

IN THIS ISSUE

4 A BRIEF BLACK HISTORY

February is Black History Month, and there's plenty of history in Oxford County.

By guest writer Heather A. Rennalls.

14 RING IN THE NEW YEAR

There was a time civic bells were a key part of the community – Woodstock's are finally being honoured.

20 CITY PROFILE: CHRIS GRATTON

The City's new Information Technology Manager takes up the challenge from Day One.



Check out the COW Tales 'Way Back When' contest on page 11 and enter today!

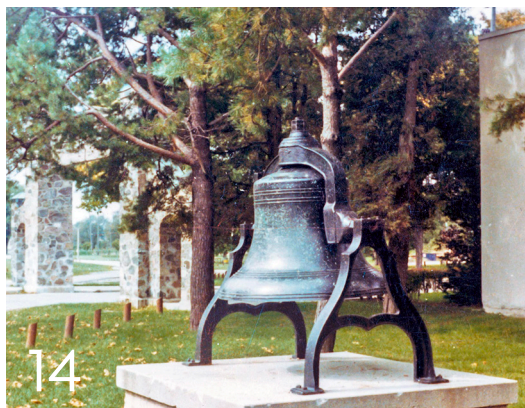
A: In 1882, Oscar Wilde spoke at the Town Hall auditorium (currently the Grand Hall – 2nd floor of the Woodstock Museum National Historic Site). He stayed at the O'Neill House – formerly the Oxford Hotel located at the NW corner of Finkle Street and Peel Street.

NEXT EDITION

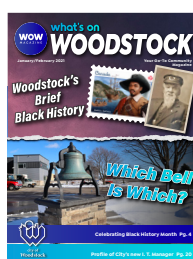
The March 2021 edition of WOW will be delivered with Canada Post beginning on March 1.



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ABOUT THE COVER

This cover features two of our editorials this edition: one a celebration of Black History and the second, a look at the City's civic bells.

CITY SCHEDULES AND SERVICES

- | | |
|---|--|
| 2 Engineering: EnviroDepot and Winter Tips | 16 Woodstock Public Library |
| 9 Fire Dept.: Winter Fires Safety | 21 Woodstock Art Gallery |
| 11 Community Grants Program | 22 Woodstock Transit and Para-transit Schedules |
| 12 Preventing Falls in Your Home | 23 Engineering: No Overnight Parking |
| 15 Woodstock Museum NHS | 24 Recreation & Leisure Guide Online |

A Brief Black History of Woodstock

by Heather A. Rennalls

In February, Canada celebrates Black History Month, and, though much of it is forgotten, there is a great deal to celebrate.

Clouded by the turbulent and often ugly history of black communities in the United States, Canadian black history is a very long and relevant story.

That Woodstock has its own story was brought home last June, when a surprisingly large march for racial equality was held in Victoria Park in support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Woodstock and Oxford County was home to a number of black communities that have since disappeared. Only a few monuments commemorate these long-gone hamlets of early black settlers.

The local story must be told in the context of broader Canadian history. Slavery existed in Canada. Black people first arrived in Canada as slaves, brought by the British, around 1608. However, the first recorded black person to arrive on Canadian soil was Mathieu da Costa, from the Azores in



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1606. He was not a slave, but a linguist, explorer, pioneer and translator for Samuel de Champlain.

The remarkable da Costa used his knowledge of Dutch, English, French Portuguese and pidgin Basque to build bridges between Champlain and the native Micmac peoples. Pidgin Basque was a dialect used by many aboriginal peoples in their trade relations with Europeans.

The first recorded slave purchase was a six-year-old boy captured in Africa and transported to New France on board a British slave ship in 1629 by trader and privateer David Kirke. Kirke sold the boy when he left New France in 1632, to French clerk Olivier

Le Baillif, who in turn either sold or gave the now ten-year-old to Guillaume Couillard. The young lad worked on Couillard's estate as a domestic, and was tutored by Jesuit priest Paul Le Jeune. Le Jeune baptized the boy 'Olivier Le Jeune' who spent the next 25 years working as a domestic. By the time Le Jeune died in 1654, it is unknown whether Olivier remained a slave or was a free man.



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what's on WOODSTOCK

Volume 23

Number 1

What's On Woodstock Magazine is published nine times a year by the Office of the Communications & Special Events Manager of the City of Woodstock. Circulation is 21,000 copies delivered to the residents and businesses of Woodstock.

Magazine produced by Flying Squirrel Design.
E-mail: wow@flyingsquirreldesign.com.
Mail/Courier: 9-1201 Nellis Street,
Woodstock, Ontario N4T 1N8

Editorial written by Jeff Culp. Ad deadline for March 2021 edition: February 3, 2021
Call Brad Janssen at 519-539-1291 x 4102 to book your advertising today.

