

*Early Settlements
In Canada West
For The Fugitives
Of Slavery*

FREE AT LAST,

FREE AT LAST,

THANK GOD ALMIGHTY,

I'M FREE AT LAST.



By 1850, there were Black communities in six general areas of Canada West.

- *Along the Detroit Frontier*
- *In Chatham and its surrounding area*
- *In the central section of Canada West*
- *Along the Niagara Peninsula*
- *In large urban centres on Lake Ontario*
- *On the northern edge of Simcoe and Grey Counties*

In 1791, under the direction of the British Parliament the Constitutional Act designated a portion of the territory known as British North America as Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec). However, in 1841 in response to the Rebellions of 1837, the British Parliament created Canada West (Ontario) and Canada East (Quebec), forming a united government. This was an attempt to remedy the issues that arose prior to the Rebellions in British North America.

There were four Black Settlements organized for the fugitives of slavery in Upper Canada / Canada West.

- 1. The Wilberforce Settlement was the first of these, located near Lucan in 1829.**
- 2. The Dawn Settlement, located near Dresden began in 1845, and was probably the best known.**
- 3. The Elgin (Buxton) Settlement started in Raleigh Township, near Chatham in 1849 was considered to be the most successful.**
- 4. The Refugee Home Society, located in Essex county, founded in 1851 was the last of these organized Settlements for freedom seekers.**

Besides these centres of Black settlement, small clusters of Blacks and individual Black families were settled throughout Canada West.

The Black population increased drastically in the years following the passage of the 1850 *Fugitive Slave Act* in the USA.



The Detroit Frontier

*Gateway to
Freedom
Monument on
Detroit Riverfront*

- *Amherstburg*
- *Windsor / Sandwich*
- *Refugee Home Society*
- *Essex County*



Amherstburg

American officers stationed near Fort Malden during the war of 1812 returned with stories about a country that welcomed Blacks, and great numbers began to settle in Malden (later called Amherstburg). Amherstburg was the most accessible Canadian port to escaping slaves because the river was narrowest there.

In 1844, Amherstburg was considered by Levi Coffin, a leading organizer of the UGRR, as the chief Canadian terminal on the Underground line. By 1859, there were 800 Blacks living in Amherstburg.



Windsor / Sandwich

The first group of fugitives arrived between 1817 and 1822. Many of them settled in Windsor and Sandwich Township. By 1830, there were 600 Blacks living along the Detroit River and the Shore of Lake Erie. The Black community continued to grow as the town prospered and became a major terminal on the Underground Railroad.



Refugee Home Society

The Refugee Home Society was founded in 1851 by abolitionists from Michigan and Canada. Over a number of years the society may have acquired close to 2000 acres of land, settling about 250 refugees (at least 65 families) on 25 acres parcels scattered amongst other White farmers. Because of the wide area settled, they formed several small communities, many with their own churches. Some of the settlers were quite successful.

Essex County

Many Blacks moved out to Essex County villages and towns, including Anderdon, Mersea, Gosfield, Colchester, Maidstone, Rochester, Harrow, and New Canaan .



