

# **The Underground Railroad...Then What Happened? Fugitive Slaves Became Freedmen in Canada**

**By  
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"When my feet first touched the Canada shore, I threw myself on the ground, rolled in the sand, seized handfuls [sic] of it and kissed them and danced around, till, in the eyes of several who were present, I passed for a madman." [Riendeau, 704] These were the words of Josiah Henson, a fugitive slave in the 1830's who became the model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom.

When dealing with the Underground Railroad, students frequently ask, "Then what happened?" Most presumably know about the road to freedom but few know what happened to the African Americans once they arrived on the free soil of Canada. In 1833 slavery was abolished in the entire British Empire. This merely formalized the inevitable abolishment of slavery in Canada, however. Slavery was not a viable option due to the short growing season in the climate of Canada. It would have been cost prohibitive to provide food, clothing, and shelter during the long Canadian winters for slaves who worked the land in the summer. There was a hope that Canada would provide a safe haven for runaways after 1833, however.

Slave owners attempted to frighten their property so the slaves would never seek this safe haven in Canada. The slaves were told the river to freedom (the Detroit River) was three thousand miles wide. There were undoubtedly told of the terrors of Niagara. The myths continued and included vivid, yet wild, descriptions of barren land where only black eyed peas would grow. The most frightening story was that abolitionists were cannibals who would fatten, boil, and then dine on the runaways. The truth was not hidden for long since there was no ban on oral communication among slaves. The word of the "land of promise" quickly spread. (Hill, 25)

The famous Underground Railroad, of course, was neither underground nor was it a railroad. It was an original system of secure overland or water routes and safe havens for runaway "slaves." There were established zig-sag routes from the South to freedom to the North and Canada. Many of these routes traversed Michigan. In addition, other routes ran through New York, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and Maine. The ultimate destination for fugitive slaves traveling through Michigan was usually Windsor via the Detroit River or Sarnia via the St.

Clair River; in New York it was the Niagara Peninsula of Upper Canada, as Ontario was then known.

There were "conductors" on this railroad such as Laura Haviland of Adrian, Michigan, Harriet Tubman and of course Levi Coffin the unofficial president of the underground system. Levi Coffin was a Quaker born in the late 1790s in North Carolina. It is believed that Coffin and his operatives were responsible for overseeing the escape of at least 3,500 fugitive slaves over a period of thirty years. The conductors were linked by their hatred of slavery. They would hide their passengers in barns, secret passages, cellars, attics, churches and secret wagon boxes. They used railroad terms to confuse Southern slave catchers. Common terms used were conductors, stockholders, passengers, station keepers, cargo and other cryptic messages. The Underground Railroad began shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century by Pennsylvania Quakers. Women were always prominent in the underground movement of former slaves, since the Quaker church allowed women a more public role in their communities.

### **Harriet Tubman and John Brown in Canada**

Harriet Tubman was born Aramitha Ross in Bucktown, Maryland, around 1820. As was the case with most slaves, accurate records were seldom kept. As she grew older, people began to call her Harriet, her mother's name. Harriet married John Tubman in 1849.

To the whites Harriet was known as unruly and recalcitrant for she was always upsetting the free-flowing work style of the overseer. Sometime before her decision to escape north, she was struck in the head by a heavy object thrown by an angry white man. From that point on, Tubman suffered "spells" which would leave her unconscious for hours at a time.

After escaping to Philadelphia, she vowed to return to the South to assist others in the quest for freedom. This became very dangerous after the Fugitive Slave Law was passed only a year later in 1850. With the new law, helping fugitives was a crime punishable by a large fine and a jail term. Tubman had to be very cautious.

Fear did not hamper the little lady and she returned to the South many times during the 1850s helping approximately three hundred slaves flee north to Canada. This effort earned her the

title "Moses of her People." It also earned her a price on her head of \$40,000. At one time Tubman lived and worshiped in the area of St. Catherines, Ontario. Enroute to Canada with a pistol and the potent drug laudanum, she once said, "I ain't never lost a passenger, and my train ain't never run off the track."

Tubman met John Brown in Chatham, Ontario. Brown pleaded with Tubman to help find recruits for a raid on Harper's Ferry. Even though she believed him to be a savior of her people, she felt his ideas were too radical. She refused to give aid, although some say it was illness that prevented this assistance.

