

On Saturday, July 8, 2006 at 2 p.m., the Ontario Heritage Trust and the South Norwich Historical Society unveiled a provincial plaque commemorating the Otterville African Methodist Episcopal Church and Cemetery at Woodlawn Octagonal Cottage in Otterville.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

**OTTERVILLE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH
AND CEMETERY**

Encouraged by local Quakers, free Blacks and escaped slaves fled persecution in the United States and found homes in the Otterville area beginning in 1829. As skilled tradespeople and farmers, these people made significant contributions to local development. In 1856, trustees of the African Methodist Episcopal Church purchased this half-acre lot and built the first Black church in Oxford County. Later that year, the church was transferred to the newly established British Methodist Episcopal denomination. The church and cemetery served the local Black community until the late 1880s. The small white-painted frame church had disappeared by the early 20th century. Its cemetery is one of the few preserved Black pioneer burial grounds in Ontario.

**ÉGLISE MÉTHODISTE ÉPISCOPALE AFRICAINE ET CIMETIÈRE
D'OTTERVILLE**

Encouragés par des Quakers locaux, des Noirs libres et des esclaves fugitifs fuirent le climat de persécution qui sévissait aux États-Unis et s'établirent dans la région d'Otterville à compter de 1829. Comme ouvriers et agriculteurs, ces personnes ont apporté d'importantes contributions au développement local. En 1856, des fiduciaires de l'Église méthodiste épiscopale africaine achetèrent ce lot d'un demi-acre et y construisirent la première église noire du comté d'Oxford. Au cours de la même année, la bâtisse fut transférée à l'église méthodiste épiscopale britannique, une nouvelle confession religieuse. L'église et le cimetière servirent la communauté noire jusqu' à la fin des années 1880. La petite église blanche, à ossature de bois, avait disparu dès le début du 20^e siècle. Son cimetière est l'un des rares lieux de sépulture des pionniers noirs en Ontario.

Historical background

Black colonies

A single tombstone remains in the Otterville African Methodist Episcopal Cemetery as a monument to some of the village's earliest settlers – African-American immigrants who began arriving in the Otterville area in 1829. A small wooden church, also located here, served the Otterville and area Black community from 1855 until the late 1880s.

Otterville's Black settlers joined others who had begun settling in Norwich in 1800. The majority of these people migrated from upper New York State in 1811. One of these settlers, Frederick Stover, was a Quaker who played a major role in encouraging the settlement of Black Americans in the Otterville district.¹

Frederick Stover was instrumental in three early Black colonizing efforts in southwestern Ontario. The first was Wilberforce (now Lucan), north of London. In 1829, free Blacks living in Cincinnati were suffering under Ohio's oppressive "Code Noir."² They founded a colonization society to search out lands in British North America. The committee, chaired by James Charles Brown – a former Kentucky slave who had bought his own freedom – was welcomed by Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Colborne, but was unable to purchase sufficient land for settlement. Indiana and Ohio Quakers helped Brown by purchasing 800 acres of farmland in Biddulph Township on his behalf through the agency of Frederick Stover.³ One group, on its way to Wilberforce, chose to settle near the Quakers at Norwich instead. This second African-American settlement – a concentration of local farms – was located along the 7th and 8th Concessions at Otterville.

¹ Some Quaker families probably had ties with African-Americans before coming to Canada, or had perhaps even engaged in assisting fugitive slaves through an early version of the Underground Railroad. There were well-known stations along the route leading from Virginia and Maryland north by way of New York state. The majority of Quakers decried slavery and became active in fugitive slave assistance. The first antislavery legislation in the United States was passed in Germantown, Pennsylvania in 1688 by a group of religious dissenters – either Quaker or Mennonite, depending on the source consulted. As early as 1786, George Washington himself complained that the Quakers of Pennsylvania were assisting fugitive slaves in making their escape.

² The term comes from the French Caribbean Islands. "Code Noir" required incoming Blacks to have a white sponsor, to post a \$500 bond for their good behaviour and to register their names and addresses with the county clerk. The City of Cincinnati also made some jobs traditionally open to Blacks no longer open to them.

