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Commemorating the Underground Railroad in Canada

Recently, Parks Canada has been working with the U.S. National Park Service in a joint initiative to commemorate the Underground Railroad, a phenomenon that resulted in what is currently estimated to have been some 20,000 African Americans settling in Canada between the 1820s and 1860s. While refugees arrived in various parts of pre-Confederation Canada, the majority crossed into then-Upper Canada at border settlements along the eastern and western ends of Lake Erie.¹ In Canada, the story of the Underground Railroad (UGRR) is one of building communities and it is the physical survivals from these settlement patterns that have been the most recent focus of Parks Canada's program of historical commemoration.

During February 1999, the Government of Canada announced the designation of two new national historic sites, the commemoration of two persons associated with a settlement site, and the inclusion of related UGRR history in the reasons for designation of five existing national historic sites. These designations bring to the attention of the public both the importance of sites created by UGRR settlers and, through the inclusion of UGRR history in the reasons for designa-

tion of other well-known national historic sites, the impact of the UGRR experience on a broad spectrum of Canadian life.

There is an astonishing wealth of UGRR sites in southwestern Ontario. Fittingly, the most numerous surviving building type is the church, that institution central to the lives of the UGRR settlers. One of the new national historic sites is the Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal Church in Amherstburg. Now part of the North American Black History Museum, this evocative vernacular structure tells, through its hand-made, fieldstone construction, the story of the small congregation who lovingly raised its walls and found strength and community through the wrenching period of adjustment and in difficult years to follow. The AME Nazrey Church is named for Bishop Willis Nazrey,² who led many AME congregations into the British Methodist Episcopal denomination. The creation of the BME Church was a response to the increasingly dangerous conditions in the United States and the difficulties they posed for Black Canadians travelling to AME church congresses. With the Civil War, many returned to the United States to serve in the Union Army, significantly reducing the refugee population in Canada. Over the years, others moved to larger centres. Eventually most dwindling BME and AME congregations reunited. It is telling that, not only the AME Nazrey Church, but so many others have been preserved by determined descendants of the original refugees. All Canadians must be forever grateful for their stewardship of these important talismans of Canadian history.

In the towns and cities where most UGRR refugees settled, domestic sites have almost completely disappeared, succumbing to pressures of urban development. In the 1980s, however, archeologist Karolyn Smardz identified the homestead built by Thornton and Lucie Blackburn. Famed as principals in the "Blackburn" riots occasioned by their arrest and subsequent escape from Detroit, they became respected citizens of Toronto, active in the refugee community and founders of the city's first cab service.³ The site is on the grounds of a busy downtown school and has little above-ground to suggest its UGRR history. Since the archeological remains are protected, the Ministerial advisory board, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, recommended that Thornton and Lucie Blackburn be designated as persons of

Map of southwestern Ontario showing concentrations of Underground Railroad refugee settlers c. 1851. Courtesy CEGERP de Limoilou, Quebec.



Plan of Elgin (now Buxton) Settlement, 1866. Actual settlement may not have been as completely developed as this suggests. Drawing courtesy Ontario Archives.

national historic importance, representative of the many urban UGRR settlers, and that an exhibit on the experience of UGRR settlers be mounted in Toronto.

By contrast, the site of the former Elgin Settlement, a planned rural community of UGRR refugees now known as the Buxton Settlement, has survived with a very powerful sense of place. Located on the north shore of Lake Erie and encompassing some 7,000 acres, the Buxton Settlement has been designated a national historic site because of the important survival of its settlement form, defined by field, road, and drainage ditch patterns and a wealth of original structures including houses, churches, a school, and artifacts exhibited in the Buxton Museum. Descendants of the original settlers still live at Buxton, some continuing to farm, and all proud witness to their forebears' achievements. This year marks the settlement's 150th anniversary and the unveiling of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque to this recent addition to the system of national historic sites.

UGRR refugees came to Upper Canada because, under British law, they were guaranteed freedom and civil rights. Despite frequent challenges brought by American slave-owners, the courts, in all but one known instance, defended their freedom. Full civil rights were more difficult to achieve, but the battles for equal rights and for the abolition of slavery everywhere, became powerful issues in the consciousness of the nascent nation. African Canadians actively defended those freedoms by joining militia groups in 1812 and again in 1837. This aspect of UGRR history is associated with the national historic sites of Fort George at Niagara-on-the-Lake and Fort Malden at

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Designations of historic significance

- 1925—The Fugitive Slave Movement
- 1992—The 1793 Upper Canada legislation limiting slavery
- 1994—Mary Ann Shadd Cary
- 1995—Josiah Henson
- 1999—Thornton and Lucie Blackburn
- 1999—The Nazrey AME Church, Amherstburg, Ontario
- 1999—The Buxton Settlement, Buxton, Ontario
- 1999—additions to reasons for commemoration of:
 - Fort George NHS, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario
 - Fort Malden NHS, Amherstburg, Ontario
 - Osgoode Hall NHS, Toronto, Ontario
 - St. Lawrence Hall NHS, Toronto, Ontario
 - George Brown House NHS, Toronto, Ontario



Amherstburg and is now officially acknowledged. The role of the courts in defending the refugees against extradition charges is now recognized at Osgoode Hall National Historic Site as is the important abolitionist activity which took place at St. Lawrence Hall National Historic Site, both in Toronto. Also in Toronto, the home of George Brown, renowned newspaper editor, politician, and Father of Confederation, is a national historic site which will now be able to more fully present his intimate association with the UGRR community and its role in helping to launch his political career.

Once again, research into an area of history long overlooked has revealed important aspects of so-called mainstream history. The recent national designations of UGRR sites and persons have begun a process that has enormous potential for a fuller understanding of Canadian history.

Notes

- 1 Hilary Russell, "Underground Railroad Parks: A Shared History," *CRM*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1997, pp. 15-21.
- 2 Historically, the name of the church and the name of the Bishop have been spelled differently.
- 3 Parks Canada is indebted to Karolyn Smardz, public archaeologist in charge of these excavations. Smardz's extensive research on the Blackburns will be the topic of her Ph.D. thesis being carried out under the direction of Professor James W. St. G. Walker at the University of Waterloo.

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