

On Thursday, November 27, 2008, the Ontario Heritage Trust and the Chatham-Kent Black Historical Society unveiled a provincial plaque at the W.I.S.H. Centre in Chatham, Ontario, to commemorate the Provincial Freeman.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

THE PROVINCIAL FREEMAN

First published in 1853 in Windsor and later in Toronto and Chatham, the *Provincial Freeman* newspaper catered to abolitionists in British North America and the Northern United States. Its chief editor was Mary Ann Shadd, an African-American emigrant who arrived in Canada West in 1851. Guided by Shadd's commitment to anti-slavery issues, the paper advocated that "Self-reliance is the true road to independence". The *Provincial Freeman* championed temperance, social reform and African-American emigration to British North America, where slavery was outlawed in 1833. Well-known abolitionists such as Samuel Ringgold Ward, William P. Newman, H. Ford Douglass and Martin Delany, as well as siblings Isaac and Amelia Shadd, also lent their editorial voices to the paper during its run. Published until 1860, the paper successfully promoted Black political discourse and revealed the degree to which middle-class African-Canadian women participated in the public sphere.

LE JOURNAL PROVINCIAL FREEMAN

Publié pour la première fois en 1853 à Windsor, puis plus tard à Toronto et à Chatham, le journal *Provincial Freeman* s'adressait aux abolitionnistes de l'Amérique du Nord britannique et du Nord des États-Unis. Sa rédactrice en chef était Mary Ann Shadd, une émigrante afro-américaine arrivée dans le Canada-Ouest en 1851. Guidé par l'engagement de Mary Shadd en matière de lutte contre l'esclavage, la devise du journal était « L'autonomie constitue la voie royale vers l'indépendance ». Le journal *Provincial Freeman* prônait la tempérance, la réforme sociale et l'émigration afro-américaine vers l'Amérique du Nord britannique, où l'esclavage fut interdit en 1833. Des abolitionnistes de renom, tels que Samuel Ringgold Ward, William P. Newman, H. Ford Douglass et Martin Delany, ainsi qu'Isaac et Amelia Shadd (frère et sœur), contribuèrent à la rédaction des éditoriaux. Publié jusqu'en 1860, le journal assura la promotion du discours politique noir et révéla l'importance

l'importance de la contribution des femmes afro-canadiennes des classes moyennes à la sphère publique.

Historical background

First issued in 1853 in Windsor, Ontario (then Canada West), the *Provincial Freeman* was for its time an average sized broadsheet that catered to abolitionists in British North America and the Northern United States. The newspaper advocated that “Self-reliance is the true road to independence” – the motto contained within its masthead. Its chief editor was Mary Ann Shadd, an African-American émigré who first arrived in Canada West in 1851. Guided by Shadd’s commitment to anti-slavery issues, the *Provincial Freeman* championed temperance, social reform and African-American emigration to British North America, which had outlawed slavery in 1833. Critical of the growth of racially-segregated communities in Canada West, the *Provincial Freeman* also advocated African-American integration into white society. During the 1850s, Shadd’s newspaper nurtured readerships throughout Canada West, as well as in New York State, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio. The paper was, and is still considered, a fine example of the ways Black voices in Canada West contributed to public discourse during the 40-year period prior to the American Civil War (1861-65).

To appreciate the social outlook and historical significance of the *Provincial Freeman* it is necessary to understand Mary Ann Shadd’s background and personal beliefs. Born in the state of Delaware in 1823 to free Black parents of mixed descent, Shadd grew up in a literate, politically active and financially secure family. Her father, Abraham, was a successful shoemaker who participated regularly in abolitionist politics. He was a leader of the Black convention movement of the 1830s, a series of conventions organized by free Blacks to address their status and future in America. Although they were fervent anti-colonialists,¹ Shadd and others began to discuss the viability of African-American emigration to Canada West. After having relocated his family in southeastern Pennsylvania in 1833, Abraham Shadd also assisted numerous escaped slaves headed for Canada, while becoming an influential voice in the Black political community of Philadelphia. It was thus during her formative years that Mary Ann Shadd became accustomed to the politics of the anti-slavery movement and the prospect of African-American community development outside the United States. As a teenager in Pennsylvania, Mary Ann also received a classical education in a Quaker school run by Miss Phoebe Darlington.²

