

Hilary Russell

# Underground Railroad Parks A Shared History



*The Josiah Henson house, where its owner died in 1883. It was established as a tourist attraction in 1948, and is now the focus of a complex of buildings known as "Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site." Photo courtesy Robb Watt.*

*Entrance to the North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre, a project of local resident Mel Simpson, who was deeply concerned with fostering black history and black pride. The former home of George Taylor, a refugee from slavery, is in front of the museum building on the right. Photo by the author.*

**T**he National Park Service and Parks Canada embody the respective federal government's commitment to preserving, protecting, and presenting the nation's nationally-significant cultural and natural heritage. While there are important structural and other differences between the organizations, they share many of the same concerns and aspirations; over the years, each has been inspired and enlightened by the other's ideas and accomplishments.

The example of the National Park Service is particularly significant with respect to its recent efforts to incorporate African-American history into its parks and programs. Parks Canada has much to learn from the breadth and variety of these undertakings, since, with one exception, our initiatives relating to the commemoration of African-Canadian history are less than 10 years old, and, to date, they entail 9 commemorative plaques.

Four of these plaques relate to the Underground Railroad — the focus of this article and an historical subject that promises exciting collaborative opportunities for National Park Service and Parks Canada. Though no existing national historic site in Canada is closely connected to the Underground Railroad, Parks Canada has begun to question how to enlarge the commemoration of a nationally-significant story in Canadian history.

The nine plaques mentioned above bear the name of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board

of Canada, a nationally-representative, advisory, and appointive body of experts in Canadian history. Its first recommendation bore directly upon the national historic significance of people of African descent in Canada only six years after its inception in 1919. In 1925, the Board recommended that the "the Fugitive Slave Movement" was of national importance. Sixty-two years would pass before it made another pronouncement that evinced a black presence in Canadian history.

It is important, however, to view this hiatus within a larger context. Until the late 1970s, the Board's recommendations seldom explicitly referenced cultural or racial groups who were other than British and French—the "two founding nations"—or, to a much lesser extent, Native peoples.

Though the concept of Canada as a "mosaic" (as opposed to an American "melting pot") gained wide acceptance—at least in academic circles—no such mosaic was reflected in the federal commemorative program. Like most general history books of the time, this program tended to focus on what might be called "mainstream" and "manifest" history—on great events and great men featured in contemporary newspaper headlines—and on nation building, outstanding examples, and earliest survivors.

Nonetheless, the Board's commemoration of the "Fugitive Slave Movement" was not an anomaly; it contributed significantly to a master narrative that delineated a distinct and heroic Canadian history. This was acknowledged in the text of the following Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque, unveiled near a border crossing in Windsor, Ontario, in 1928:

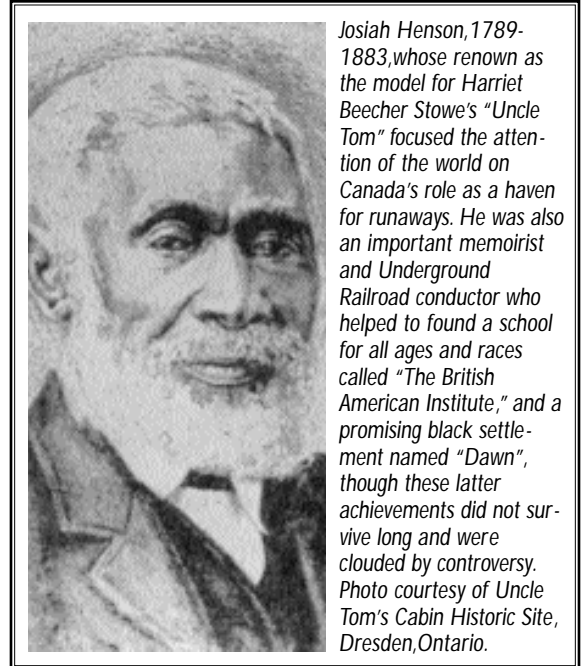
*HERE THE SLAVE FOUND FREEDOM  
Before the United States Civil War of 1861-65,  
Windsor was an important terminal of the  
"UNDERGROUND RAILROAD".*