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Goff Hall Rental	519-421-3484 x 4301
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Market Centre Rental.....	519-537-8411
Museum.....	519-537-8411
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Have your events listed in the FREE Event List on the back inside cover or for advertising in the **What's On Woodstock Magazine**, call Editor Brad Janssen, at 519-539-1291 x 4102 or fax to 519-539-3275.



Between 1628 and 1759, there was a slave trade between New France and Africa, with more than 11 hundred people shipped to New France (which covered most of North America, including present day Ontario, Quebec, the Maritimes and the American Midwest). When the British conquered New France in 1759, the governor of the colony asked royal permission to continue to import slaves from Africa. The request was denied, and the slave trade from African to Canada was never established.

New France was very much a slave society, evidenced by the passage in 1685 of the Code Noir, or “Black Code,” which provided guidelines on the sales of slaves, and had provisions for their religious instruction, training and the disposition of their offspring. The Code refers to the enslaved as “servants,” but they were deemed to be the property of their masters. Not only black people suffered this fate, but natives as well, often taken from the Pawnees and related tribes, although English settlers prefers black slaves.

After the American War of Independence in 1783, about 40,000 people from the American colonies remained loyal to the crown and emigrated to Canada, many bringing their black slaves with them. In 1793, Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe of Upper Canada (now Ontario) introduced the “Slave Bill,” which ended the importation of slaves. Upper Canada became the first British Colony to legislate an end to the slave trade, although slaves already living in Upper Canada remained slaves. Their children would be free. It wasn’t until 1834 that slaves throughout British North America were emancipated, freeing over 780,000 people, and starting a slow exodus of black people from the United States.

The exodus received a huge impetus after the 1850 passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in the United States, which required escaped slaves to be returned even if they were captured in free states.

For many slaves, Canada represented a dream of freedom where slave catchers and lynch mobs couldn’t hurt them. Slaves on the Underground Railroad endured months and even years, of living like fugitives while bounty hunters and racist government policies were always trying to impede their flight to freedom. Most slaves started out their journey on the Underground Railroad by running away from their plantation in the middle of the night. Often the runaway slave was alone, but on many occasions whole families would escape together.

The Underground Railroad (also called the “Liberty Line”) was not underground nor did it have tracks but was a movement consisting of a network of escape routes. The Underground Railroad emerged as a result of over 415 years of slavery in the United States that started in 1450 and continued through the Civil War until the

passing of the 13th Amendment which abolished slavery in 1865. Oppressed slaves wanted a way out and with the help of Abolitionist and other Anti-Slavery advocates, many slaves escaped to freedom in Canada by following the North Star via the Underground Railroad.

The term “Underground Railroad” is said to have originated in 1831 when a Kentucky slave named Tice Davids fled his plantation with his master in hot pursuit. Tice jumped into the Ohio River determined to swim to Ripley, Ohio, on the other shore. Pursued by his master in a boat, Tice made it to shore. When his master reached the shore, however, Tice was nowhere to be found. The frustrated slave-owner declared that Tice had vanished before his very eyes disappearing on some kind of “underground road.” The success of Davids’ escape soon spread among the enslaved on southern plantations.

With the advent of the steam railway, terms like the “Underground Railroad” were used as code words. The “train” would occasionally be nicknamed the “Gospel Train.” “Conductors” consisted of people or groups of people like the Quakers (important anti-slavery supporters), freed Blacks, Sympathetic Whites, Native Americans, German farmers and various religious groups, who 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. The Underground Railroad was begun by the Quakers.

The President of the Underground Railroad was a Quaker named Levi Coffin. His home in Newport, Indiana (and later in Cincinnati, Ohio) was known as the “Grand Central Station.” Through their work in the antislavery movement, Levi and his wife Catherine helped thousands of runaway slaves. During a visit to Canada in 1844, Levi visited many people whom he had helped escape slavery.



Levi and Catherine Coffin worked the antislavery movement as president of the Underground Railroad known as Grand Central Station in Newport, Indiana.

(Continued on next page)

Amazing Characters in Woodstock's Black History

by Heather A. Rennalls

The first major wave of fugitive slaves coming into Canada occurred between 1817 to 1820 and the choice of refuge was Essex County as it was the easiest and fastest to reach from the United States. About 20 terminals were set up in Ontario dotting along the shores of Lake Erie and the Niagara River, as well as Amherstburg, Windsor, Owen Sound, Hamilton, St. Catharines, Toronto, Kingston, Brantford, Collingwood and Prescott. Areas in Oxford County that both escaped slaves and free Blacks settled included, Ingersoll, Woodstock, Blenheim, Norwich, Summerville and Otterville.