*Cabin site in
Essex County.*

Buxton

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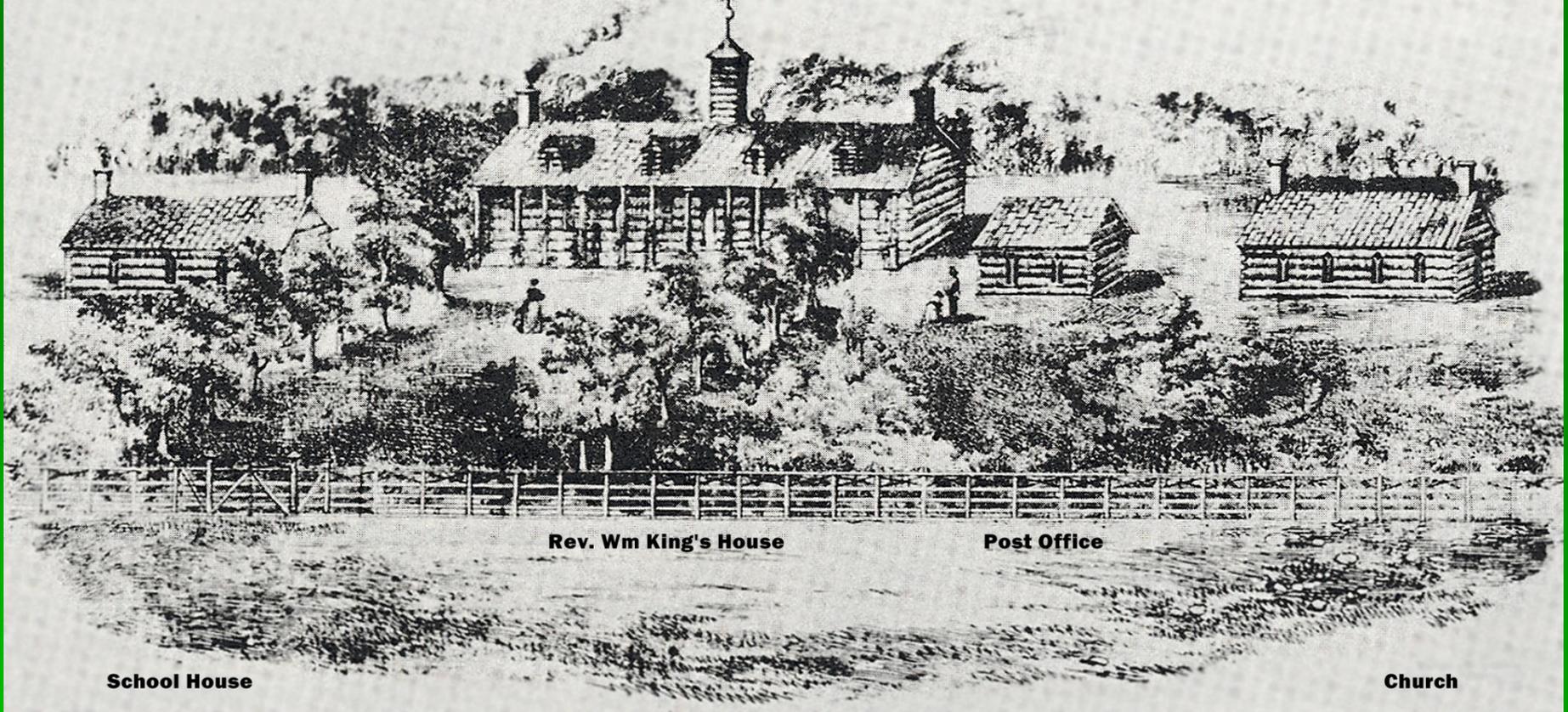
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Shreve Homestead and Liberty Bell

The Buxton Settlement was founded in 1849 by Rev. William King as a refuge for his former slaves and other fugitive slaves. The settlement consisted of 9000 acres which was divided into 50 acre lots and sold to the settlers. The settlement grew to approximately 2000 people and had schools, churches, mills, stores, a bank, hotel, blacksmith shop and brick factory.

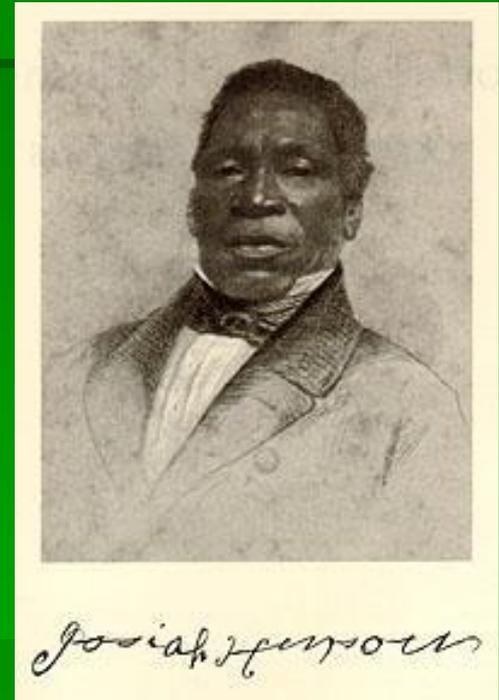
Buxton Mission 1860



It was considered to be the most successful of the early settlements for the fugitives of slavery, and was known far and wide for the superior education it offered.

The Dawn Settlement, founded in 1845, was the most widely known of the early settlements in Canada West for the fugitives of slavery. Josiah Henson (a fugitive from Maryland) who supported the Dawn Settlement, was associated with the novel Uncle Tom's Cabin. The settlement was successful in its early years and established the British American Institute for the education of its inhabitants. It was however plagued with administrative problems which led to its demise.