*Escaping from bondage, thousands of FUGITIVE  
SLAVES from the South, men, women,  
children, landing near this spot, found in Canada  
Friends, Freedom, Protection.  
UNDER THE BRITISH FLAG.*



The text of the 1928 Historic Sites and Monuments Board plaque indicates that “Fugitive Slave Movement” directly involved the Canadian government and the Canadian people in the lore of the Underground Railroad. This was (and is) a source of national pride. That Canada was a haven for thousands fleeing the slavocracy and racial caste continues to be invoked as transparent evidence that the country was (and is) different from and morally superior to the republic south of its border. After all, not only was there no slavery here at the time, but Canadian laws made no invidious distinction between black and white. The words “Canada” and “freedom” could be used interchangeably.

Arguably, memoirists, journalists, and other activists of African descent in the abolition movement helped to build this estimable reputation for Canada as a land of freedom and colour-blind opportunity: the most moving and persuasive evi-



Josiah Henson, 1789-1883, whose renown as the model for Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom" focused the attention of the world on Canada's role as a haven for runaways. He was also an important memoirist and Underground Railroad conductor who helped to found a school for all ages and races called "The British American Institute," and a promising black settlement named "Dawn", though these latter achievements did not survive long and were clouded by controversy. Photo courtesy of Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site, Dresden, Ontario.

## ***African-Canadian History***

### *More than the Underground Railroad*

Most North Americans have little awareness of African-Canadian history — usually not much more than the notion that thousands of black refugees came to Canada on the Underground Railroad, a clandestine network that assisted runaways from slavery in the mid-19th century.

Often, they have no information at all about the existence of black slavery on Canadian soil, or about two earlier influxes of thousands of blacks who arrived on British vessels, not by means of any clandestine network. African-Canadian history thus includes:

- more than 1,000 blacks who were enslaved in New France at the time of the British conquest in 1759;
- some 2,000 enslaved blacks who came to British North America with Loyalist slaveholders in 1783;
- at least 3,500 free blacks on the British side during the War of Independence who were evacuated on British vessels to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick at the end of the war;
- about 2,000 black “refugees of the War of 1812” who had been promised their freedom if they joined the British and were evacuated from the Chesapeake Bay area to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick between 1813 and 1815.

dence to this effect were contained in the testimonials of the refugees themselves, and in that they came in increasing numbers, some kissing the ground on arrival. The lore of the Underground Railroad cemented a notion of Canada as an enlightened and just society unsullied by racial oppression, and helped to expunge from popular memory the existence of black slavery on Canadian soil between the early 17th century and 1834.

No history student could sustain this ingenuous view after the publication of Robin Winks's landmark, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (1971). No doubt, its somber assessments contributed to the way the Historic Sites and Monuments Board plaque was rewritten in 1973 — without a whiff of self-righteousness:

#### **FUGITIVE SLAVES**

*From early in the 19th century, and particularly after the passage of the American Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, the towns along the Detroit River served as major terminals of the network of routes by which thousands of slaves reached Canada. Once in Canada the fugitive was often aided by philanthropic societies and individuals in securing land, employment and the necessities of life. In some cases separate colonies were established for former slaves. By 1861 an estimated 30,000 fugitive blacks resided in Canada West, but more than half of them returned to the United States following emancipation.*

Though this revised inscription supplies dates, numbers, and other intriguing details miss-

ing from the earlier version, it communicates less about vital issues: why runaways and free blacks came to Canada, and the importance of their fate to all African Americans and to the propaganda war against slavery: blacks in Canada bore the brunt of “proving” the truth of the abolitionists’ argument that legal equality was all that was required.

Further, like its predecessor, this inscription does not hint that many former slaves rose above immense discriminatory barriers to forge their own institutions and destinies, that they introduced commercial tobacco growing into the province, and that they were otherwise implicated in the economy, culture, and politics of the country. On the contrary, its statements that runaways were “often aided by philanthropic societies and individuals...” and “in some cases separate colonies were established for former slaves” deprive them of agency and imply a helpless dependency.

