

Buxton Historical Society
Research Materials

The Refugees From Slavery in Canada West
Report to the Freedmen's Inquiry Commission
By: S.G. Howe

PREFACE - 1863

A. Purpose of report to ascertain if blacks can take care of themselves if / when freed. Information in report is based on the investigation of the 20,000 blacks presently residing in Canada.

B. Common belief that the black refugees in Canada are "picked men", proof of their superiority being their escape and the ordinary black may not be able to care for themselves. Disputes this belief:

1. vast regions of slavery territory which would be near impossible to reach Canada
2. a person who may lack the courage to runaway, can still possess ability to provide for themselves
3. restrained from escape by moral qualities
 - a. love their family, formed personal attachments to their masters family
 - b. sense of loyalty and cannot betray a trust
 - c. religious obligation having been taught distorted Scripture to make them believe it would be a sin to escape
 - d. strong belief that freedom will eventually come to them

C. Based on fair representation of black population of free and slave from border and middle states the Canadian refugees are:

1. earning a living and buying property
2. respect and marry women and send their children to school
3. build churches and improve in manners/morals

Not because they are "picked men" but because they are FREE MEN

"When I was a slave, I spake as a slave, I understood as a slave, I thought as a slave; but when I became a free man, I put away slavish things."

FREEDMEN'S INQUIRY COMMISSION

Report to the Secretary of War

A. Fact that black refugees have been living in Canada with all the rights and privileges of British Subjects is too important to overlook by a committee into the abilities of black people recently freed in the United States.

1. Blacks have for many years lived in Canada in the same conditions as the newly freed slaves are in, with an unsympathizing population regardless of legal protection.
2. Visited large towns where the black population exist in considerable numbers

- St. Catherine's
- Hamilton
- London
- Toronto
- Chatham
- Buxton
- Windsor
- Malden
- Colchester

3. Spoke with the city officials (such as mayors, jailers, sheriffs), clergy, and schoolmasters of these cities and with a great many black people at their homes or place of business. Testimonies were taken word for word, by peoples not acquainted with each other.

William Grose testimony : I served 25 years in slavery and about 5 I have been free. I feel now like a man, while before I felt more as though I ere but a brute. When in the United States, if a white man spoke to me, I would feel frightened, whether I were in the right or wrong; but now it is quite a different thing: if a white man speaks to me, I can look him right in the eyes, - if he were to insult me, I could give him an answer. I have the rights and privileges of any other man."

4. Blacks in the south have motives for lying which do not affect those in Canada

"A man can get more information in Canada about slavery, than he can in the South. There I would have told you to ask the master, because I would have been afraid to trust a white man; I would have been afraid that you would tell my master... A colored man tells the truth here, -there he is afraid to."
(from The Refugee or Narratives of Fugitive Slave in Canada, by Benjamin Drew)

I. HISTORY

A. Slavery in Canada

1. Native Americans had long accepted the slavery system
2. French tolerated the "***Institution***"
3. when England seized Canada they tolerated and encouraged slavery (in the 30th year of George III of England) "***for encouraging new settlers in His Majesty's Colonies and Plantations in North America.***" Ironically at this time, blacks were imported as slaves into Canada and those who escaped fled into the United States to enjoy freedom. Canadian Provincial Government declared on July 9, 1793:
 - a. ACT it is unjust for a people who are free to encourage slavery and expedient to abolish slavery gradually "***without violating private property***", etc. therefore the authority "***to grant license for importing Negroes into this Province is repealed***"
 - 2nd Section - Nothing in the Act extends to previous contracts.
 - b. the abolition of slavery in all British colonies in 1833 freed all slaves born prior to July 1793, slavery legally existed in Canada several years after it had been abolished in several states
 - Massachusetts 1780
 - New Hampshire 1792
 - New York 1799