In her twenties, Mary Ann Shadd taught in African-American schools in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York City and contributed to numerous abolitionist publications. By 1851, her attention shifted northward. While attending the North American Convention of Coloured People in Toronto that fall, Shadd was persuaded by convention leader Henry Bibb to set up a

school in his area. Consequently, she moved north and founded a school in Windsor, Canada West. Quickly, Shadd became a proponent of her adopted home and believed that the road to fruition for African-Americans was dependent upon emigration to Canada and participation in Canadian public life. Moreover, where a majority of Black American abolitionists regarded the United States as the spiritual and eternal home of the African-American nation, Shadd encouraged Black Americans to rescind their devotion to the United States for a more promising future north of the border. Her laudatory language and enthusiasm for Canadian society was expressed in her published handbook, *A Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West*. Unfortunately, she became embroiled in a controversy with Henry and Mary Bibb, who owned and operated the Sandwich-based newspaper, *The Voice of the Fugitive*. Shadd opposed separate schools for Black children, in contrast to the Bibbs, and this led to a nasty dispute that spilled onto the pages of their newspaper. Bibb also wrote that Shadd's opinions and behaviour were unbecoming of her status as a woman. The controversy led to her firing by the American Missionary Association, which was funding her school. However, Bibb's use of his newspaper to attack Shadd led in part to the establishment of the *Provincial Freeman*.

The first issue of the *Provincial Freeman* was printed in March 1853. Published in Windsor, Canada West, the inaugural edition was a prototype designed to attract subscribers and advertisers. Future editions, readers learned, would be published weekly and based out of either Toronto or London.

Although Shadd was the chief overseer of the paper, her name did not appear prominently in the first edition. Instead, to conceal the fact that the publication had a woman at its helm, articles written by Shadd appeared anonymously. The paper listed Samuel Ringgold Ward, a renowned orator and escaped slave living in Toronto, as the editor. Ward's editorial noted that the paper would be non-denominational, independent of party politics and concerned with anti-slavery issues. The primary motive of the *Provincial Freeman*, Ward noted, was to endorse African-American emigration to Canada. The promotion of Canada as a refuge for Black Americans was a dominant theme of the paper over the course of its existence.

After having secured financial investment, as well as subscribers' support, the *Provincial Freeman* reappeared in March 1854, in Toronto. While Ward remained listed as the editor, Shadd's ideas and political beliefs steered the direction of the paper. As chief operator of the *Provincial Freeman*, Shadd welcomed the assistance of John Dick, an English abolitionist living in Toronto who had knowledge of the newspaper trade. Together, Shadd, Dick, and increasingly less so, Ward, who became a success on the British lecture circuit, developed the *Provincial Freeman* into a weekly publication. Considering that Henry Bibb's *The Voice of the Fugitive* had recently folded due to financial difficulties, largely brought on by a fire that burnt down his offices the previous year, Shadd's paper filled an important void in Canada West. By 1854, the *Provincial Freeman* was the sole homegrown newspaper aimed at African-Americans living north of the

border. Through the publication of articles and poetry that championed the perceived equality of British North American society, Shadd's publication not only strengthened the communal ties of the growing Black Canadian population, but also gave credence to the promise of a foreign land that ostensibly regarded character rather than skin colour as an effective means by which to judge people.

In addition to endorsing British North America as a "land of impartial laws" possessing a "Constitution having no distinctions of color [sic]," the *Provincial Freeman* regularly promoted racial advancement through self-reliance and hard work. Significantly, Shadd, and other contributors to the paper, argued that the realization of African-Americans as successful entrepreneurs, farmers and citizens depended upon integration into the Canadian economy and political life. Troubled with advocacy groups, which helped establish Black settlements, such as Buxton and Wilberforce, the *Provincial Freeman* routinely criticized the growth of segregated African-American communities in Canada West. Its efforts to encourage Black integration into the economy included publishing informative charts and graphs that outlined where and for what prices farmers could sell their produce and the typical wages that skilled and unskilled Black workers could expect.

Although concern for African-American assimilation into Canadian life remained a dominant theme of the paper, the *Provincial Freeman* also included reports and editorials on countless other topics. The June 3, 1854, edition, for instance, contained articles on the prohibition movement, the prospect of coal harvesting in Canada West, the natural wonders of the United States, the political situation in Hungary, as well as pieces on escaped slaves in Boston and "Negrophobia in St. Catharines." The same edition featured poetry, a short story about a Russian nobleman, weather forecasts and obituaries. Moreover, the *Provincial Freeman* normally included numerous advertisements promoting dry goods stores, booksellers, clothing stores, hairdressers, barristers and doctors. As a public forum for readers both Black and white, the paper's appeal went beyond its concern with racial affairs. It was clearly a medium by which women's issues were voiced, particularly those of Black women. The views and activities of prominent suffragists and women's rights advocates like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were regularly featured,³ as were the particular concerns and achievements of African-American women in Canada and the United States.