Dawn

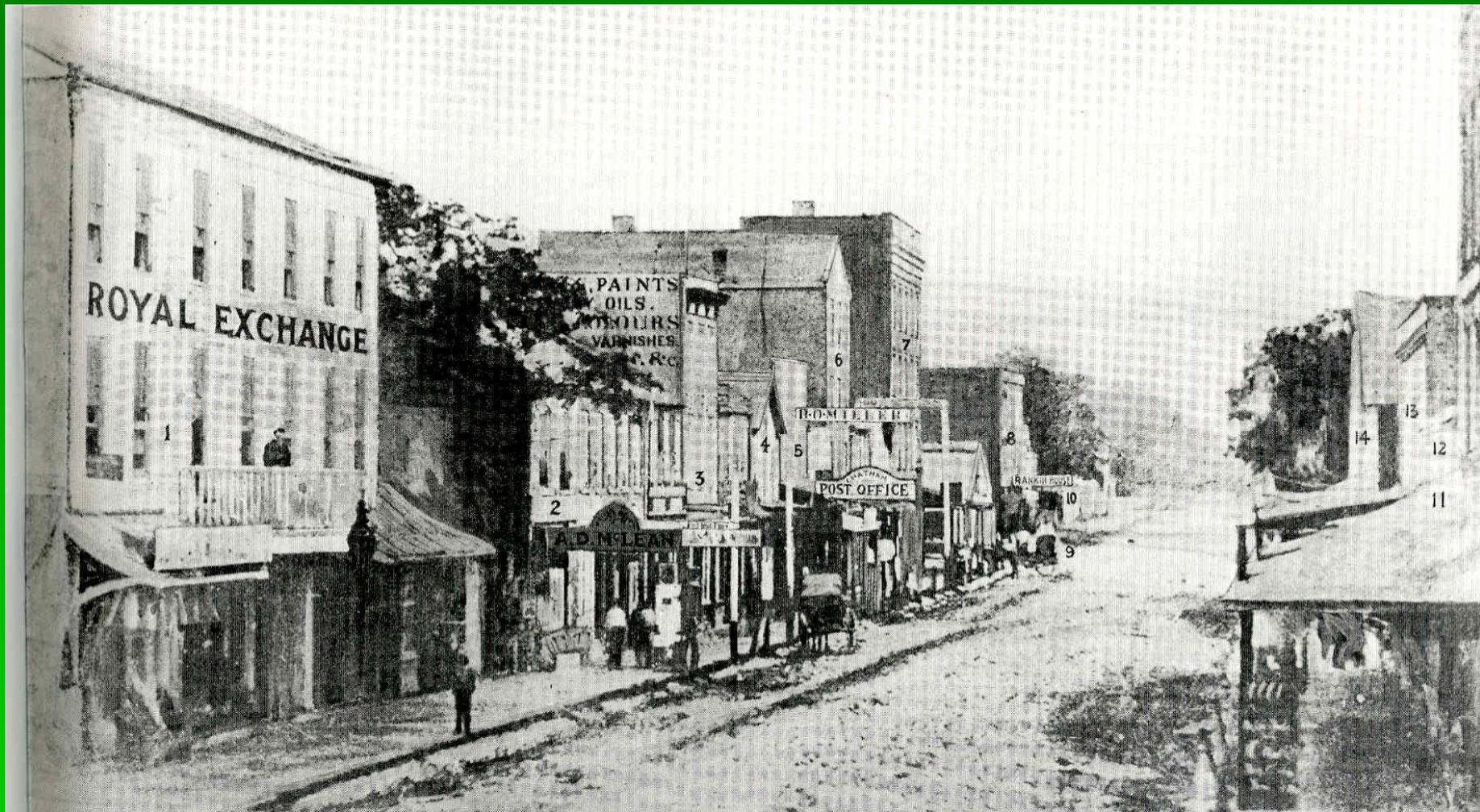


Shrewsbury

Between 1840 to 1860, runaways and free Blacks moved into Shrewsbury and the town came slowly alive. Some came by way of the Underground Railroad to Detroit, then to Chatham by way of the Detroit River, Lakes St. Clair and Thames River. Some came from across Lake Erie from the Cleveland area. A school was built in 1860-61, as well as a church which is still in use today.

Chatham

The government began granting lots in the Chatham area around 1800. Black settlers came to the area because they felt more secure, due to the increased distance from the Detroit River. During the early years these settlers started businesses, using the skills they had learned during their years in slavery, and many became successful businessmen. Chatham was the home of the '*Provincial Freeman*' for several years, an anti-slavery newspaper published by Mary Ann Shadd. Chatham was also a meeting and recruiting place for the planning of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry.



Main Street Chatham, Canada West

By the 1850's
Chatham's
population was
reported to be one
third to one half
Black.

