

On Saturday, August 18, 2007, at 10:30 a.m., the Ontario Heritage Trust, the Lakeshore Black Heritage Committee and the Town of Lakeshore unveiled a provincial plaque to commemorate the Puce River Black Community in Lakeshore, Ontario.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

PUCE RIVER BLACK COMMUNITY

While the first Blacks arrived in the Puce River area during the 1830s, the community owed its existence largely to the Refugee Home Society. This abolitionist organization led by Henry and Mary Bibb offered support to escaped slaves who travelled to this area from the United States through the Underground Railroad by providing opportunities for land ownership and self-sufficiency. Beginning in 1852, families purchased 25-acre farms in Sandwich and Maidstone Townships, from the Society, which also set aside a portion of lands for the construction of schools and churches. In 1872, the Refugee Home Society deeded a half acre of property to the trustees of the British Methodist Episcopal Church. A B.M.E. church and cemetery were established on this site and served the Puce River Black community until the late 1920s. An African Methodist Episcopal church, was also located to the east. Forged in freedom, this thriving farm community produced descendants who have gone on to lead successful lives across North America.

COMMUNAUTÉ NOIRE DE LA RIVIÈRE AUX PUCES

Lorsque les premiers Noirs arrivèrent dans la région de la rivière aux Pucés, dans les années 1830, la communauté devait en grande partie son existence à la Refugee Home Society. Cet organisme abolitionniste, dirigé par Henry et Mary Bibb, accordait un soutien aux esclaves qui venaient se réfugier dans cette région et qui arrivaient des États-Unis en empruntant le chemin de fer clandestin. Il leur offrait la possibilité de devenir propriétaires terriens et de subvenir à leurs besoins. À partir de 1852, des familles achetèrent à la Society des fermes de 25 acres dans les cantons de Sandwich et de Maidstone. La Society réservait aussi une partie des terres pour y construire des écoles et des églises. En 1872, la Refugee Home Society céda un demi-acre aux fiduciaires de l'Église épiscopale méthodiste britannique. Une église épiscopale méthodiste britannique et un cimetière furent construits sur le site et servirent la communauté noire de la rivière aux Pucés jusqu'à la fin des années 1920. Une église épiscopale méthodiste africaine était également située à l'est. Les descendants des fondateurs de cette communauté

agricole prospère, épris de liberté, s'établirent avec succès dans toute l'Amérique du Nord.

Historical background

Early settlement

The presence of Blacks in Essex County can be traced back to slavery in the colonies of New France and Great Britain. In the early 1700s, when the French controlled what is now Ontario, census records document the existence of slaves owned by prominent families such as those of Jacques Dupéron Baby (which held 30 slaves), Antoine Descomptes Labadie, Gilles Parent and many others.¹ After the region came into British hands, slaves held by British families were brought to the region, particularly in the late 1700s after the American Revolution. At that time, Loyalist slave owners, such as Colonel Matthew Elliott from Virginia, settled in Malden Township. Elliott reportedly owned 60 slaves, some of whom deserted and served in the militia at Detroit.² Free Black veterans who fought on the side of the British during the Revolutionary War were also given land grants in Essex County. One of the earliest known Black landowners was James Robertson, a veteran of Butler's Rangers, who was granted land in Colchester Township in 1787.³

After the 1793 Act prohibiting the importation of slaves into Upper Canada, African American slaves began escaping to Canada through the Underground Railroad.⁴ This increased after the War of 1812, when soldiers from Kentucky and Virginia brought back stories of Black men fighting in red coats on the British side. Although Windsor, Sandwich and Amherstburg received many escaped slaves, Maidstone Township also became a destination. Two brothers, Tom and Granville Lawson, escaped from slavery in Kentucky and reached Maidstone in 1833. They owned a one-masted scow and lived on Concession 7, west of the Puce River. George Washington was another early settler in Maidstone Township.⁵

By the 1850s, "there was a large Black population along the Base Line Road and south of it," which provided the chief source of hired help on the farms of the Scottish settlers.⁶ However, the Refugee Home Society founded by Henry Bibb would help many more African American families escaping directly from slavery in the United States to settle in Canada. Bibb was a former escaped slave, noted abolitionist and founder and editor of the *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper in Sandwich, among others.