For many readers, the *Provincial Freeman* provided a forum where they could publicly express their views. The paper featured readers' letters regarding various issues on a weekly basis. Often, these letters celebrated the efforts of the editors. One such letter, from a former slave, Mrs. N.D. Hopewell, asked poignantly, "Will you permit a woman to address a few lines ... to her many friends in the United States?"⁴ She gave a brief account of her life as a free person who 'owned' herself and her pen. Others, including a September 1854 letter that elucidated the situation of Blacks in St. Catharines, responded to previously published articles. At times,

published letters disagreed with the claims of the *Provincial Freeman*. A January 1855 letter, for instance, argued against African-American emigration to Canada because “there is no prejudice in the United States against color [sic].” Complementing readers’ responses were announcements from American newspaper vendors about new subscribers to the *Provincial Freeman* in the northern United States. Such notices gave readers the impression that the paper was not only a Canadian publication, but a transnational newspaper that encouraged public dialogue on the issues of racism, anti-slavery and Black emigration to Canada.

Notwithstanding a growing readership, the *Provincial Freeman*, as was the case with so many 19th-century newspapers, experienced its share of financial difficulties. After almost a year and a half in Toronto, Shadd decided to move the paper’s operations to Chatham, Canada West, a town east of Windsor. Shadd believed that the growing Black population of the area, which comprised 5,000 people by 1861,⁵ would alleviate her financial troubles through increased subscription. In Chatham, under the editorship of Baptist minister, William P. Newman, the *Provincial Freeman* continued to advertise local stores and services, broadcast readers’ letters, publish North American as well as international news, and, of course, argue for the abolition of slavery and African-American emigration to Canada. For another five years, the *Provincial Freeman* remained the preeminent Canadian newspaper oriented to an emigrant African-American readership. By 1856, Isaac Shadd, brother of Mary Ann, took over its daily management, with the help of sister Amelia C. Shadd, Amelia Freeman Shadd (Isaac’s wife),⁶ abolitionists H. Ford Douglas and Louis Patterson, all of whom contributed articles or editorial material at various times.

The paper collapsed in 1860 for a number of reasons, the most significant of which was economic. Chatham, as well as much of Canada West, suffered a severe depression in 1857, which continued to plague the town for years to come. The construction industry, which employed many Black men in the Chatham area, declined significantly. As numerous Black businesses closed, the *Provincial Freeman* received fewer advertisements and, in time, fewer subscriptions. The final extant copy of the newspaper is dated June 1859. Ads for the *Provincial Freeman* carried in the *Weekly Anglo-African*, a New York publication, ceased in the summer of 1860.

The short life of the *Provincial Freeman* does not diminish its significance as an historic publication. For over six years, the paper fostered African-American dialogue in Canada West. As Mary Ann Shadd’s creation, the *Provincial Freeman* also reveals the degree to which middle-class Black women participated in the public sphere. In terms of Ontario’s past, Shadd’s newspaper confirms the significance of Canada West as an important and, indeed, celebrated destination for African-Americans during the years leading up to the American Civil War.



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¹ Anti-colonizationists were Blacks who believed that America was their home and that they were entitled to remain just as any other group. They felt that the fight against slavery was best conducted at home in the United States. These people advocated primarily against emigration to Africa and the Caribbean, although Canada was also included.

² Sarah Cary Evans, "Mrs. Mary Ann Shadd Cary, 1823-1893," in *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction*," Hallie Q. Brown, ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988 (first published 1926), 92. Evans wrote this account about her mother, Mary Ann Shadd Cary. However, historian Jane Rhodes found no evidence of a Quaker school run by Miss Darlington. More research is required to confirm.

³ Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) was a Quaker minister, abolitionist and early women's rights advocate. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) was a social activist and leading figure in the women's movement. They organized the first women's rights convention in 1848 in Seneca Falls, NY, and fought for equal rights and suffrage for women throughout their lives.

⁴ *Provincial Freeman*, 6 October 1855.

⁵ Michael Wayne, "The Black Population of Canada West on the Eve of the American Civil War: A Reassessment Based on the Manuscript Census of 1861," *Social History*, Volume XXVIII No. 56 (November 1995), 483. The Black communities of Dawn, Chatham and the Elgin Settlement in Kent County created the largest African Canadian population, at 4,736, of any county in the province.

⁶ Amelia C. Shadd was Mary Ann's sister. Amelia Freeman Shadd was Isaac's new bride. Amelia Freeman had been invited to Chatham to teach a school for Black children and after her marriage to Isaac Shadd in 1856, she became involved in the paper as well.