*B.M.E. Church
Chatham, Ontario*

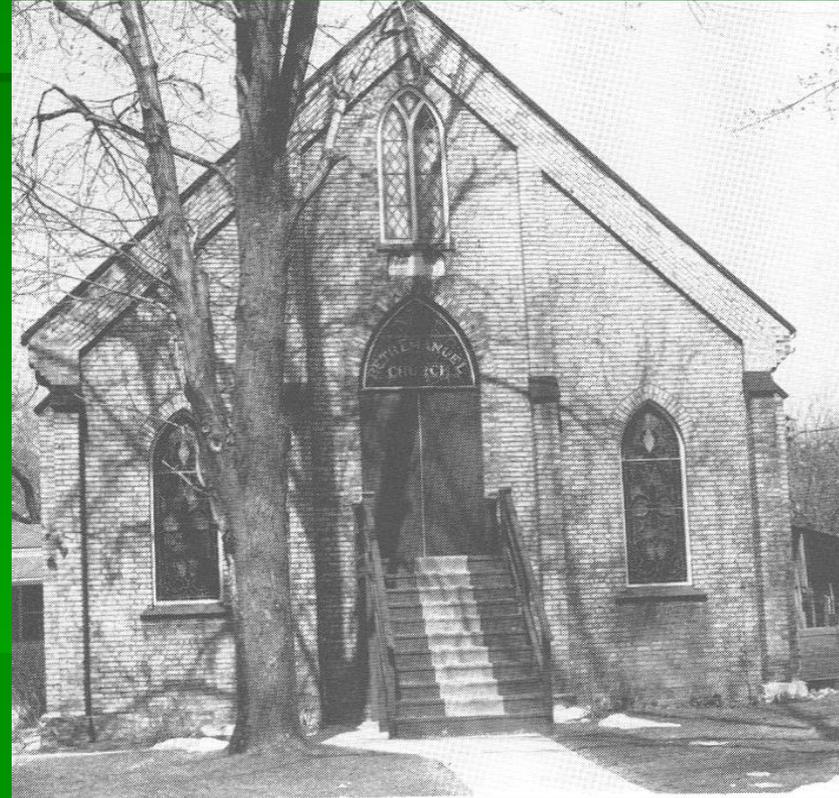


The Central Section of Canada West

- *London*
- *Brantford*
- *Queen's Bush*
- *Wilberforce*

London

By the early 1830's, Blacks had begun to settle in London. In 1832 there were 25-30 Blacks living there. By the middle of the 19th century small Black communities were firmly rooted in London, with a population estimated to be around 500. The town was a centre for social, religious and educational activities for Blacks who lived in the surrounding areas.



*Grey Street Church
London, Canada West*

Black children in London and its vicinity had considerable difficulty gaining admission to the town's common schools . Many of the Whites objected to having their children sit in the same forms with the coloured pupils; and some would not send their children to schools where the Blacks were admitted. In 1854, the Anglican Canada Church and School Society decided to meet the problem of segregated education head on. They brought in teachers and opened their school to both White and Black pupils in a London barracks. This school was highly successful for a while until illness and other pressures brought about its demise. The end came in 1859, when the Mission School was able to announce that the common schools of London had finally opened their doors to all children, without distinction of race or colour.

Brantford

Black slaves were brought to Brantford by Joseph Brant, chief of the Mohawk Village on the Grand River.

Members of his family married Blacks of the area. By 1832, there were 4 Black families in the village. Fugitives also traveled to Brantford by land and by water. In 1837, the small Black community of Brantford established its own school, since their children were excluded from the town's common school. By 1846, about 15 Black families lived in or near Brantford. The Black population of Brantford, unlike many other refugee settlements, actually dwindled at the beginning of the 1850's. Some may have moved due to discrimination, while others may simply have decided to go into Queen's Bush and other areas. By 1852, there were fewer than 100 Black people living in Brantford.

Queen's Bush

About 1840, Black and White squatters began to move into the wilderness of Queen's Bush, part of a large tract of land in the Lake Huron area. There were no organized settlement programs for Blacks in the Bush. They went in as individual families and managed on their own. In 1844, there were reported to be 108 Black families living in the bush. Most came without money and supplies; sometimes they had only an axe and a few clothes. There were no roads, no markets and no mills. The settlers existed at first in common shelters, and their first food was simply greens gathered in the woods boiled in salt. But they survived and hewed out of the bush small homes, a mission church and in time a school.