Refugee Home Society settlement

The Refugee Home Society was a land settlement scheme established to provide plots of 25 acres for fugitive slaves to give them a hand up and to help promote their "moral, social, physical, intellectual, and political elevation." Interested parties held a meeting in Farmington, Michigan, on May 21, 1851, and a follow-up meeting on January 29, 1852, at which the following

officers were elected: Nathan Stone, president; A.L. Power, vice-president; E.P. Benham, secretary; and Mary E. Bibb (wife of Henry), corresponding secretary.

At an August 25, 1852, convention in Detroit, H.D. Kitchell assumed the presidency, Samuel M. Mead became the vice-president, S.M. Holmes the secretary, Henry Bibb the corresponding secretary, Horace Hallock the treasurer, and E.C. Walker assumed the new position of auditor. Reverend S.A. Baker, Reverend Henry Coles, Francis Raymond, Robert Garner, J.M. Diamond, A.L. Power, Lewis Tappan, Samuel Zug and George Cary comprised the executive council. E.P. Benham, J.F. Dolbeare and Reverend C.C. Foote were appointed agents and commissioned to collect funds for the organization.⁷

The Society helped escaping slaves to settle in Canada under specific settlement terms. The first five acres were granted free of charge and the 20 adjoining acres were sold at cost. One-tenth of the purchase price was to be paid down before possession of the land, and the balance had to be paid in eight annual installments. Settlers were obliged to clear the five acres granted free of charge within two years. They also could not construct houses of less than two rooms, and chimneys had to be made of brick or stone. All settlers had to be recent refugees from slavery and could not already own land. Lands bought could only be transferred to heirs that were spouses or children, otherwise they would fall back to the Society. Finally, settlers could not buy, sell or use alcohol. At the August 1852 convention, some of the terms were improved so that settlers had three years to clear their five acres, and the 10 per cent down payment was eliminated. In addition, annual payments were stretched from eight to nine years. The limitation on the transfer of land was also changed so that settlers could sell or transfer their land free of restrictions at the end of 15 years.⁸

The Society began to publicize and raise funds in the anti-slavery community to buy land in Essex County. Although it envisioned acquiring 20,000 to 50,000 acres of land for the settlement, the Society began to buy land in much smaller parcels as it became available. All land purchased by the Society was in the townships of Sandwich and Maidstone. At the August 1852 convention, the Society reported a capital fund of \$3,033.25, and that 12 families had taken up lots and had cleared 50 acres.⁹ When Benjamin Drew toured Canada West in 1855, he reported that some 20 families were living on 25-acre farms.¹⁰ In total, the Refugee Home Society purchased 2,372 acres of land and settled at least 65 families, representing a population of roughly 250 people. Many more did not remain on the land and sold their property back to the Society, receiving the value of their improvements back in cash so as to enable them to begin anew.¹¹

Schools and churches

The members of the Refugee Home Society understood the importance of education, and the Society's constitution stated that one-third of the proceeds of the sale of the lands was to be devoted to the building and running of schools. At the August 1852 convention, this was changed to allocate one-half of the proceeds for education.¹² Wherever a settlement comprised six families, a school facility would be provided.

Laura Haviland, a Quaker and Underground Railroad activist living in Michigan, was asked by the Society to teach at a school for the settlers. According to Haviland, a frame house was erected for school and meeting purposes, where she taught classes for a year beginning in the fall of 1852. She also taught a Sabbath school to all ages there.¹³ Mrs. Hotchkiss subsequently took charge of the school. She was the wife of Reverend David Hotchkiss, who was hired by the American Missionary Association to establish missions at the Puce River, Little River and Pike's Creek settlements. Mrs. Hotchkiss was supported by the Refugee Home Society, and by 1858 this school was flourishing with almost 40 students. In November 1859, however, Mrs. Hotchkiss died, and the school was left vacant until 1860. Mr. Hotchkiss remarried in October of that year and his new bride "entered at once vigorously into the work of the mission." The Hotchkisses resigned in May 1862 and returned to Pennsylvania.¹⁴ However, it is believed that the school continued in operation for some years thereafter.¹⁵ In 1871, the "E.C. Walker School," located on one-quarter acre on the Base Line Road next to the Puce River, was donated to the Township of Maidstone on the condition that it pay \$1 rent for 10 years and that the building remain a school for that period.¹⁶ It is believed that this school was renamed SS No. 9 (School Section Number 9), and was later rebuilt on the Puce Road across from the Baptist Church in 1913. The original building was apparently torn down by the 1930s. The later building was being used as a residential home as late as 1973.¹⁷