The most northerly terminus of the Underground Railroad was the former Wesleyan Methodist Church in Ingersoll. Led by Quakers by the 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 Ingersoll 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.

A well-known barber in 1860 was Thomas Doston who escaped slavery in Kentucky in the 1840's and came to Woodstock. Thomas and his wife Abigail had two sons, James and William. The family remained in the area until the 1880's, when they moved to Detroit to live with their son James who became the Deputy Sheriff. Thomas died in Detroit in 1906.

Gilbert 'Gil' Sanders became known as the "only barber in town" who had a shop located on Dundas Street West in Woodstock. By the 1870 Census, Gilbert had two other Black men working for him as barbers, Henry Anderson and William Tillman. During the 1880s, Gilbert was married and had a family of three living in Woodstock.

Marshall Anderson

Marshall Anderson, known as "Marsh", was born in South Norwich in 1844. In 1871, when he was 27 years old, Marsh farmed on a rented property near Burgessville. He resided there with his first wife Sarah and their 3-year old daughter Frances. Following Sarah's death, Marsh married her younger sister Mary. The family moved to Woodstock in 1881 where Marsh joined the Woodstock town fire brigade until the fire department was made a permanent one and moved to the fire hall on Perry Street. However, that same year, Mary died.

During the 1890's, Marsh was the municipality's law enforcement and known as "Woodstock's Faithful Night Watchman". Hired by local merchants, this large Black man patrolled the city after dark when policing did not provide night coverage after six o'clock. Lieutenant-Colonel John White came up with the idea of having Marsh protect stores and business at night. Marsh's beat

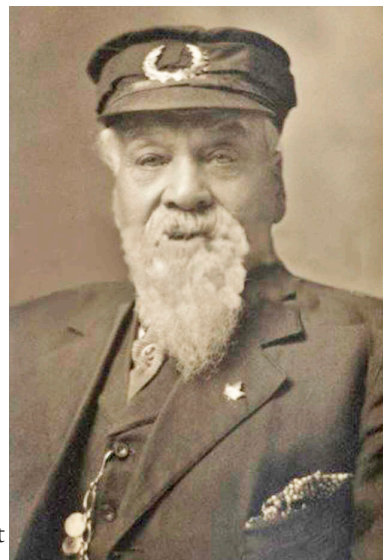
was from Vansittart Avenue to Wellington Street, on both sides of Dundas Street as well as the stores and business around City Hall Square.

Marsh had an assistant; a large Newfoundland dog named "Duke." The two made an effective team but Duke was poisoned when he was 11 years old. Marsh's second dog was a Great Dane named "Seeker". While Marsh tried the doors of the local merchants, Seeker would stand and wait. If there were any sign of trouble, Marsh would let Seeker in to investigate. The beat back was in reverse; Seeker would lead the way down the allies behind the stores, followed by Marsh. If something unusual was found, Seeker would "utter a deep growl and stand guard until Marsh" arrived with his gas lamp to investigate and make an arrest if necessary. If someone had to be placed in the lock-up, located in the cellar of the town hall, Marsh would lead the way, followed by the culprit and Seeker bringing up the rear. It was reported that Marsh and Seeker never lost a prisoner. In the morning, the prisoner would be freed.

After 40 years of public service, Marsh retired at age 81 in 1925 and was granted a pension for life by the Woodstock Police Commission.

Smith Family

Samuel Walter Smith was the eldest of six children born to Peter and Maude Smith on December 13, 1871. Of his five siblings, Samuel was the only one of the six who remained in Oxford County. He was born in Innerkip then moved



File photo

Marshall Anderson



Peter Smith was a slave in Virginia before he left the United States and arrived and settled in Innerkip. Smith is pictured with his neighbour, Jean Walton (left) and Fay Mctavish, a school teacher. Smith walked daily from Innerkip to Woodstock to work at the House of Refuge.

to Woodstock to find employment. Samuel married Mary A. Anderson from Chatham in 1903.

Like his father, Samuel was a hardworking man and an entrepreneur. According to his son, Fred Smith, Samuel was the first person to plough the streets of Woodstock with his team of horses and a snow plough. He also delivered wood and cleaned up after fires. Sometimes Fred would accompany his father and his team of horses ploughing the streets at 4:00 in the morning.

