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William and Susannah Steward House

On Saturday, October 15, 2005, at 2 p.m., the Ontario Heritage Foundation unveiled a provincial plaque commemorating the William and Susannah Steward House in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

WILLIAM AND SUSANNAH STEWARD HOUSE

William, an African American teamster, and Susannah Steward (also spelled Stewart) lived in Niagara from 1834 to 1847. The Steward home was part of Niagara's "coloured village", a vibrant community of former Canadian slaves, black Loyalists and African American refugees. Later, the Stewards divided their lot for sale to Robert Baxter, a local black resident. In 1837, William Steward was one of 17 local blacks who signed a petition asking Lieutenant Governor Sir Francis Bond Head to refuse to extradite Kentucky fugitive Solomon Moseby. Moseby was rescued from the Niagara jail by more than 200 African Canadians. In 1847, they moved to Galt (now Cambridge) where they lived for the rest of their lives. The Stewards' modest cottage is an excellent example of local vernacular architecture. It serves as a compelling memorial to these hardworking people who contributed to the building of Niagara-on-the-Lake and to protecting African American refugees in the region.

MAISON WILLIAM ET SUSANNAH STEWARD

William Steward (aussi épilé Stewart), un conducteur d'attelage afro-américain, et sa femme Susannah vécurént à Niagara de 1834 à 1847. La maison des Steward était située dans le « village des gens de couleur » de Niagara, une collectivité dynamique constituée d'anciens esclaves canadiens, de loyalistes noirs et de réfugiés afro-américains. Les Steward divisèrent par la suite leur terrain et en vendirent une parcelle à Robert Baxter, résident noir de la localité. En 1837, William Steward fut co-signataire avec 17 autres citoyens noirs locaux d'une pétition demandant au lieutenant-gouverneur Sir Francis Bond Head de refuser d'extrader Solomon Moseby, fugitif du Kentucky. M. Moseby fut libéré de la prison de Niagara par plus de 200 Afro-Canadiens. En 1847, les Steward s'installèrent à Galt (l'actuelle ville de Cambridge) où ils finirent leur vie. La modeste maison des Steward est un excellent

exemple d'architecture vernaculaire locale à la mémoire de ces résidents diligents qui ont contribué à édifier Niagara-on-the-Lake et à protéger les Noirs américains qui trouvèrent refuge dans la région.

Historical background

Niagara's "Coloured Village"

The Niagara black population began with the settlement of American Loyalists, who were permitted to bring their slaves when they moved to Upper Canada (now Ontario). These included Butler's Rangers, the regiment commanded by Colonel John Butler, formerly of New York State. Other bonds people belonged to immigrants from the British Isles. They were purchased in the United States from local First Nations people who had captured enslaved Americans in raids during the Revolution. However, at Upper Canada's first parliament at Newark (modern Niagara-on-the-Lake) in 1793, Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe pushed through "An Act to prevent the further introduction of Slaves, and to limit the Term of Contracts for Servitude within this Province." This did not free existing slaves, but forbade their further importation. It set the children of existing slaves free at the age of 25. Their children were, in turn, considered to have been born free. Within a few short years, most blacks living in Upper Canada were working for wages.

African Americans had been promised freedom and land in return for fighting on the British side in the Revolutionary War. Some of these black Loyalists settled their families in the Niagara District. In the War of 1812, local blacks volunteered to help repel the American invasion. Returning United States soldiers spread the word that they had fought "black men in red coats" in Upper Canada. This startling news sparked an influx of runaway slaves seeking asylum. Some came on the fabled Underground Railroad, but most made their way to Canada unassisted. Deteriorating conditions of black life in 1830s America encouraged even free people to seek new lives where racial oppression was not, at least, enshrined in law. Fourteen families moved to Niagara during the 1830s. Niagara gained not only labourers and domestic servants but also skilled tradespeople who found a ready market for their services.

Most people of African descent lived in the "coloured village" in the southwestern section of town on the edge of the Military Reserve. This area was bounded by Mississauga and Butler Streets, and John and Anne Streets. By 1837, 10 per cent of the local population of 4,000 people was black. Two churches served the community. Steward's wife probably attended the African Methodist Episcopal Church. William Steward initially went to the Anglican Church. However, according to the *St. Catharine's Journal* of July 24, 1845, a William Steward served that year as Clerk to the Baptist Church in Niagara at the time a dispute over property arose between white and black sections of the congregation. The church was transferred to the African Canadian membership. Whether this was the same man has not been ascertained. Many

of the residents of the "coloured village" are buried in the Black Burial Ground, a designated landmark on Mississauga Street. This was associated with the Baptist Church that once stood nearby.