At one time there were three churches in Puce River: a British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church, an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and a Baptist Church, all located near the corner of the Puce River and the Base Line Road (now Highway 42).¹⁸ During her year-long tenure in the settlement, Laura Haviland was involved in establishing a Christian Union Church that was non-denominational. When Haviland was about to leave the settlement, a Reverend Maglothin from Virginia began to hold services, and "a few months after (it was) reorganized under the auspices of the Methodist Episcopal Church."¹⁹

The Reverend David Hotchkiss ministered to the "refugees from slavery" at several locations in Maidstone Township. He established a church at Puce River in June 1858 with 14 members. At the time of his departure from Canada, Hotchkiss reported that he had received 45 communicants into the church, of whom six died, five left and eleven were expelled,²⁰ leaving 23 members.²¹ In the BME Annual Conference Minutes of 1869, it was most likely the members of this church that requested membership in the BME Conference:

Maidstone, June 2nd, 1869

To the B.M.E. Church of Western Canada: --
We the Undersigned Members and official Board and Trustees
Of the English Wesleyan Methodist Church, do, by these presents,
Petition your Conference that we desire to become members of that body:
Manuel Eaton, George Teres, George Glen, Margaret Moore, Emeline Lucas,
Elizabeth Gooden, Mary Stanley, Glasco Garison, Virginia Eaton, Cliptan Gooden,
George Stanley, George Lausen, Pane Lausen, William Glen, Susan Cooke and
Almeady Bevels.²²

The minutes indicate that their request was granted on a motion by the Reverends Walter Hawkins and G.R. Blount.

The 1872 deed of the British Methodist Episcopal Church states that Refugee Home Society trustees Horace Hallock and Edward C. Walker sold one-half acre on part of Lot 7, east of the Puce River, to George Glenn, Henry Franklin and Golson W. Cannaday for \$1.²³ The deed also states that the trustees shall erect a church on the property for worship and as a meeting place. This was accomplished and the church continued in operation for several decades. In the 20th century, its numbers had dwindled such that by 1929 the BME Church at Puce had no regular pastor, only three church officers and five full members. By 1944, the building had been demolished.²⁴

The origin of the African Methodist Church on the site remains unclear. It is known that AME Churches were operating in 1828 at Malden, Gambia, Niagara and Fort Erie, and that by 1840 there were 12 churches in the Upper Canadian Conference with 256 members. At that time, James Harper was appointed to the London and West circuit. In 1853, membership continued to grow to the point where the circuits in Essex County were reorganized. The Colchester circuit included the area surrounding Amherstburg and Colchester, and the Sandwich circuit covered the territory around Dawn, Sandwich and Windsor. In 1856, in Chatham, many of the Canadian churches decided to sever ties with the AME, and the British Methodist Episcopal Church was formed.²⁵ However, not all AME Churches joined this new conference.²⁶ When exactly the AME Church in Puce River was established, and for how long, is not known.

Lewis and Mary Jackson

One of the most intriguing aspects of the cemetery located at Highway 42 and Puce Road is the one remaining, and stately, tombstone (which stands over five feet high). On one side it reads: "Lewis Jackson, Born A Slave In Kentucky, Died April 12 1897 Aged 62 Yrs." On another side it reads: "Mary, Wife of L. Jackson, Born A Slave Died June 1, 1896 Aged 69 Yrs." Lewis Jackson was a farmer and the Jacksons were members of the Puce River BME Church.²⁷ The Proceedings of the BME Conference held in June 1895 lists Lewis and Mary Jackson on the "Episcopal Fund Roll of Honor" (sic) for the Puce River Church, and also identifies Reverend Daniel Eady as Pastor.²⁸ In addition to Lewis Jackson, a John Jackson also settled in the Puce

River area. There is some speculation that Lewis, John and their brother Granville might have been the brothers of Henry Bibb.²⁹ John settled on Concession 5, Lot 7, in the Puce River area and received the deed to his land, for which he paid \$75 on February 12, 1862. Lewis settled on Lot 2, Concession 13, and received his deed on December 8, 1865. He paid \$70 for his farm.³⁰