The chief area of settlement at Queen's Bush was at Conestoga, just north of Kitchener and Guelph. Some settlers were fugitives who had come to Canada on the UGRR. Others were Loyalists and Refugees who had fought with the British in wars against the USA. Blacks began to leave Queen's Bush in the 1850's and had completely disappeared from that area by the end of the Civil War.



Queen's Bush, Canada West

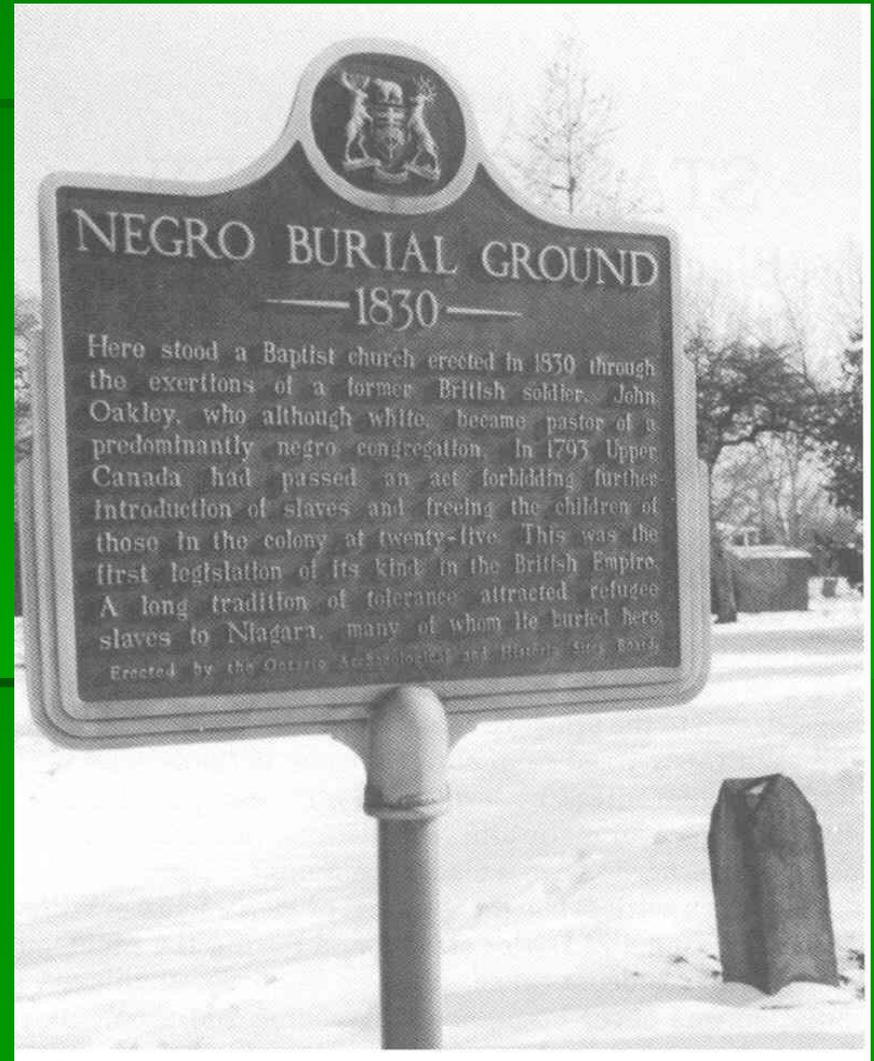
Wilberforce

Although, Ohio abolished slavery in 1802, a series of laws known as the “Black Code” restricted Black emigration and employment opportunities in the state. In 1829, Cincinnati officials gave notice that the laws would soon be “strictly enforced.” Local Blacks organized a colonization group, which received permission to relocate in Upper Canada. With financial assistance from several Quaker organizations, they purchased 800 acres of land near the modern village of Lucan. The settlement was named after British abolitionist William Wilberforce. Wilberforce was the first all-Black settlement in Upper Canada. Five or six families arrived at the remote settlement in 1829. American abolitionists published glowing accounts of the colony’s progress and published a map showing different routes to the settlement. By 1832, 32 families had settled at Wilberforce. It had a general store, sawmill, school and inn. Despite this early progress, the settlement soon declined. By 1835, the population had dwindled significantly and it continued to decline.

Along the Niagara Peninsula

- *Niagara Falls*
- *St. Catharines*
- *Fort Erie*
- *Niagara-On-The-Lake*

Niagara, Ontario
Historical Landmark





Niagara Falls

Blacks have been present in Niagara Falls from the earliest days of European Settlement. Levi Coffin, an important organizer in the Underground Railroad movement visited the Niagara Falls area in 1844 and reported a small Black settlement in the Niagara area. The area they lived in was called “Pollytown”, and the residents were generally employed in the service sector.