Brown believed in helping slaves in a more militant way than Tubman. His views against slavery were formed early in Connecticut and then thrived when he moved to Kansas. He had helped slaves escape to Canada through Massachusetts and New York. Brown desired to act in a more radical and drastic manner by 1859 when he and Tubman met. On October 16, 1859, with eighteen followers from the North and Canada, Brown lead the raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (currently in West Virginia). After his capture, trial, and execution he was buried at his family homestead near Lake Placid, New York.

Tubman never was captured as a conductor on the famous railroad nor as an effective nurse, scout and spy for the Union Army. She returned to her home in Auburn, New York, after the war. There she raised funds for needy and elderly blacks. She also helped to establish schools for blacks who settled in the area. Her home still stands today as a memorial to her life which ended in 1913. Today there is a movement in New York to honor her with a holiday.

Both Harriet Tubman and John Brown had ties to Canada. Both devoted their lives to helping slaves yearning for freedom. In their own way each was a martyr.

### **Laura Haviland, Mother of Philanthropy**

Laura Haviland, a Canadian born Quaker, was considered to be the Harriet Tubman of the Detroit/Windsor frontier. She was commonly known as "Aunt Laura." In 1839 at the age of 30, Mrs. Haviland began the Raisin River Institute near Adrian, Michigan, a predominately Quaker settlement. Supported by those who strongly rejected slavery, this school was both coeducational

and multiracial, a radical concept for the era. Chartered by Michigan in 1847, this vocational school operated for over sixty years. (Dunbar, 295)

In 1852, Henry Bibb and Charles Foote, leaders of the Canadian Refugee Home Society, asked Haviland to teach school at the black Puce River settlement near Windsor. She not only exposed the new Canadians to their first formal education; she ministered to their religious needs as well. Due to the distance between black settlements and diverse religious denominations, Haviland proposed a Christian Union Church be founded where refugees of all faiths could worship. Successful until Haviland returned to Michigan, the Union Church members later formed the Methodist Episcopal Church of Puce while the Baptists formed a second church in the area. (Hill, 131)

Her Adrian home and the Institute had become stations on the underground route to Canada. In 1881, Aunt Laura wrote her autobiography, recounting her work assisting fugitive slaves in their quest for freedom and also educating refugees for success in their new found homes in the Detroit/Windsor area. Although not as universally known as Harriet Tubman, this white woman became a key stationmaster on this railroad and spoke out against the evils of slavery on many occasions. In 1893 just prior to her death, Haviland was "honored as 'the mother of philanthropy' during the Michigan Day..." at the Chicago World's Fair (Massie, 99)

### **Alexander Ross, Canadian Bird Watcher**

One of the most intriguing Canadians who held a major role in the Underground Railroad was Alexander Ross. Ross was a white doctor and ornithologist from Belleville, Ontario. He used bird watching in southern states as a cover for his activities with the railroad. His parents educated him early in the evils of slavery but his knowledge was cemented when he read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Ross worked with abolitionists through out the North including Michigan. He journeyed to Virginia, Tennessee, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Alabama where unsuspecting plantation owners allowed him full access to their land to watch birds. Under the cover of darkness, Ross would then work with trustworthy slaves who he gave "lessons" on escape routes. While he personally conducted only a few slaves to his homeland, he gave directions to many more. At the

request of Abraham Lincoln, Ross was recruited to break up a Confederate spy ring in Montreal. (Hill, 33-5)

### **Early Communities**

As early as 1815, the area around Oro, Ontario, was set aside for black veterans of the British forces of the War of 1812, which was desegregated. Many of these early refugees from the American South arrived in small groups with little formal organization. Many first settled near the border where their boat landed in small knots of population. They then moved inland. There were many important communities established by the fugitive slaves in Canada within a very short time.

The first black community organized in Canada was Wilberforce, named after British reformer and abolitionist William Wilberforce. Established in the 1820's near London, Ontario, it proved that an all black community could be viable though it failed to prosper. Wilberforce failed not because it was founded by African Canadians community but more likely because of ineffective management and simply bad luck.

Amherstburg, Ontario, is located at the narrowest point of the Detroit River. Many fugitives could make wooden boats or makeshift rafts to float across the river. Some merely walked across in the winter, from island to neighboring island and on to the Canadian riverbank. Amherstburg became a black settlement as did Fort Erie on the Niagara River. It was near Amherstburg that the blacks from the South reestablished the tobacco culture of the Natives in the area. As early as the 1820s, tobacco was exported to Montreal.