Recent research by Professor Michael Wayne of the University of Toronto calls the 1973 inscription into question. His pioneering examination of the enumerators’ schedules pertaining to the 1861 census of Canada West (called “Upper Canada” between 1791 and 1840, and “Ontario” after 1867) causes him to refute the following oft repeated claims:

- that 30,000 to 40,000 African Americans moved to Canada West between about 1815 and the Civil War;
- that perhaps two thirds of this population were runaways;
- that more than half of this number returned to the United States after emancipation.

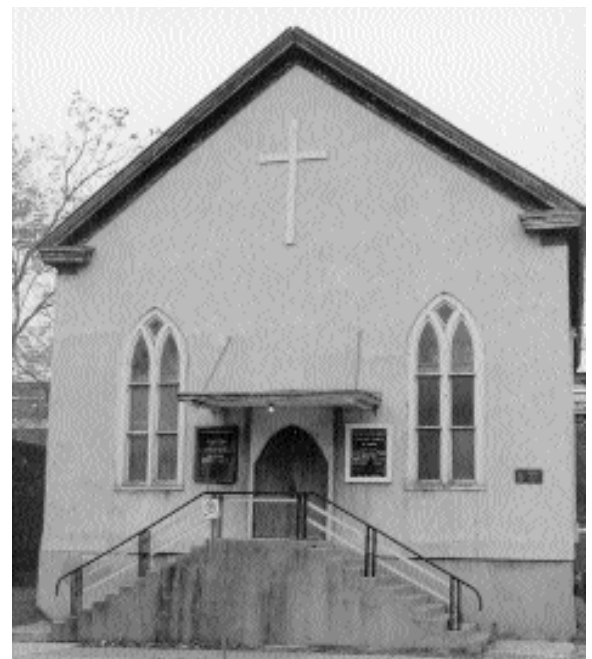
Instead, Wayne estimates that there were about 22,000 black residents in Canada West in 1861, of whom more than 40% were Canadian born; only about 20% of the 20,000 were runaways; only about 20% of the total disappeared by the next census in 1871.

Exterior and interior views of the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church, Salem Chapel, St. Catharines, where Harriet Tubman worshiped during her residence in Canada. This building, dedicated in 1855, replaced a log structure on the same site that had served as an AME church. Photos courtesy Rob Watt.



Mary Ann Shadd (Cary), 1823-1893, the first woman of African descent declared to be of national historic significance by the Minister responsible for Parks Canada. In Canada West (Ontario) between 1851 and 1863, she was an indefatigable advocate on behalf of African-American refugees in Canada and women's rights, and a ferocious opponent of American slavery, racial segregation, and the system of fund raising for refugees known as “begging.” Photo courtesy National Archives of Canada, C-2997.

Wayne’s research in the manuscript census would also indicate that both inscriptions place undue emphasis on settlements in southwestern Ontario, on the American border, since enumerators in Canada West in 1861 found black residents in “...a total of 312 townships and city wards in the schedules, representing every county and city of the province and the Algoma district.” They were more widely scattered in the province than Germans, “the only immigrant group in the middle of the 19th century that was roughly comparable in size to the black population.” These facts, argues Wayne, warrant scholarly attention, the more so because an unwarranted amount has been lavished upon “separate colonies” supported by white philanthropy like Wilberforce, Elgin, Dawn, and the Refugee Home Society. With the exception of the Elgin Settlement in Buxton, “sepa-



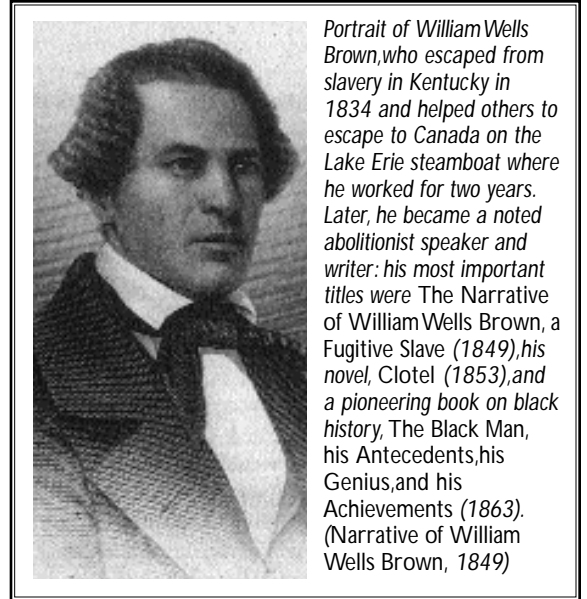
rate colonies” failed badly, they involved only a small percentage of the black population, by any estimate, and they are not windows into the more general experience of refugees in the province or the country.