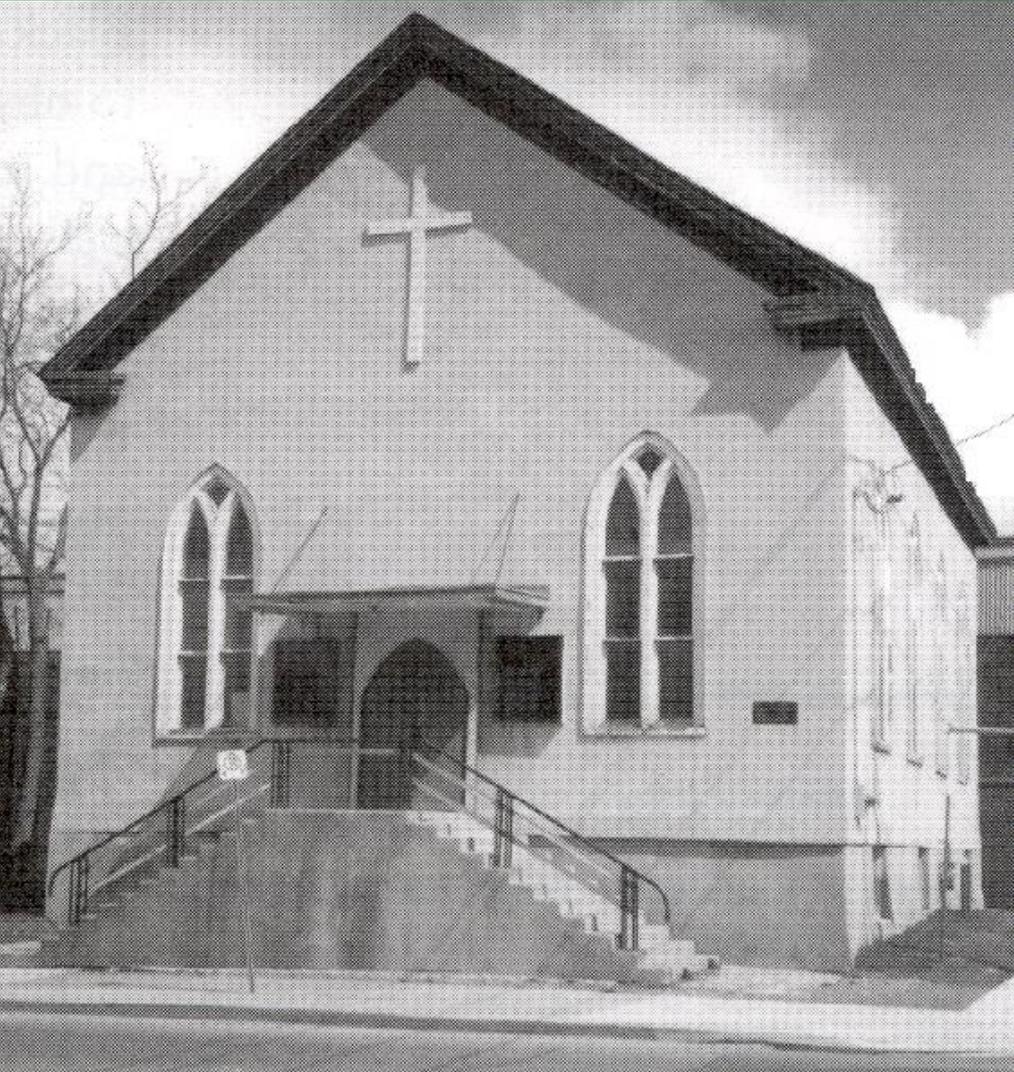
St. Catharines

Blacks have lived in the St. Catharines area from early in its history. In the mid 1830's their numbers became significant. Most came as escaped slaves. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, the population steadily increased and St. Catharines became one of the preferred destinations of free northern Blacks who emigrated to Canada.



Underground Railroad conductor, Harriet Tubman, made the St. Catharines area a centre of her activities and it became a popular destination for settlement of the refugees of slavery. The main part of the coloured settlement was a hamlet situated on the outskirts of the village.