By 1830 there were over five hundred blacks near the Detroit River and Lake Erie and hundreds more on the Niagara Peninsula. St. Catherines became a major settlement where many blacks helped to build the Welland Canal around the Niagara Falls. As the museum at the canal today explains, some of the new black residents were hired to keep peace between warring Irish factions. The Irish Catholics and Protestants at times rioted against each other with the blacks quelling the riots. Many traveled on to Toronto where these black Canadians became an important part of the working class of this growing city. The further they moved into Canada, kidnapping by hired slave catchers was less likely. There was also cheap, good, available land in the interior of

Ontario at this time.

The Toronto Anti-Slavery Society was formed in 1851 by the founder of *The Globe*, a major newspaper. Blacks were drifting into Toronto and were arriving poor, destitute and disoriented after their harrowing trip. This group was dedicated to providing the necessary food, shelter, and clothing until the new Canadians could obtain jobs. (Hill, 20)

The adjustment was difficult. The new Canadians arrived in ragged clothing, which had to be replaced. There was plentiful game in the wilderness but hunting could be dangerous at times. The blacks had to adjust from the humid heat of their southern plantations to the bitter cold of the Canadian winter. Many became ill due to poor living conditions but most survived. The African Canadian communities were rooted in strong religious beliefs and the notion of self-help.

By the mid-1800s black communities were located in the Windsor area, near Chatham, by Brantford, the area around Simcoe, near London, and the urban areas around the western end of Lake Ontario. There were also numerous individual black families who lived in unnamed wilderness areas. After the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed in the United States, there was a dramatic increase in refugees until the shots were fired to start the Civil War. These fugitives settled where others travelers of the Underground Railroad had earlier founded black communities.

### **Josiah Henson's Dawn Settlement**

The most famous of the fugitives who followed the Underground Railroad was Josiah Henson, who became immortalized in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Born in the late 1700's in Charles County, Maryland, as a young man Henson was beaten by an overseer for daring to protect his master. As a result, Henson was never able to lift his arms to his head again. Later the protective father of twelve, Henson fled to Canada with two of his smallest children on his back in a knapsack. Ten years later the refugee family settled along the Sydenham River near Dresden, Ontario, in the 1840's. It was in this new settlement called "Dawn" that he taught other fugitives his concepts of land ownership and the importance of education. In 1842 his British American Institute offered basic education and manual training useful in this new land. This burgeoning African American community started with small log cabins. Both a grist mill and saw mill were soon added

as well as Henson's own two story frame house and church.

The story of Henson cannot be told without mentioning Harriet Beecher Stowe. Henson and Stowe first met in 1849 when Josiah traveled to the Stowe home in Andover, Massachusetts. Out of this meeting much of Stowe's research material on life in the South was gathered and "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was born.

At the time of Henson's death at the age of 94 in 1883, questions continued to persist as to whether he was in fact "Uncle Tom." At the site of his settlement a visitor can view the original autobiography of Josiah Henson as dictated to Samuel Eliot in 1849. Also found there is the original pulpit from which he preached, some personal belongings, and an autographed photo of Queen Victoria she presented to Henson during her 1879 visit to Canada. Other possible models for the famous runaway used by Stowe are lost to history. Today the Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site, operated as a museum and historic site by the St. Clair Parkway Commission near Dresden, Ontario, testifies to Stowe's designation of Henson as Uncle Tom. If a visitor is fortunate Barbara Carter, the great-great-granddaughter of Henson, will be there. Although now retired as the curator of the museum, she can't resist meeting with groups to share the story of the original "Uncle Tom."

### **Buxton, Ontario**

Another successful black community was the Elgin Settlement, also known as the Buxton Mission, established by Rev. William King. King, a Presbyterian minister from Scotland, inherited slaves upon the death of his young Louisiana wife. When he was transferred to Canada, he resolved this moral dilemma by inviting those fifteen slaves he emancipated to join him. This new settlement southeast of Windsor, Ontario, helped the newly freed blacks to become economically self-sufficient while it built pride and self-reliance in the members of the community. By 1853 Buxton had a population of over three hundred on two hundred acres of land. The settlers owned 128 head of cattle, 15 horses, 30 sheep and 250 hogs. They also had a sawmill, brickyard, gristmill, store, and a potash factory (Hill, 83).

One of their greatest accomplishments of this mission was the Buxton school, which

became the pride of the community and documented the value the refugees placed on education. Many children taught their parents after the youngsters returned from their daily lessons. Thus adults learned what they had been denied in their Southern homeland. The school curriculum had an excellent reputation because the students progressed from the earliest primary levels of education to college entrance in a mere six years. Consequently, many white families in the area and even as far away as Toronto and Buffalo were convinced to send their children to the Buxton Mission School. By the time King died in 1895, he had proven that African-Canadians could establish and sustain a successful self-supporting settlement.