- New Jersey 1820
 - virtually abolished in all northern states before 1830
- c. by common practice slavery had virtually ended in Canada by the 1800's
- B. Initially the freedom of slaves in Canada didn't impact the U.S.; rumour gradually spread to the slaves in the Southern States that far away under the "north star" there was a land where the law declared all men free and the government enforced the law.
1. Rumours were circulated regarding Canada to the slaves in an attempt to frighten them from running away (that geese would peck your eyes out or frozen tundra where nothing would grow, etc.). As the rumour of freedom spread, the number of fugitives increased; the underground railroad was soon formed from the huts of slaves to houses of Good Samaritans in the north.
 2. The slaves instinctively felt the enemies of the United States were friends of the slaves. In 1826 as a result of the great loss of property (fugitive slaves) the U.S. Secretary of State (Mr. Clay) entered into negotiations with Mexico and the British Government (re: Canada) for the return of 'property'.
 - a. U.S. House resolution *"requesting the President to open negotiations with the British government in the view to obtain an arrangement whereby fugitive slaves, have taken refuge in the Canadian Provinces if that government, may be surrendered by the functionaries thereof, to their masters, upon making satisfactory proof of their ownership of said slaves."*
 - b. British Lord Aberdeen insisted 1828 *"that the law of Parliament gave freedom to every slave who effected his landing upon British ground."*
 3. Census reports indicate the decline of black population in the northern states and although slavery was abolished in these states, legislation did not give blacks social rights.
 - a. blacks who had never been slaves but born of slaves, were not secure due to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

II. PHYSICAL CONDITION

- A. The report opinion is that people of mixed heritage produce weaker people, lacking the stamina and health of *"pure blood lines"* which the writers of this report contend is indicated by census figures.
1. Reports that mulattos are not a race, but a breed, that was produced and modified as the market for slaves demanded - *"premium set on hybrids"*
 - a. 1800 slave black population 1,002,798 whom 109,194 were free and 1860 slave black population 4,435,709 of whom 482,122 were free
 - b. the doctors of the 1850's believed mulattos were more likely to develop diseases; such as tubercular disposition of the stomach and intestines, rheumatism, or lung disease
 2. Suggest that the African Americans in the U.S. would have become extinct (due to the cold) if not for the *"infusions"* of white blood
 - a. interpretation of various northern city statistics reports indicate that African heritage populations have more deaths yearly than births
 - b. comparisons to the climates of North America and Africa are made with regard to the environmental effects to natural evolution

c. population statistics of the (supervised and assisted) Liberian and Haiti colonies are sited showing a general decrease in growth

B. The Canadian experiment is used to theorize about mixed marriages or the 'Amalgamation Of Races'.

1. In the early years emigration were mostly male, as it wasn't as easy for slave women to escape bondage, therefore marriage or open cohabitation between black men and white women wasn't uncommon; marriages are mostly with "***Irish, or other foreign women***"

2. When social oppression or forces of slavery was not an immediate issue, blacks "***true to human instincts***" were drawn together by "***more natural affinities than existed between them and another race.***"

Bishop Green, a colored man of the Methodist Episcopal Church, says: - "There is not much intermarriage between the colors. But our people have too much good sense to think a white woman is degrade because she marries a black man..... If the man is an upright man and the woman is an upright woman, they treat them as if they were both colored; they have sociability among them..... The young men of our community are of the opinion that they can find as good wives among their own class as can be found any where, and you can't find them offering to marry a white woman...."

Says John Kinney, a very intelligent man, - "The majority of the colored people don't like the intermarriage of colored and white people. I want a woman I am not ashamed to go into the street or into company with, and that people won't make remarks about. It don't amount to any thing, I know, but it hurts a man's feelings."

III. MATERIAL CONDITION

A. In regard to those who question the blacks ability to work and support himself and family the following examples are given:

1. In Southern States thousands of slave owners had such faith in blacks ability that they have the blacks run their business' directing field hands or run mills, send them to market to sell garden stuff or livestock.

2. In Northern States the population of free blacks is approx. 500,000 who are contributing to the prosperity of their communities and require less assistance than white European immigrants.

"Those in the Free States, in spite of blind and bitter prejudice, are thriving; as the abundant testimony gathered by your Commission, will prove.

Still, many people are made to believe that the Negro is too lazy to work, except under compulsion. To such, the Canadian experiment may furnish another line and percept.