Wayne’s estimates may diminish the number of blacks in Canada West, but they do not diminish their importance or the impact of the Underground Railroad in Canada. On the contrary, his work contradicts a pervasive impression of blacks as outsiders who were not really part of the Canadian immigrant experience. He demolishes the notion that the great majority were “birds of passage” who huddled close to the border, burdening Canada and themselves with their exile mentalities until after U.S. emancipation, when most gratefully returned to their real home and to more accustomed warmer climates.

Eleven existing sites and museums in Ontario interpret the Underground Railroad, though, not surprisingly, they have not benefited as yet from Michael Wayne’s unpublished research. None are national historic sites or within the Parks Canada system: they are owned and operated by local authorities or non-profit corporations. Most of them are concentrated near the U.S. border, and in rural or small town areas of Essex and Kent counties in southwestern Ontario, and three — Uncle Tom’s Cabin in Dresden, the Raleigh Township Museum in North Buxton, and the John Freeman Walls Historic Site in Puce — are inextricably linked to three “separate colonies,” (respectively Dawn, the Elgin Settlement, and the Refugee Home Society).

These and other Underground Railroad-related sites in south western Ontario have special appeal to African-American heritage tours; their interpretations often focus on slavery, dramatic

*John Freeman Walls and Jane Walls’s cabin at the John Freeman Walls Historic Site. The Walls fled North Carolina for Canada in 1845. Their descendants still own their original land and cabin in Puce, near Windsor, Ontario. Photo by the author.*



*Portrait of William Wells Brown, who escaped from slavery in Kentucky in 1834 and helped others to escape to Canada on the Lake Erie steamboat where he worked for two years. Later, he became a noted abolitionist speaker and writer: his most important titles were The Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave (1849), his novel, Clotel (1853), and a pioneering book on black history, The Black Man, his Antecedents, his Genius, and his Achievements (1863). (Narrative of William Wells Brown, 1849)*

escape, the Underground Railroad, abolitionism, and border crossings. As such, some visitors may conclude that these sites are “the end of the Underground Railroad” and not the beginnings or the outgrowth of an intrinsically-Canadian experience — though one admittedly joined at the hip to African-American history.

Understandably, established sites in Ontario tend to stress the successes of runaways and free blacks in Canada. Most are constrained by scarce resources that do not permit them to mount sophisticated displays that elucidate in detail such significant aspects of the refugee experience as the establishment of segregated schools in Ontario, the meaning and repercussions of self-help and black convention movements, the conundrums posed by colonization and emigration schemes, the divisive and critical debate on segregated black communities, and on the impact of runaways on the politics of the province and on the relationship between the Canadian and American governments.

Black refugees obviously brought to Canadian localities many aspects of African-American culture, together with their concerns about slavery and the progress of the race. While they involved themselves in Underground Railroad operations, in ferocious U.S. debates on abolition and emigration, and in later Civil War and Reconstruction efforts, they did not remain “African Americans” who had a single national identity and history. After they crossed the American border, they and their descendants forged a distinct but multi-faceted African-Canadian culture and history. These were deeply imprinted with their Canadian milieu and had a permanent impact upon it.

The Underground Railroad was predicated on crossing borders; its meaning and implications are constrained and distorted when the subject is considered only within the context of a “national” history — whether Canadian or American. Its U.S. underpinnings and operations were seminal to the unfolding of the Canadian story; in turn, the fate and activities of refugees in Canada are germane to its overall development and to U.S. history.