In 1959, Mildred Smith (photo on pg. 3), the youngest of Samuel's children, was appointed pastor of the British Methodist Episcopal (B.M.E.) Church in Woodstock where she had been the deaconess of the church since 1950. Her duties of a deaconess included visiting the sick and dying as well as assisting the pastor with service. In a newspaper article that appeared in the *Woodstock Sentinel-Review* on July 9, 1959, Pastor Smith reported that she is an "old fashioned" type of minister and people would expect to hear an old-fashioned Gospel service. Despite her small congregation of five, Pastor Smith hoped that the old church would be bulging to its seams with people. This never occurred however, but the Smith family still went down in the history book.

The Smith family are one of the few remaining Black families who arrived in Oxford County via the Underground Railroad during the mid-1880s. The family has 150 years of history contributing to their community.

Built by former slaves, the B.M.E. Church was once the religious and social centre of Woodstock's Black community. Known by various names: Hawkins' Chapel and Park Row Community Chapel, the church opened its door on December 2, 1888. A porter at the O'Neil House George

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The British Methodist Episcopal (B.M.E.) Church on Park Row.

Washington and stonemason Dan Anderson, started canvassing in 1883. By 1886 the two local Black men purchased lot number 1 at 257 Park Row in Woodstock, to build the 200-seat frame church.

The church was named Hawkins Church after the first minister, the Right Reverend Walter Hawkins. During the 1880s, the church serviced about 75 Black families and was one of the few Black churches in the community. The last burial service held at the church occurred on January 15, 1937 for Samuel Walter Smith (Peter Smith's eldest son.)

After being closed for six years, Reverend George Boyce took over the church in July 1977 and re-opened it a year later as Park Row Community Chapel. To show that the church was open for any race, it was painted black and white. Reverend Boyce baptized Kevin James Mitchell, of Stratford son of Ray and Cecilia Mitchell (Mabel Smith's daughter) on February 6, 1978, during the church's re-opening. The child was the fourth generation of the Smith family to be baptized in the church before it was closed permanently in 1986. A single-family dwelling now stands at the site that was once a centre for Blacks in Woodstock.

Born on March 22, 1909 and raised in Woodstock, Frederick (known as Fred) Alfred Smith was well-known and respected person around town. Fred was known to 'break into song' wherever and whenever he went. He was known as the area's finest gospel singer who sang for churches and gatherings and even travelled to the States to sing.

Fred used to deliver the newspapers for the *Daily Sentinel-Review*, he worked as a polisher and janitor for James Stewart Manufacturing Company when he was 16 and worked there for 32 years. The James Stewart Manufacturing Company was established in Woodstock in 1892 then moved their operations in the early 1960s' they wanted Smith to follow but he declined.

In 2000, Fred donated his family owned century-old Stewart Good Cheer coal/wood burning stove to the Woodstock Museum which continues to be part of their collection.

George Gravy

Yet another famous, well-respected and popular Black resident in Woodstock was George Gravy. He was born a slave in the southern United States around 1856. Prior to coming to Woodstock in 1925 where he proclaimed himself as the unofficial Town Crier, George resided in Chatham, Ontario. There he shined shoes at both the Hotel Rankin and the Old Hotel Garner. Aside from being the town crier, George also shined shoes and washed windows. He had a shoeshine stand in the back of Sam Kostis' restaurant at 369 Dundas Street in Woodstock. He also worked at the Steward Manufacturing Company for less than a year.

George Gravy proclaimed himself as the unofficial Town Crier for Woodstock and had the booming voice to back it up.

Woodstock residents nicknamed him George "Washington Jones" a name he did not like but one that stuck and has since been immortalized. For twenty-five years George Gravy paraded around the streets in Woodstock advertising everything from hockey and baseball games to local events like dances, the Lion's carnival, Woodstock Fair and the Rotary Bingo. Many of the Woodstock merchants hired George to advertise their products and services.

Dressed in a silk black hat, a swallow-tailed coat, striped pants and freshly polished shoes, he was bedecked with numerous medals, badges and flags, George started off with a silver trumpet. He then had a hand-bell which was replaced with a double hand-bell which he rang before making his announcements through his brass megaphone, which is now an artifact at the Woodstock Museum. He also carried a sandwich board which would promote the next motion picture showing at the Royal or theatrical production at the Capital. It was said that George's booming voice could be heard in Eastwood, five miles away, if the wind was right.

Heather A. Rennalls is a local freelance writer and public speaker who specializes in Black history in Oxford County. You can visit her blog at <http://heathershistoricals.weebly.com>.



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Check out the COW Tales 'Way Back When' contest on page 11 and enter today!

A: a) Hillcrest/Huron Park Public,
b) Woodstock Christian School,
c) St. Mary's Jr. High