored", from the census of 1842, 1851, 1861 and 1871, Mary had evidence that Black families resided in Oxford County with the largest population residing mainly in Ingersoll during 1861. In South-western Ontario, Ingersoll was second only to Chatham in the size of its Black community during 1851 to 1861. Of the town's 2,000 residents, 400 were Black. The reasoning for a large number of Black people in the village could be attributed to The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

Located on Oxford Street, south of Charles Street, ex-slaves volunteered their labour in 1854, to build the Wesleyan Methodist Church as thanks for the kindness shown to Black people arriving in Ingersoll.

The Church consisted of a three-story brick building with living quarters for the minister on the top floor and could seat 500 people. Pine boards in the attic, measured 12 to 14 inches wide, indicating the size of white pine trees that inhabited Oxford County then. Many Black labours were skilled in the building trade such as bricklayers, plasters and roofers.

The Wesleyan Methodist Church was one of the most northerly terminuses for the Underground Railroad in South-western Ontario. Also called the "Liberty Line", the Underground Railroad began in the 1780s by the Quakers. It was a movement that helped American slaves escape bondage to freedom in Canada by following the North Star. Between the 1830s and 1840s, about 20 terminals were set up in Canada jutting along the shores of Lake Erie. Travelling on foot at night through swamps, bayous, forests and waterways, escaping slaves followed the stars to guide them north and hid during the day at stations or ports.

Fear of bounty hunters was always foremost in a runaway slave's mind being captured and returned to the plantation. To confuse bounty hunters, railroad terms were used. For example, 'conductors' fed clothed and hid escaping slaves from one point to another until freedom was reached. 'Stations' were places the abolitionists hid their 'cargo' - escaping slaves - like barns, churches, attics, cellars, farmhouses or secret passages. Slaves passed information on escape routes by songs like "Follow the Drinking Gourd".

Known as "Black Moses" of her people, Harriet Ross Tubman was a legendary conductor on the Underground Railroad. Born into slavery Harriet helped about 300 slaves escape their bondage to become free in Canada. Despite a

\$40,000.00 price on her head by a group of slave-owners, Tubman continued to lead escaping slaves to freedom

Led by Quakers by way of St. Thomas, slaves escaping bondage from their plantations from Virginia, Georgia, Louisiana and even as far as New Orleans, were smuggled into the attic of the Wesleyan Methodist Church during the night. Anti-slavery supporters would try to find work for them on neighbouring farms throughout Oxford County, or would transport them to other areas to work, to enable them to safely reach their destinations.

Due to their large population, Black Ingersoll residents wanted their own church and built the British Episcopal Church (BME) in 1858. Also called the “Negro Church”, the BME Church was erected on the south side of Catherine Street on the east side of the stream, located near where the majority of Blacks had lived. In addition, many Black people were buried in the Ingersoll Rural Cemetery as well as in Potter’s Field.

**Reverend Solomon Peter Hale** was the last Minister of the BME Church where he preached for twenty years. He and his wife Juliana arrived in Ingersoll from Maryland in 1860. He died in Ingersoll in 1904.

However, by 1871 most Black people vanished from Ingersoll without a trace. Despite Ingersoll’s quest to bring escaping slaves to their flourishing village, resentment towards Blacks brewed. Through an interview with the late Ingersoll journalist, Stanley J. Smith, Mary Evans recalled his words: “It was as if Ingersoll wanted to get the blacks here for freedom but once they got them here they didn’t treat them well. “ Stanley reported that Black workers “worked for 50 cents per day. It was pitiful.”

As a result, many Blacks who resided in Ingersoll moved to other surrounding areas like Dresden, Hamilton, Toronto and St. Catharines. Prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861, many returned to the United States to fight the Union side for their freedom. At the conclusion of the war in 1865, many Blacks left Canada for the United States to find lost family members and friends who were now free and to taste life as free people in their homeland.

### **Woodstock**

Not much information exists as to the origins of the Blacks who resided in Woodstock. However, being a larger city where opportunities for employment could be secured could be one explanation. Woodstock was the chief station for the Great Western Railway which ran from the Town north, south, east and west.