*Salem Chapel B.M.E Church,
St. Catharines, Canada West
designated Historic Landmark*



At one period, of the 800 Blacks in St. Catharines about 700 were escaped slaves. Many of the refugees had been assisted by Harriet Tubman. In 1851, Tubman moved to St. Catharines and it became the center of her anti-slavery activities for the next seven years.

Fort Erie

Fort Erie was often the first site of freedom for runaway slaves. They stopped here to take stock of their new situation. There was work available and they earned their first wages here. Lake steamers and small craft often dropped runaways at Fort Erie. A small village called “Little Africa” grew on the outskirts of town. By 1840, there were 80 Blacks living in Fort Erie. This number increased to 200 before they scattered to other parts of Ontario about 1880.

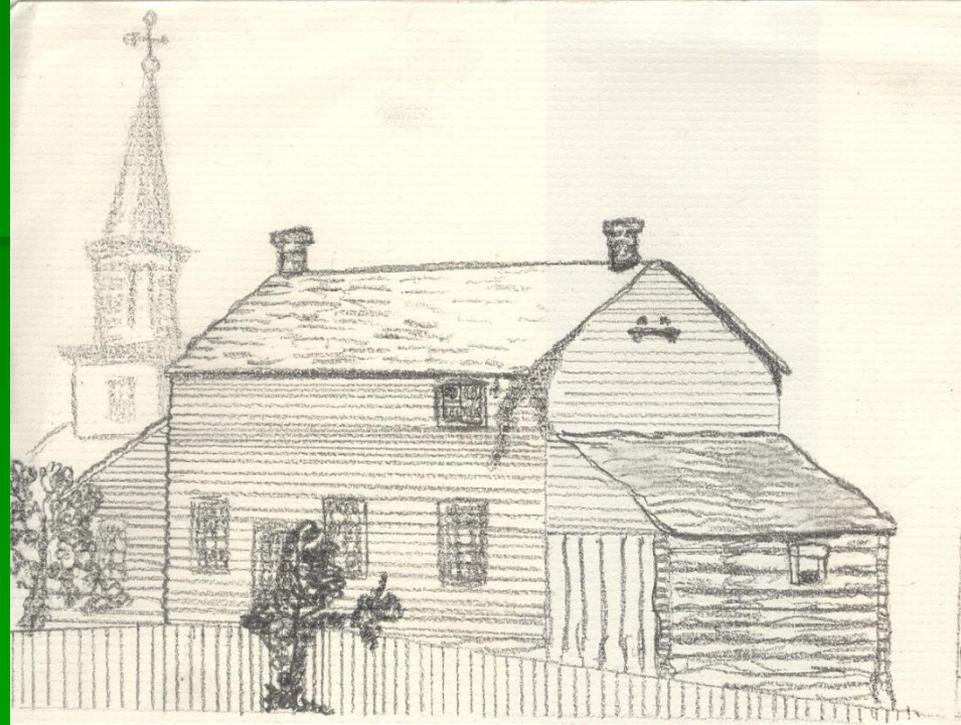
Bertie Hall in Fort Erie is believed to have been a "safe house" for fugitive slaves prior to the American Civil War.



Niagara-On-The-Lake

Upper Canada's first capital Newark (later called Niagara On the Lake) was thought to be the safest place for refugees to settle. As word of a safe refuge spread their numbers grew. Some came as slaves, some as free settlers, and some received land grants because of their military service. Between 1800–1860 Niagara welcomed a large number of escaped slaves. Some were brought by their owners, the UGRR helped some to escape, and some came on their own following the north star and crossing the Niagara River to freedom.