A shared history, but not a unitary one, is being invoked — a shared history where differences are no less important than similarities. Greater understanding of these differences and similarities may be promoted by collaborative efforts of Parks Canada and the National Park Service to promote public awareness in both countries of a dramatic and inspiring chapter in North American history that contains essential messages for the present.

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## Canadian Historic Sites and Monuments Board Recommendations Relating to African-Canadian History

The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada recognized the importance in Canadian history of the “Fugitive Slave Movement” in 1925. During the last 10 years: it has recommended three other commemorations that relate to the Underground Railroad:

- legislation passed in (what is now) Ontario in 1793 that freed any slave who came into the province, whether brought by a slave holder or escaping bondage. (The bill introduced gradual manumission for slaves — perhaps a few hundred — who were already resident in the province) (recommended in 1992);
- Mary Ann Shadd Cary, pioneer newspaper-woman and activist, whose work in Ontario was largely concerned with those who had fled slavery and the U.S. Fugitive Slave Law (recommended in 1994);
- Josiah Henson, a refugee from slavery, a conductor of the Underground Railroad, an important figure in the abolition movement, and a community leader who helped to found the Dawn settlement near Dresden, Ontario. His later fame as the model for the character of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Uncle Tom” brought international attention to the Canadian haven (recommended in 1995).

The Historic Sites and Monuments Board has been particularly active in recognizing African-Canadian history during the last 10 years. In this period it has also recommended the commemoration of:

- Sam Langford, a talented Nova Scotian boxer who achieved international recognition early in this century (recommended in 1987);
- The No. 2. Construction Battalion, a labor battalion formed in 1916 after blacks insisted upon serving in their country’s war effort (recommended in 1992) ;
- The Black Loyalists at Birchtown, the largest and most influential free black community in 18th-century Canada (recommended in 1993)
- Black Railway Porters and their Unions, who played a major role for the struggle for black rights in Canada (recommended in 1994).
- Nova Scotian Contralto Portia White, who forged a brief but spectacular career on the concert stage during the 1940s (1995).



# Ontario Heritage Sites that Interpret the Underground Railroad

***The North American Black Historical Museum & Cultural Centre, King Street, Amherstburg***

The museum building contains displays relating to the history of Africa and people of African descent in North America, together with artifacts and information relating to the Underground Railroad and its impact in Amherstburg. Two historic buildings form part of the complex: the former home (moved to the site) of George Taylor, a refugee from slavery, and the former AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Nazrey Church, built in 1848. The centre was the project of a local resident and members of the AME congregation. No provincial or federal designations apply to this site, though the museum has received limited funding from the municipality, and from various provincial and federal departments.

***The John Brown Meeting House/First Baptist Church, King Street East, Chatham.***

The First Baptist Church was the site of John Brown's secret constitutional convention in May 1858. The building does not look much like it did at the time: a 1946 brick facade and 1950s renovations have transformed the appearance of the wood frame church that was built in 1853. The church is still active, and is open by appointment to tourists. A provincial plaque