William and Susannah Steward

According to naturalization records, William Steward (also spelled Stewart) entered Upper Canada in 1834 and took the oath of allegiance to the Crown on February 16, 1842. Steward – born around 1799 – was about 35 years of age when he came to Canada. His wife, Susannah – ten years his junior – was born in the United States about 1809. It is not known if the Stewards were fugitive slaves or free, or if they arrived in Canada together. There is no local record of their marriage, so they may have already been a couple. They had no children. The Stewards had perhaps lived as free people in the northern United States before migrating to Upper Canada. Steward signed his naturalization papers and land transfer documents in a good hand as "William Steward", suggesting he was literate before he arrived. The Stewards purchased a town lot the same year they arrived in the province, indicating that they brought money with them.

William and Susannah Steward resided in Niagara from 1834 to 1847. Over the years, they sold sections of their property to other African American immigrants. One of these lots came into the possession of Peter Sands, a fugitive slave who operated a barbershop at Niagara before moving to Thorold in 1854. Sands was one of seven men who fled across the Detroit River in the summer of 1833 after assisting in the dramatic rescue of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn from a Michigan prison. The Blackburn escape precipitated the first extradition dispute between Canada and the United States over the fugitive slave issue. Canada's refusal to return the Blackburns set the tone for all diplomatic and legal negotiations regarding Canada's reception of black American refugees before the Civil War.

William and Susannah Steward were also involved in another celebrated fugitive slave case. In 1837, Solomon Moseby was incarcerated in the Niagara jail. He was accused of horse theft, a trumped-up charge so his Kentucky owner could reclaim his "property." The American government demanded Moseby's extradition. William Steward joined with local African Americans and signed a petition to Lieutenant Governor Sir Francis Bond Head on Moseby's behalf. Men and women came from all over the region and camped around the jail to prevent Moseby's removal. Local whites sympathized and provided food and shelter for the black protesters. After more than two weeks, the jailor tried to take Moseby away in a cart but a riot broke out. Women were as active as men in the protest, preventing officers from crossing a footbridge on the jailhouse grounds and holding their guns up so they could not shoot. Two respected local blacks, including a Nova Scotia-trained schoolteacher named Herbert Holmes, were killed. Moseby fled and made his way to Montreal and then to Britain, where he was well received.

Architecture and property history

The Stewards' lot – number 337, an acre in size and located on the southwestern outskirts of Niagara, was originally part of the property given to Andrew Butler, son of Colonel John Butler, by Crown Patent on May 17, 1802. Andrew died in 1804 and his son Joseph W. Butler in 1828 sold the property to his cousin, Lewis Clement, for the sum of £20. On November 27, 1834, Clement, who had grown up in a slaveholding family, transferred it to William and Susannah Steward for £25. The deal was witnessed by Samuel M. Carter, whose wife Sarah Carter was a leader in the 1837 riot that rescued Samuel Moseby.

"William Steward of the Town of Niagara ... yeoman (a man of colour)" subdivided the lot and on August 13, 1836 sold the southwesterly half to Robert Baxter, also "a man of colour" according to the deed. Baxter, "carpenter and joiner", signed his deed with an "X" and paid £22 for the half-acre. Susannah Steward appeared before Justice of the Peace Thomas Butler to waive her dower rights. Two merchants witnessed the transaction, James Rogers and Thomas Duff Miller. Baxter subsequently divided his lot in two, and it was one of these quarter-acre properties that Peter Sands acquired in the 1850s. The Stewards sold off the remaining half-acre to John Oliver on August 24, 1847 for £87.10.0.

The Steward home is typical of frame cottages constructed by the former Upper Canadian slaves – black Loyalists and African American immigrants, both fugitive slave and free – who occupied Niagara's 19th century "coloured village." The home is believed to have been built early in 1835, a year after William Steward arrived from the United States. It is a storey-and-a-half in height, with a transverse roofline and two windows in each gable end. The front of the house is plain, with six-over-six windows flanking a central doorway. From the thickness of the walls, it appears that the Steward house was constructed of sawn log and was covered with weatherboard. Access to the basement is from the exterior. A single-storey addition was built fairly early in the building's history. This extends the entire width of the back part of the original house. The grounds consist of neatly mowed lawns with evidence of a former vegetable garden. To the east of the house there is a tidy white-painted shed with six-over-six windows and board and batten siding.

To the rear of the Steward House there once stood a long narrow building with access off John Street. If this structure was contemporary with the house (which could be ascertained by archaeology) it may have served as a drive shed. Census and tax records show that the Stewards owned a dog and a horse. The horse was probably used in his cartage business. Susannah, too, may have contributed to the household income, although there is no record of her employment. African American women living in Canada worked as dressmakers and domestic servants or did fine ironing and hairdressing.

After 1847, the Stewards moved to Galt (now Cambridge) where they lived for the rest of their lives. The Steward house is an excellent example of local vernacular architecture and

serves as a compelling memorial to these hardworking people who contributed so much to protecting black refugees living in the region, and to the building of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

In December 1999, the Niagara Foundation acquired the property at 507 Butler Street at the corner of John Street in Niagara-on-the-Lake. The Foundation is in the process of restoring the structure with the intention of opening the William and Susannah Steward House as a museum.

The Ontario Heritage Foundation gratefully acknowledges the research of Karolyn Smardz Frost in preparing this paper.



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