

Village Essay 5

The Underground Railroad

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George's Square was set aside by George K. Chisholm as a place designed for the recreation of and as a gathering place for the people of Oakville. However, to the African-Canadians in Oakville, for many years the park was the site of a gathering which remembered a much more defining event. The Emancipation Day picnics that were held in the park signalled the end of the Underground Railroad to Oakville. The Underground Railroad was the term that described the secret transportation of African-American fugitive slaves over the border into Canada. It affected Oakville as well as the larger stations in Windsor, Kingston and Toronto. The influx of runaway slaves from 1850 to 1865 dramatically changed the makeup of Oakville during the middle of the nineteenth century. The town's reaction was, it seems, positive to their new residents--a reaction that was well before its time.

The early fugitive slaves came haphazardly on their own. One of the earliest recorded escaped slaves arrived in Canada on Aug. 1, 1823 aboard the Canadian steamer Chief Justice Robinson which picked up a black man afloat on a wooden gate in Lake Ontario. He explained that he had "run away from Tennessee to upper New York State...he stole a gate and tried to float across the [Niagara] River to Canada." When he learned that he was on a Canadian ship, "he dropped to his knees and cried, 'Thank you, Lord, for delivering me to Canaan!' " The Chief Justice Robinson continued to sail and land passengers in Toronto until, and after, 1852 as well, amongst those passengers may well have been runaway slaves.¹

But there were worse potential problems in store for those southern slaves trying to escape. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 persuaded African-Americans to leave the northern states in larger and larger numbers. Canada West was "the promised land for runaway slaves, as once their feet touched Canadian soil they could no longer be pursued." After they crossed the Mason-Dixon Line there were various "societies in the northern states to assist them, Fugitive Slave Laws notwithstanding." One which they could contact was the organisation called the 'underground railroad'. Under cover of darkness "the fugitives were forwarded from station to station, and by the thousands they tumbled across the border into British North America".²

The fugitives in the post-1850 period entered Canada West "by a greater variety of routes than the earlier refugees".³ Oakville itself was not a station on the Underground Railroad. A station was considered any town or city which was well-known by the whole system. The closest station was St. Catharines, the site where Harriet Tubman led many of her fugitives⁴, because of the increase in total numbers, however, it was inevitable that some would find their way directly to Oakville. Most would find themselves conveyed here by local men as well. One of the most renowned local men

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was Captain Robert Wilson who rescued slaves by stowing them away in his grain hold as he returned across the lake from ports like Rochester on the American side. Between his main ship and several small vessels under him, Robert Wilson put in with 'grain' which had been sent out "from an Ashtabula [NY] warehouse for human cargo".⁵ Several other captains on the Great Lakes ferried slaves⁶ and in addition to Wilson in Oakville, it is said that Captain Morden and Captain James Fitzgerald also ferried slaves across the lake in the 1850s and 1860s.⁷ The task was less dangerous for these captains, if caught, than for any American captain as they were British citizens. They would have little chance of being arrested on American soil, however, they could have had their ships confiscated along with all their goods.

In addition to the white Canadian help in the Underground Railroad, there were several prominent members of the African-Canadian community that aided their former compatriots across the border. One who gained a good deal of fame on either side of the border was James Wesley Hill. Born in Maryland, he came across the Potomac River into Pennsylvania and later into Upper Canada. He settled on a farm which bordered the 9th Line south of the railway (now Maple Grove Avenue) where he grew strawberries. Safe and free in Canada West, James Hill did not stop there but became an agent for the Underground Railroad. He returned to the United States several times over the next few years, earning himself the name 'Canada Jim' for his escapades.⁸ On his return, he would give the freed slaves work on his farm among them were: Johnsons, Wallaces, William Holland, Benedict Duncan and Lloyd Brown. Others he freed later went to Dresden, near Chatham.⁹

After the end of the Civil War, the need for the Underground Railroad was likewise over. The 1860s and 1870s saw many former slaves move on to other towns in Canada West or back to the United States. For those that stayed, and also for many who did not, Emancipation Day was celebrated in St. George's Square as freed slaves from all over the province returned to Oakville to remember the occasion, and often to visit Robert Wilson at "Mariner's Home" on Dundas Street North.¹⁰

For those that did stay, they mostly became farmers, dockside workers and for the women, domestics and housemaids. James Hill's daughter, for example, found work with the Chisholm children.¹¹ In special cases, there were vocal and prominent black Oakvillians. In the 1860s editor and publisher of the Bee, a local newspaper, was African Canadian and, possibly, an escaped slave named John Cosley.¹²

As the community first grew and then became permanent, there was a desire to have a permanent place of worship. After raising funds in the community and using the talents of the Black community in Oakville and Bronte, The African Methodist Church was built by William Butler in 1890-1891. A prominent figure in his own right, Butler later travelled in England to expound on the advantages Blacks had in Canada over those in the United States using the example he had seen in Oakville and Bronte.¹³

By the beginning of the First World War there were only fifty African-Canadians in Oakville¹⁴, a small but prominent population within the almost six thousand total residents of the town. The community was tightly knit, with their own churches and

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social events, mostly through the same church. Relations, however, between blacks and whites in the town were always good, the schools were integrated, church socials mingled and black employees worked in several large businesses in town.¹⁵ Though the community's numbers would remain the same as the town grew around it, the community would always be an integral and important part of the larger Oakville community and communal history.

Bibliography

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Footnotes

1. Daniel G. Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada*, (Agincourt, Ont.: The Book Society of Canada Ltd., 1981) p. 28, 33
2. Hazel C. Mathews, *Oakville and the Sixteen: The History of an Ontario Port*, p. 247
3. Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, (Montreal/Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) p. 244
4. Lawrence Hill, Interview of Alvin Duncan, June-August, 1991 for the Ontario Black History Society, p. 187
5. Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, p. 245
6. Hazel C. Mathews, *Oakville and the Sixteen: The History of an Ontario Port*, p. 248
7. Lawrence Hill, Interview of Alvin Duncan, June-August, 1991 for the Ontario Black History Society, pp. 172-173
8. *Ibid.*, p. 52
9. Hazel C. Mathews, *Oakville and the Sixteen: The History of an Ontario Port*, p. 248
10. *Ibid.*
11. Lawrence Hill, Interview of Alvin Duncan, June-August, 1991 for the Ontario Black History Society, p. 82
12. Hazel C. Mathews, *Oakville and the Sixteen: The History of an Ontario Port*, p. 261
13. Lawrence Hill, Interview of Alvin Duncan, June-August, 1991 for the Ontario Black History Society, pp. 130-133
14. Canada Census, Vol. 4, 1911
15. Lawrence Hill, Interview of Alvin Duncan, June-August, 1991 for the Ontario Black History Society, pp. 59, 61