### **Post Civil War African Canadians**

An interesting fact of history about the African Canadians is that many did not remain in their new land. Some refugees living in Canada returned to the United States to fight for the Union cause in the Civil War. Harriet Tubman, who by then claimed Canada as her home, was one of the most successful of spies for the Union Army, for example. Mary Ann Shadd of the Buxton Mission in Ontario, actively recruited soldiers for the Union army, taught students in Washington, D.C., and eventually became a successful attorney after the Civil War. Shadd had published a newspaper in Buxton, a first for a black woman. She was also one of the first black women to graduate from Howard University.

After the Civil War, other blacks, who had been educated in Canada returned to the South and found an abundance of jobs awaiting them. Recently freed slaves in the South had found their illiteracy prevented them from acquiring productive employment. Those who left for Canada became educated and returned to their homelands in the South to reconstruct the area. The Raleigh Township Museum in North Buxton points with pride to former resident James Rapier who went on to become a leader of black reconstruction and United States Congressman. Further they point out the accomplishments of the entire Shadd family, which went on to become leaders in education, medicine, publishing, and public servants on both sides of the border.

Others left Canada to return to the United States because of personal economic hardship, the desire to reunite with lost family members or friends, and problems in adjusting to the harsh

Canadian climate: moreover, many were simply homesick for the South.

Even though official census figures for the time period are available, it is difficult to draw conclusions other than generalities as to precise numbers of blacks returning to their southern homeland or remaining in Canada. Some escaped, were recaptured, escaped a second time and returned to the South. Many died, disappeared or passed as white Canadians. What was the length of time to establish residency for the census? There simply were no accurate records kept on either side of a porous border.

Some black families originally from the United States did return after the Civil War. Anderson Abbot was the first Canadian black doctor. He served as one of eight black Union surgeons during the Civil. After the war he worked in Chicago until he retired to Toronto, his birthplace. (Hill 207) Some of those who remained were descendants of the first wave of blacks from the United States in 1783, shortly after the American Revolution. These were blacks who fought on the side of Britain and who were promised freedom as well as land in British North America [Canada] by the crown. Some were descendants of the servants who accompanied their Loyalist masters to Nova Scotia after the war. These African Canadian families had lived in Canada for almost a century. Those who remained in Canada after 1865 worked as professionals, farmers, waiters, construction workers, carpenters, and masons.

### **In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Like the fugitives who used the night stars of the Big Dipper and the North Star to "follow the drinking gourd," today's students can experience the emotion of freedom by visiting several of the excellent museums and locations of fugitive settlements. In Michigan, students can view the accurately reconstructed quarters of slaves at Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan. In nearby Windsor, Ontario, they might visit the Sandwich Baptist Church, site of the original fugitive slave settlement. The North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre in Amherstburg, Ontario, provides displays of the Underground Railroad and early settlements of blacks in Canada.

Many current members of black Canadian communities such as Barbara Carter are direct descendants of the original freedom seekers of the nineteenth century. In Dresden, Ontario,

students may visit "Uncle Tom's Cabin," the home of Josiah Henson and buildings used to house the new migrants from the South. In North Buxton there is the Raleigh Township Centennial museum where descendants explain the unique Buxton Mission plan. While in Chatham, one can visit the First Baptist Church and John Brown's Meeting House, where he and his conspirators planned the raid on Harper's Ferry. One unique tribute to the courage and dilemmas of fugitives in Canada is the John Freeman Walls Museum near Windsor, Ontario.

John (Freedman Walls) was raised in the South as a "black brother" to a white master's son. As adults John and his white friend, Daniel Walls, worked together on the North Carolina plantation. Upon Daniel's death-bed, he commanded that John "take care" of his family when he died. John did just that. He and Daniel's widow Jane fled the plantation with her four children. After arriving in Indiana, the couple married and then continued on to freedom in Canada. There the family grew with six more children. Being a free man John adopted a middle name and then honored his white friend by taking Walls as his last name. The descendants of this couple are the curators and guides at this unique interactive museum today. Visitors can experience the Middle Passage as well as the escape along the Underground Railroad amidst mosquitoes and the sounds of barking dogs.

The blacks who leaped from the Underground Railroad to Canadian soil experienced the indescribable thrill and excitement of undergoing transformation from marketable chattel to freedmen. Perhaps this experience can be best summed up with the words of abolitionist Frederick Douglass, "A keen observer might have detected Canada in our repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan.'" (Douglas)

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