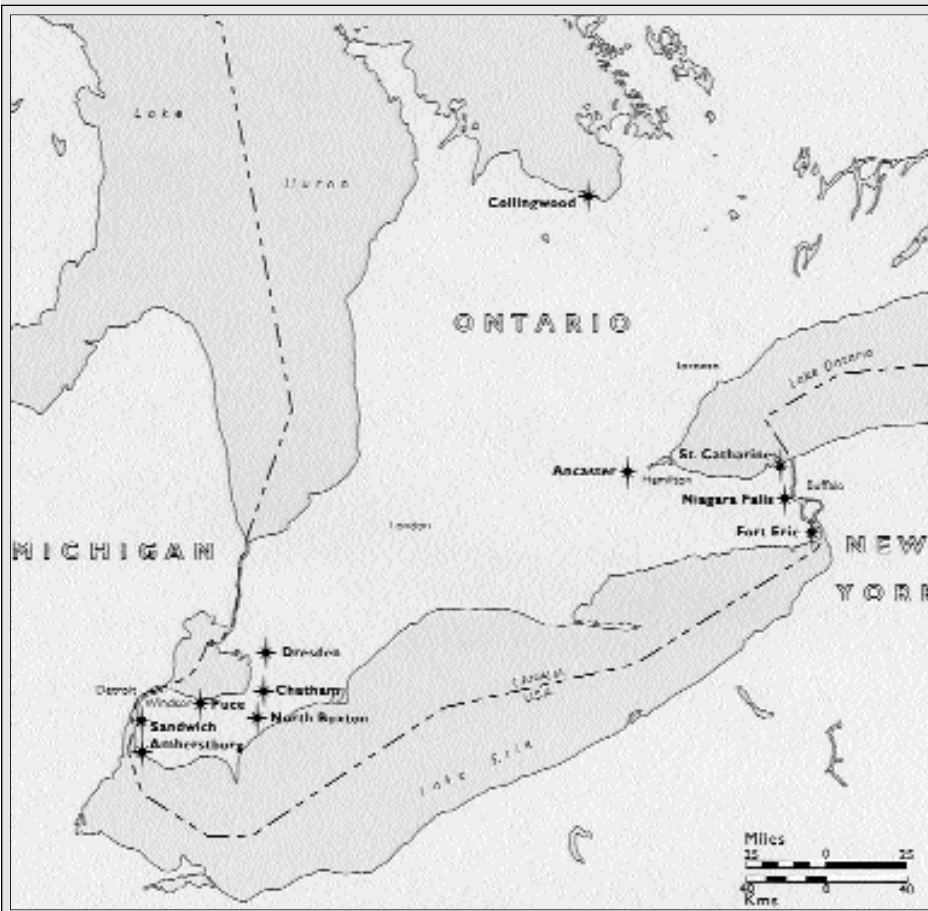
making the convention was erected beside the church in 1958.

***The Raleigh Township Centennial Museum/Elgin Settlement, North Buxton.***

The museum commemorates the Elgin settlement at Buxton, an utopian and highly publicized black refugee community founded in 1849 by the Reverend William King. A 1967 museum building contains artifacts relating to early settlers. An 1861 former school-house forms part of the complex; an historic BME (British Methodist Episcopal) church and cemetery are nearby. The museum resulted from local efforts, and receives very limited Provincial funding. The settlement was commemorated by a provincial plaque in 1965.

***Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site, (The Dawn Settlement), Dresden.***

This site is connected with the Reverend Josiah Henson, whose 1849 memoir, "The life of Josiah Henson," formerly a slave and now an inhabitant of Canada as narrated by himself, was read by Harriet Beecher Stowe and contributed to her composite character of "Uncle Tom." The museum complex includes Henson's 2-story home, where he died in 1883. (It has been moved three times, but is now apparently very close to its original site.) It abuts the Henson family



**Heritage Sites**

**Amherstburg**

*The North American Black Museum and Cultural Centre*

**Ancaster**

*The Griffin House*

**Chatham**

*John Brown Meeting House/First Baptist Church*

**Collingwood**

*Sheffield Park Black History and Cultural Museum*

**Dresden**

*Uncle Tom's Historic Site*

**Fort Erie**

*Bertie Hall*

**Niagara Falls**

*The Nathaniel Dett BME Church and Norval Johnson Heritage Library*

**North Buxton**

*Raleigh Township Centennial Museum*

**Puce**

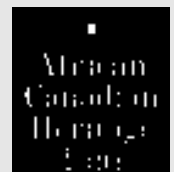
*John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum*

**Sandwich**

*Sandwich Baptist Church*

**St. Catharines**

*The BME Church (Salem Chapel)*



plot and a monument to Josiah Henson erected just after his death. The complex also contains a “refugee cabin” and a mid-19th-century Presbyterian Church that have been moved from nearby locations. From the late 1940s until the 1980s, the site was operated by local businessmen as a tourist destination; since 1992, it has been owned by the St. Clair Parkway Commission, a provincial agency. A provincial plaque to the Josiah Henson House was erected in 1965. Henson was declared to have been a person of national historic significance in 1995; the erection of the federal plaque is pending.