³ Norwich Friends Monthly Meeting Book, June 9, 1830, Norwich and District Archives (attached). See also Peter C. Riply et al, eds. *The Black Abolitionist Papers, vol. 2, Canada*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1986, 51 n4. See also Peter Williams, *A Discourse Delivered in St. Philip's Church for the Benefit of the Coloured Community of Wilberforce, in Upper Canada, on the Fourth of July, 1830*, New York, N.Y., 1830, 10-11. For Stover's role in Wilberforce and Dawn, see William J. Pease and Jane Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America*, Madison, WI: State Historical Society for Wisconsin, 1963, 48 & 71. See also Cathy Symons, "Quakers Helped End Slavery," *Norwich Gazette*, Feb. 23, 2005.

Otterville, originally called Otter Creek Mills, was located on Lot 12, 8th Concession on the banks of the Otter Creek. Over the next three decades, families migrating from New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut – as well as from other parts of early Ontario – joined to form the nucleus of a thriving African-Canadian community.

Stover also took part in developing the British American Institute (BAI) at the Dawn Settlement in what is now Dresden, Ontario. It was founded by the remarkable Josiah Henson – fugitive slave, lecturer and preacher – in partnership with Reverend Hiram Wilson, an important abolitionist. Both Stover and J.C. Brown, who moved to Canada in 1830, were also on the BAI's Board of Directors.⁴

Black settlement in Oxford County

Blacks in Oxford County farmed in Norwich, near Otterville, but they also lived in other villages such as Milldale and in the larger towns of Ingersoll and Woodstock. By 1848, there were about 200 Black people living in the Norwich vicinity.⁵ The majority were not recently escaped slaves, but free men and women who were either free-born, legally manumitted or earlier refugees from the South who had been living free in Northern states. The Norwich Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends records that “voluntary subscriptions for the removal of free people of colour from North Carolina to free governments” were taken up.⁶ The immigrants brought money to purchase property. Most, too, were skilled tradesmen. Their contribution to the early development of Norwich Township was considerable.

By 1842, according to one account, there were enough Black families to warrant the establishment of an African-Canadian schoolhouse. The Canada Mission of the American Missionary Association, created at the suggestion of Hiram Wilson, sent Mary C. Sheppard to teach at Otterville at this time. Black children had been routinely excluded from public education in southwestern Ontario and attended separate schools. However, the local interpretation of Egerton Ryerson's *Common Schools Act* (1850) integrated area schools in 1855 when North and South Norwich became separate townships. The Superintendent's Report for South Norwich, during that same year, stated that there were 20 Blacks in the Otterville school

⁴ Probably in the mid-1830s, Frank Stover met Josiah Henson, as well as the Reverend Hiram Wilson. Wilson had come to Upper Canada in 1836 as a missionary. He lived at Toronto and then Dawn, founding schools for fugitive slaves and then partnering with Henson, who had already experimented with colonization at Colchester. They created the British American Institute, Canada's first manual labour school, and Stover served on the BAI Board of Trustees. Another trustee was J.C. Brown, the same man whose brainchild the Wilberforce Settlement had been. For Stover's role in Wilberforce and Dawn, see William J. Pease and Jane Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America*, 48 & 71. For a short biography of J.C. Brown see Ripley, 74-5n.

⁵ *Oberlin Evangelist*, August 30, 1848 and *American Missionary*, October 1848, cited in Linda Brown-Kubisch, *The Queen's Bush Settlement: Black Pioneers, 1839-1865*, Natural Heritage Books, 2004, 112-3.

⁶ Norwich Friends Monthly Meeting Book, September 14, 1831, Norwich and District Archives.

school and 59 at nearby Summerville.