Legacy of settlement

Over 60 Black families who had recently escaped from slavery were assisted by the Refugee Home Society in settling the Puce River area on good lands in Essex County. The Society offered these refugees a viable economic foothold and the possibility for true independence and self-sufficiency.³¹ Some families went on to do quite well, buying more land and becoming entrepreneurs. Manuel Eaton, for example, established a small factory where he made potash and pearl ash from the wood ashes that he collected. It is said that he had large barbecues on his grove on the Base Line Road. By 1891, he had acquired almost 125 acres.³² John Freeman Walls and his sons, who were also Society alumni (although members of the Baptist congregation), eventually owned well over 100 acres.³³ These Black settlers and their descendants made valuable contributions to the development of Canada. The Puce River Black community is an important example of early Black settlement in Ontario.

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¹ E.J. La Jeunesse, "Census of the Inhabitants of Detroit Sept. 1, 1750," cited in Carole Jenson, "History of the Negro Community in Essex County 1850-1860," MA Thesis, Department of History, University of Windsor, 1966, 1-2.

² David Botsford, "History of Coloured Folk in District Filled with Humour, Pathos and Industry," cited in Carole Jenson, "History of the Negro Community in Essex County," 2.

³ Fugitive Slave File 5, Fort Malden Museum, cited in Carole Jenson, "History of the Negro Community in Essex County," 8.

⁴ In 1793, Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe introduced anti-slavery legislation. However, it was not universally popular since some members of the Legislative Council owned slaves themselves. Nevertheless, *An Act to Prevent the Further Introduction of Slaves, and to Limit the Term of Contracts for Servitude within this Province*, was passed on July 9, 1793.

⁵ Malcolm Wallace, "Pioneers of the Scotch Settlement on the Shore of the Lake St. Clair," *Ontario History*, Vol. XLI, No. 4 (1949), 177, 195.

⁶ Ibid., 195.

⁷ Originally, there were two groups involved in wanting to settle fugitives on land: the Refugee Home Society, consisting of men from Detroit, and the Fugitives Union Society, which listed Josiah Henson of Dawn as president, George Williams and Henry Bibb of Sandwich as vice-president and secretary respectively, and Henry Brent as treasurer. The Refugee Home Society appears to have taken over the project by the convention of August 1852. Peter Carlesimo, "The Refugee Home Society: Its Origin, Operation and Results, 1851-1876," MA Thesis, Department of History, University of Windsor, 1973, 4, 7, 12, 19-20.

⁸ Ibid., Appendix C, 182-86.

⁹ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰ Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: A North-Side View of Slavery*, Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1969, 227.

¹¹ Peter Carlesimo, "The Refugee Home Society," 161.

¹² Ibid., 18.

¹³ Laura Haviland, *A Woman's Life-Work: Labors and Experiences of Laura S. Haviland*, Miami, Florida: Mnemosyne Publishing, 1969, 192-3.

¹⁴ Tenth, Eleventh, Twelfth, Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Fifteenth and Sixteenth *Annual Reports of the American Missionary Association*, New York: American Missionary Association, 1858, 1857, 1868, 1859, 1860, 1861 and 1862, 44, 36, 32, 33, 29, 29, 26.

¹⁵ Malcolm Wallace, "Pioneers of the Scotch Settlement on the Shore of the Lake St. Clair," 195.

¹⁶ Peter Carlesimo, "The Refugee Home Society," Appendix B, 178.

¹⁷ Ibid., 147-8.

¹⁸ Ibid.; *Puce Memorial Cemetery*, Windsor: Essex County Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society, 1985. On microfilm at the Ontario Archives, OGS Cemetery Records, Essex County, Maidstone Township MS451, Reel 45.

¹⁹ Laura Haviland, *A Woman's Life Work*, 196-7, 199-201. Haviland does not say exactly where she taught school and Sunday school, but she may have been at Puce River.

²⁰ People could have been expelled from churches at this time for reasons of lewdness or intemperance.

²¹ Thirteenth and Sixteenth *Annual Reports of the American Missionary Association*, New York: American Missionary Association, 1859, 1862, 33, 26-7.

²² *Minutes of the Thirteenth Session of the Annual Conference of the British Methodist Episcopal Church held in the Town of Windsor, Province of Ont., Dominion of Canada, May 29th to June 6th*, St. Catharines: R.R. Disney and E.S. Leavenworth's Book & Job Printing, 1869, 12, BME Church of Canada fonds on microfilm, 96.031C, reel #2, United Church Archives, Victoria University (University of Toronto).