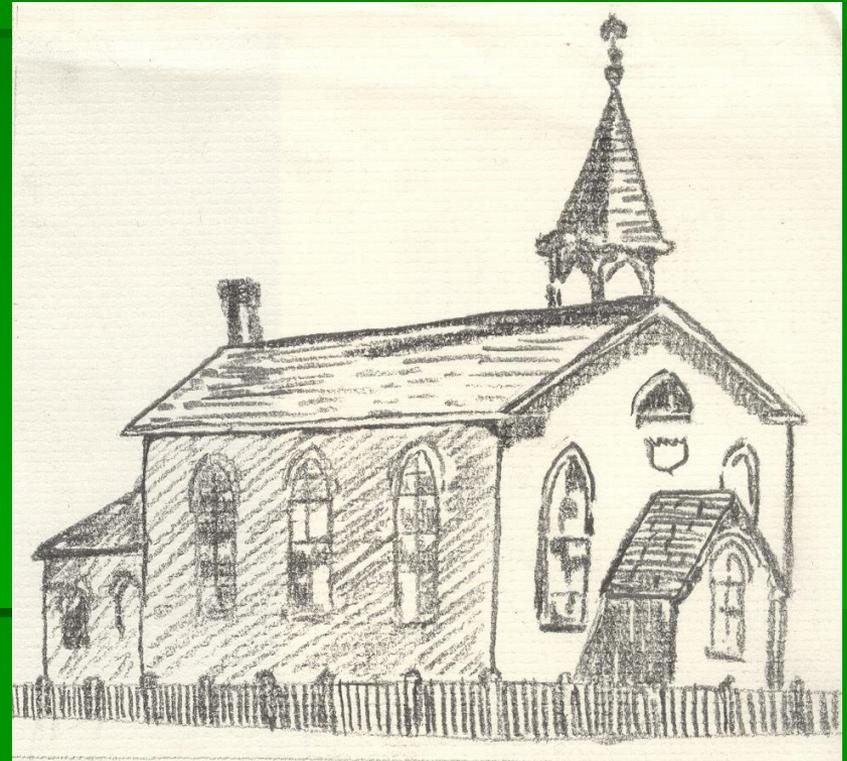
The area settled by people of colour was known as the “Coloured Village.” The population never exceeded 200 but it influenced the social and political life of the town. Some Blacks prospered during their years of residence in Niagara. Several owned and operated businesses. After the Civil War, the black population of the area declined. Some went to the U.S., others to larger centres.



*Niagara On The Lake -
church and school built by fugitives.*

In Large Urban Centres

- **Toronto**
- **Hamilton**



Early Toronto Church

Toronto

By 1834, Toronto was the third largest city on the Great Lakes. Good opportunities existed in Toronto for skilled trades people and labourers, merchants and other business people. When word spread in the USA of the available opportunities, free Blacks from the northern states as well as runaways began seeking refuge and work in Toronto. The distance from the USA made them feel safe from slave catchers. The resulting Black community became self-supporting, and many prospered. Toronto was also a stronghold of abolitionist activity (the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society was formed there). If Blacks arrived in Toronto destitute and disoriented from their journey to freedom, the society worked toward helping them find jobs and starting their new lives.

Hamilton

Blacks were living in Hamilton throughout the 1820s and 1830s. At that time, there were also Black squatters on Hamilton Mountain. By 1835, Hamilton's Black population was large enough to open an A.M.E. church in a small log building. In 1850, there was a Black community called "Little Africa", on Hamilton Mountain. The Black population grew to 300 in 1856.



*St. Paul's Church,
Hamilton, Canada West*

On The Northern Edge of Simcoe and Grey Counties

- Collingwood
- Oro
- Owen Sound

*Oro Church,
Historical Landmark*



Collingwood

There are few records to show how Blacks first reached Collingwood, but it is most probable that UGRR workers put fugitive slaves aboard steamers headed for Georgian Bay ports. By 1850, Great Lakes steamers carried Blacks from ports in Chicago to Collingwood and Owen Sound. The town of Collingwood was founded about 1854 on Nottawasaga Bay in the northwest corner of Simcoe County. Its small Black community began with the town itself.

Oro

Settlement in Oro began in 1819 when 23 Black men were granted 100 acres each on Wilberforce Street in Oro Township, located on Lake Simcoe. These men were entitled to the grants because of their military service. The majority of the Black settlers were refugees from the oppressive Black Codes in Ohio in 1829. The settlement was not a terminus of the Underground Railroad, however it was the only settlement in which Blacks were initially encouraged to settle with Crown Land grants. In the 1830's a new plan was implemented to develop White settlement in the township and land grants to Blacks came to an end. This new policy led to the decline of the Oro Settlement.

In Oro, the village of Edgar was the main center of Black life, which had a Black church with a community burial ground. In time, the increased settlement of the area raised land values and most Blacks sold their land at a profit and sought employment in urban areas. Although one or two families remained in the area, the settlement had virtually disappeared by 1900.

*Oro Church,
Historical Landmark*



Owen Sound

By 1850, Great Lakes steamers carried Blacks from ports in Chicago to Owen Sound and Collingwood. The exodus of Black squatters from the Queen's Bush which began in the 1850s, was complete by the end of the Civil War. Those Black settlers who did not return to the United States moved on to Owen Sound or Chatham to seek the security of their thriving Black communities. Both fugitives and free Blacks continued to go north during the 1850s until they reached Grey County and Sydenham Village which later became Owen Sound. These settlers along with those who came from Queen's Bush soon formed the beginnings of Owen Sound's Black community.