Norwich Blacks were also active in Canadian antislavery and participated in the Great North American Convention, or the Convention of Coloured Freemen, at Toronto's new St. Lawrence Hall from September 11 to 13, 1851. Henry Bibb, a Kentucky fugitive and abolitionist lecturer who published the *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper, invited the delegates who came mainly from the Great Lakes region of the United States and Canada. They discussed the draconian new American *Fugitive Slave Law* (1850), which facilitated the recapture of former runaway slaves from every state in the North and South, and to decide if Canada West (now Ontario), was the best place for African-American emigrants to settle.⁷ The tiny Norwich community sent two representatives: Jeremiah Wainer and Elijah De Groat.⁸

After the 1850 passage of the *Fugitive Slave Law* by the US Congress, thousands of people who had previously escaped from slavery but were living in the Northern states left for Canada. Canada West, in particular, benefited from this influx, and received many talented and ambitious people. Robert Williams, a fugitive slave, brought his family to the Otterville area in 1852 after meeting some Norwich Quakers at a Friends Meeting near Rochester, New York. Likewise, Isaac Grey, born in Maryland, came in 1855.⁹

The Church and Cemetery

According to the 1851 census of the Canadas, there were 102 Black people living in Norwich and by 1855 there were 167 Blacks living in South Norwich alone, which divided from North Norwich in that same year. However, it was not until 1856 that those living near Otterville, located in South Norwich, built their own church, although there had been a Black Methodist congregation for some years.¹⁰

⁷ The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 permitted slaveholders and their agents to pursue their fugitive property in any state in the Union. Local sheriffs and judges were obligated to assist in their arrest. Special commissioners were appointed and paid more for each man, woman or child "returned" to slavery than for those set free. Abuses were rampant; all that was required for an arrest to be made was the sworn testimony of a white man. Blacks were not entitled to defend themselves nor to a proper trial, although Northern states immediately passed personal liberty laws to try to circumvent this. As a result, literally thousands of people – some free for generations – sold or abandoned their homes and businesses and moved to Canada.

⁸ C. Peter Riley, *The Black Abolitionist Papers, vol. 2, Canada*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, 1986, 149-169. Hiram Wilson and Josiah Henson were on the committee, and J.C. Brown, now living at Chatham, also attended.

⁹ The 1871 census of Canada shows Isaac Grey of Norwich, Ontario, as 66, and the 1881 census of Canada lists the same man as an "African" born in the USA, aged 75. The age discrepancy suggests this was not the same man. Fugitive slaves frequently avoided any mention in the official record, so they would not be found.

¹⁰ Norwich was included in the new Brantford Circuit of the African Methodist Episcopal Church established in 1853. Donald George Simpson, "Negroes in Ontario from Early Times to 1870," unpublished PhD dissertation,

While African-Americans adhered to a variety of denominations, the most popular were Baptist and Methodist. White churches in the United States generally accepted Black parishioners, even those who were still enslaved, but there was a great deal of discrimination. Blacks were forced to sit in upper galleries and were either not accepted for full membership or not allowed to hold church office. Blacks led by former slave Richard Allen withdrew from the Philadelphia Methodist church in protest in 1786 and, in 1816, established the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME). It grew quickly across the United States and came to Canada in the early 1820s. It became part of the New York Circuit in 1827, although a missionary was not sent to the Canadian congregations until 1832. The first Canadian conference was held at Toronto on July 21, 1840 when there were 256 full members of the AME Church in what is now Ontario.¹¹

The establishment of a separate church was a very important step in community building. Generally the only gathering place the people owned in common, the Black church served not only as a religious centre but as a lecture hall and often as the first school. The Sunday school movement was adopted early in the Black community, and this is where many children and adults learned their letters. Abolitionist, political and social events took place there, and the church served as the focus for the establishment of benevolent, fraternal, temperance and self-help groups.

In 1853, the AME church was reorganized and the new district of Brantford encompassed Otterville and surrounding communities, although no church had yet been constructed. The Otterville AME Church made the transition in 1856 to the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) conference along with most of the other churches of this denomination in Canada West. The BME was initially created because Canadian Black clergymen – many of them fugitive slaves – could not safely travel to AME conferences in the United States. They also wished to demonstrate their allegiance to Queen Victoria and the British government that harboured so many fugitive slaves in the tumultuous years that led up to the American Civil War. Historian Robin Winks suggests, too, that the fact that so many fugitive slaves had white wives aroused objections to the term “African.” Bishop Willis Nazrey of the African Methodist Episcopal Church resigned his position and became the first Bishop of the British Methodist Episcopal Church. He continued until his death in 1874, and was succeeded by Bishop Randolph Disney.¹²

University of Western Ontario, 1971, 98; also see Right Rev. James A. Handy, *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History*. Philadelphia: AME Book Concern, 1902, 131, 210-11.