#### *John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum, Puce.*

This complex of buildings is owned and operated by the Walls family, descendants of a refugee from slavery. A log cabin said to have been constructed in 1846 and a family cemetery are on the site, and an assortment of other buildings moved there to serve as interpretation centres. These are on land that was made available to refugees at inflated prices through the Sandwich Mission, an organization launched in 1846 by white American abolitionists. During the early 1850s, the Sandwich Mission became The Refugee Home Society, acquired over 2,000 acres, and settled about 150 blacks on scattered 25-acre parcels, with various strings attached.

#### *The Sandwich Baptist Church, Sandwich*

A still active black church built in 1851, and the oldest extant in the Windsor area. African-Canadian Heritage Tour literature describes it as “the oldest black church in Canada...built of logs in 1841 [and] rebuilt in 1851 with bricks made by former slaves.” Its basement is said to have sheltered runaways from slave catchers.

#### *The Griffin House, Ancaster*

The home for over 150 years of the Griffin family, descendants of Eneals Griffin, a refugee from Virginia, and his white wife. They came to the Niagara area in 1829, and bought the house in 1834. The building and a 45-acre parcel of land, intact since 1841, were purchased in 1988 by the Hamilton Region Conservation Authority, which has undertaken research, archeology, restoration, interpretation, and landscaping. It is open to tours by appointment.

#### *The British Methodist Episcopal Church (Salem Chapel), Geneva Street, St. Catharines.*

Between 1855 and 1858, Harriet Tubman worshiped at this Church, and lived just around the corner in a boarding house on North Street (since demolished). The church is said to have been “designed and constructed by refugee blacks, and in continuous use as a church since 1855.” A provincial plaque to Harriet Tubman was erected next to the building in 1993.

#### *The Nathaniel Dett British Methodist Episcopal Church, Peer Street, Niagara Falls.*

Another active church that receives African-Canadian Heritage tours and which houses the Norval Johnston Heritage Library relating to black history. Its congregation was organized in 1814. The church was built by the faithful in 1836 on a site that proved so cold that the building was moved in 1856 to its present location; it still rests on the logs that were used to effect its move. (It was renamed in 1983 in honor of R. Nathaniel Dett, a noted composer and music teacher who played the piano and organ there during his youth.) The church was designated to be “architecturally significant” under the Ontario Heritage Act in 1986. It receives no government funding.

#### *Bertie Hall, Fort Erie*

An historic building (now owned by the Niagara Parks Commission and leased to the Mildred Mahoney Doll Museum) which, according to historian Owen Thomas, “...is believed to have been a ‘safe house’ for fugitive slaves prior to the American Civil War. Local legend claims that slaves were brought across the River under the cover of darkness and were kept in the basement until arrangements could be made to take them to safer quarters further away from the border.”

#### *Sheffield Park Black History & Cultural Museum, Collingwood*

A museum opened in 1991 which interprets black settlement in the area: land grants to black veterans of the war of 1812 in Oro, other black settlers and their descendants in Simcoe county and Collingwood, black marine heritage on the Great Lakes, the Underground Railroad, and slavery and African history. The museum receives no public funding; it is kept open by donations and a small entrance fee.

## **The Underground Railroad in Quebec and the Maritime Provinces**

Quebec was a weaker magnet than Ontario for 19th-century refugees from slavery and black codes, though Montreal served as an Underground Railroad terminus and a centre of anti-slavery activity in Canada. The city became home to a celebrated runaway, Shadrach Minkins, whose rescue in 1851 from a Boston courtroom and the clutches of the Fugitive Slave Law was celebrated throughout the Abolition movement.

William and Ellen Craft were the most famous refugees to arrive in the Maritimes via the Underground Railroad, but, unlike Shadrach Minkins, they did not come to Canada to stay. From Boston, they took “a tortuous trail ...to Maine, Nova Scotia, and St. John, New Brunswick,” where they soon boarded a steamer to Liverpool, England.

The operation of the Underground Railroad also implicated sea routes to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia from American ports. Nevertheless, its local impact seems to have been relatively slight; the few hundred refugees whom it assisted to reach the Maritimes (or who came clandestinely, on their own) were assimilated into existing communities of descendants of black Loyalists and black refugees of the War of 1812.