²³ Deed #1503 Maidstone, registered July 30, 1872, provided by the Lakeshore Black Heritage Committee. Glenn, Franklin and Cannaday were all settlers of the Refugee Home Society. See Peter Carlesimo, "The Refugee Home Society," Appendix B.

²⁴ *Journal and Proceedings of the 73rd Annual Conference held at Niagara Falls, Ont. June 25th-July 1st, 1929* and *Minutes and Proceedings of the Ontario Annual Conference of the British Methodist Episcopal Church of Canada. Eighty-Eighth Session, June 27-July 3, 1944*, BME Church of Canada fonds on microfilm, 96.031C, reel #2

²⁵ The BME in Canada was created because many of the Canadian Black clergymen were fugitive slaves and they were unable to travel safely to AME conferences in the United States. They also wished to demonstrate their allegiance to Queen Victoria and the British government for harbouring fugitive slaves during the tumultuous years prior to the American Civil War.

²⁶ Daniel A. Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, Vol. 1, New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968 (orig. pub. 1891) 57, 117, 128-29, 144-45 and Chapter XXIX; Dorothy Shadd Shreve, *The AfriCanadian Church: A Stabilizer*, Jordan Station, Ont: Paideia Press, 1983, 78-81.

²⁷ Census of Canada for Maidstone Township for the years 1861 (no listing), 1871, 1881, and 1891. Schedule C, Deaths, Essex County, Maidstone Township, Registration #008256 April 17, 1897 and #007649 June 3, 1896. *The Windsor Evening Record*. *Chatham Daily Planet*.

The *Plaindealer*, issues dated 1889-1893 Detroit.

The BME Church Annual Conference Minutes 1869-1897.

Christian Recorder newspaper, organ of the AME Church in the United States on the Accessible Archives website at www.accessible.com. *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*.

In 1973, Peter Carlesimo interviewed Mrs. Florence Holland, who concurred but stated that he was a member of the BME Church.

²⁸ Journal of Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth, Fortieth and Forty-First Annual Sessions of the British Methodist Episcopal Church, 1895, 1896 and 1897 BME Church of Canada fonds on microfilm, 96.031C, reel #2; The Roll of Honor is discussed in the 32nd Session of the BME Church Conference Minutes. The Roll of Honor was formed for members to pay 25 cents annually for the support of the superintendent of the BME Church. The names of all contributors would be printed in the Annual Conference Proceedings. In 1895, Lewis paid 25 cents and Mary paid a total of 75 cents, and the following year Lewis, now a widower, paid his annual 25 cents. In 1897, neither Jackson was on the Roll of Honor because both were then deceased.

²⁹ Dr. Afua Cooper, noted Henry Bibb scholar, contends that Lewis Jackson may, in fact, have been a brother of Bibb. Lewis Jackson escaped slavery and found his way to Windsor with his two brothers Granville and John in September 1852. In his newspaper, the *Voice of the Fugitive*, Henry Bibb recounted the story of how he met his brothers, Granville, John and Lewis, by chance on the docks of the Detroit River. The brothers were also reunited with their mother, Mildred Jackson, who Bibb had rescued from slavery some years earlier. According to Cooper, speculation about what happened to the brothers exists, but people assume that their last name was also Bibb, when, in fact, it may have been Jackson, the same as that of their mother or it may also have been some other last name.

³⁰ Peter Carlesimo, "The Refugee Home Society," Appendix B, 177, 180.

³¹ The Refugee Home Society came under a good deal of criticism during its operation, much of this emanating from Samuel Ringgold Ward and Mary Ann Shadd in the *Provincial Freeman* newspaper. One of their criticisms was that only landless fugitive slaves could be a part of the settlements, meaning that industrious Black settlers who could take leadership roles were denied access. Shadd and Ward also felt that this was another "begging" scheme in which money was being solicited by mischaracterizing the nature of the settlers as poor, destitute ex-slaves. Two sources that deal with this subject are William H. and Jane Pease, *Black Utopia: Negro Communal Experiments in America*, Madison, Wisconsin: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1963, Chapter 6 and Peter Carlesimo, "Refugee Home Society," especially chapters II and III.

³² Malcolm Wallace, "Pioneers of the Scotch Settlement," 195; Assessment Roll, Essex County, Maidstone Township, 1891.

³³ *Ibid.*