¹¹ Handy, 13ff & 138; Daniel Alexander Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Nashville, Tenn: AME Sunday School Union, 1891, 56-7, 95, 116-7; Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks In Canada, a History*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971, 355-7; Richard R. Wright, *Centennial Encyclopaedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Philadelphia: The Book Concern of the AME Church, 1916, 14.

¹² A good discussion of this amicable division in the Black Methodist churches of North America appears in Rev. James A. Handy, *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History*, Philadelphia: AME Book Concern, 1902, 193ff. See also Edwards. S. J. Celestine. *From Slavery to a Bishopric, or The Life of Bishop Walter Hawkins of the British Methodist*

On January 6, 1856, the white farmer who owned much of what is now Otterville, Edward Bullock, sold a half-acre of land for the sum of £15 to Lindsey Anderson, Isaac Grey and Isaac Durphy, trustees of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The deed was registered June 2, 1856. This small plot of land would become the site of the Otterville Black church and would also serve as its congregational burial ground.

Built sometime in 1856, the Otterville church was listed in British Methodist Episcopal Church records as debt-free by 1864. The Proceedings of the Thirteenth Session of the Annual Conference (Windsor, May 29, 1869) listed Lindsey Anderson as one of three Elders, along with Josiah Henson of Dawn. The church had 48 members and BME records list Lindsey Anderson as the first preacher. No documentation remains of church membership, christenings, marriages or burials. There is, however, a photograph album in the Norwich Archives that contains a music box. It belonged to the Williams family, who attended the church and provides a glimpse into their lives. They were egg producers and evidently very prosperous, given the fine clothing worn by the men, women and children shown in photographs.¹³

Although there are no known existing photographs, an older resident recalling it during its final days described the Otterville African Methodist Episcopal Church as a small, white frame building covered with clapboard that had a gabled portico on its front façade.¹⁴ The church structure disappeared sometime early in the 20th century, having gone out of use by 1899.

The Otterville Church was locally famous for the large revival meetings it sponsored. On August 18, 1882, a report in the *Tillsonburg Observer* stated, "One of the most largely attended bush meetings ever held in the vicinity was held by the British M.E. (Colored) church of Otterville near that village on Sunday. People from Brantford, Ingersoll, Tillsonburg and other towns and villages in the vicinity were present besides some 2,000 to 2,500 white people."

The church continued to serve the community throughout the latter half of the 19th century. As Black district residents migrated to other areas, however, its membership dwindled. In 1884, the AME and BME Churches reunited, so the Otterville church would have operated under African Methodist Episcopal Church governance for its last few years.¹⁵ The Williams family moved away and the Andersons became well-known and respected residents of Woodstock.

Church. Canada, London: J. Kensit, 1891. 152-3; Gwendolyn Robinson and John W. Robinson, *Seek the Truth: A Story of Chatham's Black Community*, n.p. 1989, 69-70.

¹³ "Williams Bible," Norwich and District Archives.

¹⁴ Heather Rennalls, Woodstock Sentinel-Review, nd, Norwich and District Archives; Joyce Pettigrew, personal communication.

¹⁵ Wright, 296.

Burials seem to have continued in the cemetery throughout this period, since the one remaining tombstone bears a date of 1880. However, Lindsey Anderson – who died in 1888 – was buried in the Pine Street Friends Burying Ground at Otterville. There were only five members left in 1888, according to the Annual Conference of the British Methodist Episcopal Church, and after Anderson’s death it was recommended the property be sold.

There is no mention of the Otterville church as having an active congregation in the 1889 records of the BME conference. No camp meetings were recorded after 1899 and the property eventually reverted to the township.¹⁶ The church structure disappeared over time – possibly a victim of wind and weather, as no newspaper account or local story records it being either intentionally demolished or burning down. The churchyard, with its few stones, was in very dilapidated condition by the late 20th century and the single remaining headstone stands as a monument to Otterville’s early Black community. Today, this cemetery is one of very few preserved Black pioneer burial grounds in Ontario.

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¹⁶ In conversation with historian, Joyce Pettigrew.