Woodstock was incorporated on January 1, 1857 and was the centre of a rich agricultural country with successful farms. Manufactures at the turn of century included the Woodstock Iron Works established in 1842 by H. P. Brown. The Vulcan Iron Foundry manufactured stoves, agricultural implements, tin and sheet-iron ware. There were a few grist and flouring mills in the city and two tanneries, a patent medicine factory, a large wholesale and retail book and paper

warehouse that manufactured book-bindery. There was also an oil refinery and a brewery.

In 1888, the British Episcopal Church, also known as Park Row Community Chapel, and Hawkins' Chapel, named after the **Right Reverend Walter Hawkins** the first minister, was built on Park Row in Woodstock. The church was once the centre for Black people in Woodstock until it was permanently closed in 1986.

Woodstock was also home to the famous Town Crier **George Washington Jones** who arrived here in 1925 and who became immortalized in August 2004 after a walkway was named in his honour. Another famous Woodstock family is the **Smith family**.

### **Norwich**

Norwich was another early settlement where Blacks settled. First known as Sodom and later Norwichville, Norwich was given the name in 1799. Much of the research on Quakers to this area can be credited to Marie Avey from the North Norwich Historical Society.

Known as "the resting place of the Quakers," Norwich was settled by Quakers Peter Lossing and his brother-in-law Peter DeLong in 1810. They traveled from Dutchess County, New York to look for a place to settle and purchased 15,000 acres of land for 50 cents an acre. Other early settlers included Adam Stover, Joseph Lancaster, the Motts, Cornwell, Snyders and Sackriders to name a few.

In the 1840s, Norwich had flourishing saw mills and a flour mill. There was also a carriage and blacksmith shop as well as a tannery and furniture shop. Harvey Farrington established the first commercial cheese factor in 1864 on Quaker Street. Some of the Black settlers set up saw mills as well. Aside from working at the saw mills, employment was also gained by clearing land like **Robert Addison, James P. Wainer** and **James Wainer** in 1853.

In 1855, Norwich was divided into North and South North townships; the village of Norwich was incorporated in 1876. At that time there were two railroads. The late 1880s to the early 1900 were times of prosperity for Norwich due to several industries. Such as the Donald Produce Company, Allen Vinegar Works and the West, Taylor Bickle Company Limited manufacturing of booms and whisks.

The reason for Black settlement here can be attributed to Frederick Stover, a Norwich Quaker and land agent for the Wilberforce settlement. It is reported that Blacks settled in Norwich Township as early as 1829. Through her research, Joyce Pettigrew documents how early historian, Mrs. Snell attributes the date of Blacks settling in Norwich coincided with the Cincinnati Riots of 1829. In 1829 in Cincinnati, Ohio, fear of increased number of Blacks enforced the "Black Laws" which required Blacks to have a certificate of freedom issued by court and a \$500.00 bond in order to settle in the city. As a result, a race riot ensued.

The Quakers assisted Blacks in Cincinnati by arranging settlement in Canada by providing financial aid to purchase 800 acres of land 2 miles outside London (Lucan) in Wilberforce Frederick Stover. They expected about 2,700 Blacks would settle there. But fear of cold and hunger in the North persuaded many to change their minds and only 460 came to Canada. Nonetheless, many still didn't make as far as Wilberforce as they settled among "Friends" in Norwich Township.

### **Otterville**

Unlike the Black settlers in Ingersoll, many of the Norwich township settlers were free Blacks mainly from New York State. These families had the means to purchase property. For example, one of the first Black families to settle in the township were **Isaac Joiners** who built a sawmill and became leaders in the community. The first registration of land ownership by a Black settler was **Samuel Jones** who purchased Lot 16, Concession 7 in 1833.

Another early Black settler was **Jeremiah Wayner** who in 1838, owned land on Lot 17 Concession 7. He later worked at one of the Cromwell Mills. Other free Black families to purchase land were the **Wayners** and the **Joiners**. Both families purchased 150 acres of land where they farmed and built a saw mill.

According to records kept in Cromwell's Day Book, Tidey's Survey and the Town Book, other Black families to purchase land included **Daniel Tuner, Elisha Durphy, Isaac Durphy** who helped built the church, **Thomas Wayner, Gardner Wayner**, and **John Page**.

Documentation also listed the jobs these early Black settlers were employed at. For instance, **Richard Call** one of three brothers who served in the War of 1812, was a Captain, **George Hollenbeck** a shoemaker, **John Bedford** was a gunsmith **Elijah DeGroat** was a cooper and **Lindsey Anderson** was a carpenter.

**Robert Williams** settled on a farm on Lot 6 Concession 7. (Refer to the Williams Family for further information.) Local historian, Joyce Pettigrew, indicates that the majority of Black families lived in North Norwich Township.

*In the 1851 Census, 100 Blacks were recorded in the south part of The Township of Norwich and one family of four in the north. This number increased to 165 by 1861, with 148 Blacks in the new Township of South Norwich and 17 in North Norwich.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Joyce A. Pettigrew. *A Safe Haven The Story of the Black Settlers of Oxford County*, The South Norwich Historical Society 2006, p. 39.

In 1856, **Isaac Gray**, Isaac Durphy and Lindsey Anderson purchased land to on the outskirts of Otterville to build a church where Anderson was the first preacher. Five years later the church was named the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) but later changed to the British Methodist Episcopal Church (BME), to show support for the British during the American Revolution. The church was described as a white-framed structure that was debit free by 1864.

Up until the early 1900's, large camp meetings called "bush meetings" were held at the church. Many people, both Black& white alike, would attend & who traveled from Ingersoll, Tillsonburg, Brantford, & even as far away as Windsor for these meetings. A Black preacher from Woodstock, **Reverend Lucas**, would sometimes speak at these bush meetings.

One of the Black settlers from Summerville was Isaac Gray, a former slave. Gray was the great-grandfather of the late Raymond Lewis, the first Canadian-born Blackman to win an Olympic Medal. Lewis, who lived in Hamilton, Ontario, won a Bronze Medal in the 1932 Los Angels Olympic Games and a silver medal at the British Empire Games in London Engle and again in 1934. Ray was present for the unveiling of the Memorial Cairn at the AME Cemetery in Otterville.

He died in Hamilton on November 21, 2003 at the age of 93. If he had lived, Ray Lewis probably would have been present for this auspicious occasion. On July 8, 2006, the Ontario Heritage Trust and the South Norwich Historical Society, unveiled a provincial plaque commemorating the once African Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery at the Woodlawn Octagon Cottage in Otterville. The inscription on the plaque reads as follows:

### ***Otterville African Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery***

*Encouraged by local Quakers, free Blacks and escaped slaves fled persecution in the United States and found homes in the Otterville area beginning in 1829. As skilled tradespeople and farmers, these people made significant contributions to local development. In 1856, trustees of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery purchased this half-acre lot and built the first Black church in Oxford County. Later that year, the church was transferred to the newly establish British Methodist Episcopal denomination. The church and cemetery served the local Black community until the late 1880s. The small white-painted frame church had disappeared by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its cemetery is one of the few preserved Black pioneer burial grounds in Ontario.<sup>4</sup>*

By the late 1880s, the Black population declined as the operation of lumbers mills dwindled. Joyce cites that in 1881 there were 78 families which dropped to 60 in 1891 then to only 27 families in 1901. By 1909, 9 families who owned property

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<sup>4</sup> Karolyn Smardz Frost. "Otterville African Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery" *Featured Plaque of the Month*, August, 2006. Ontario HeritageTrust.

were listed. The last of the original families to live in this area was **Sherman DeGroat** who died in 1978.

According to Joyce's research, despite the influx of Irish immigrants to compete with employment, the treatment of the Black settlers was well received. Few incidents of racial tensions existed. However, with no newspapers before 1860s, Pettigrew surmises that this could have result in few reports. Nevertheless, she mentions two incidents were the Ku Klux Klan burned crosses near Black homes but dates were not mentioned.

Joyce states that even today the Black families of these areas are remembered with respect and affection. This is apparent in the work that has and continues to be done on the local Black history by the Norwich Archives, the Norwich and District History Society and by the South Norwich Historical Society.

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