Let it be borne in mind, however, that the refugees find no other advantage in Canada except freedom and protection by the laws. In all respects, they labor under very great disadvantages. Chiefest is that of Climate."

B. In regard to Canadian racial prejudice of "***whites against the Negroes***" several examples are given; demeaning behaviour is not distinguished by social class however violent behaviour is more often exhibited by the "***lower classes***".

"It would be easy to show how the natural sympathy and compassion which is felt for exiles on their first arrival by all, and which continues to be felt by people of Christian culture, is converted into antipathy and animosity among the vulgar."

"I find more prejudice here than I did in New York State. When I was at home, I could go anywhere; but here, my goodness! you get an insult on every side. But the colored people have kept their rights before the law; that is the only thing that has kept me here." (black woman in St. Catharine's)

"There is a mean prejudice here that is not to be found in the States, though Northern States are pretty bad." (Dr. Jones, black man, in London)

"I am sorry that any persons belonging to the Church of England are so narrow minded as to suppose their children will be injured because there are a few colored persons in the same school; but of course we cannot change our principle and the young ladies must leave." (response made to parents who protested black students by a Hamilton minister.)

1. Several schools were interviewed with headmasters giving mixed opinions in regard to segregation.
2. Toronto and Hamilton are noted on several occasions as being the most liberal and tolerant communities.

C. With very few exceptions the general populace of Canadians comment that the blacks who sought refuge in Canada have an admirable disposition to work.

1. In the places where refugees are free to live as they choose, their homes are tidy, with gardens, ***"decencies of life are well observed"***, children are dressed well, and plentiful table.

"One thing about the colored people here is quite remarkable; they never beg. They only ask for work; and when they get work, if they have borrowed any money, they will come back and pay it - I think I never knew white men to do." (Hon. Geo. Brown, M.P. Toronto)

"The great mass of the colored people of Canada have been thrown entirely on their own resources; and their history is generally like that of a fugitive whom we met, who told us on his arrival, he had to borrow twenty five cents to buy an axe, and from that day forward had worked on without asking favors, until he had become independent and comfortable."

"Blacks don't steal any more than whites, the whites often get clear by saddling their sins on the backs of the "darkies"."

D. Reports are given of the segregated settlements which were developed for black refugees, called "colonists".

1. The major colonies were Elgin Settlement, at Buxton; Dawn Settlement; at Dresden; and the Refugees Home, at Windsor.
2. The attempts to organize blacks in colonies was of less interest to the United States than the abilities of refugees to maintain themselves without aid.
 - a. blacks natural affinities are strong enough to become members of a community without ***"artificial encouragement"***
 - b. colonies prolong dependence and ***"doesn't convert men into self-reliant individuals, as the rude struggle with difficulties must personally be overcome"***
 1. Buxton worthy of more attention than records able to spend
 2. Established mechanics, plasters, blacksmiths, gunsmiths, and sailors (on the Great Lakes) are cited as occupations held by black refugees.

IV. INTELLECTUAL AND MORAL CONDITION

(intellectual)

A. As the black fugitives who entered Canada very little schooling (if Northern) or none whatsoever (if Southern), the number of adults who have learned to read and write is remarkable and show a high regard for instruction by their priority to obtain a good education for their children.

1. Based on the data available, the committee concluded that the number of black Canadian scholars was proportionately the same as whites and the average attendance for both races was basically the same (70%).
 - a. Principal McCullum of Hamilton reported black children equal to white children in "**mental attainment**", conduct and discipline
 - b. Principal Sinclair of Chatham reported black and white children on the whole learn the same; blacks learn material faster but require more reviews
 - c. Dr. McCaul of Toronto University reported several incidents of academic excellence by black scholars, including an occasion when a student received double honours for having 'double -firsts' in the subjects of mathematics and classics (which had only happened three times since the University opened 20 years earlier)
2. Observations in regard to segregated and mixed educational institutions were that the black children attending mixed schools did not differ in their general appearance, academics or behaviour from the white children, however black children who attended segregated schools weren't as tidy in appearance and less advanced in studies.
 - a. many communities had separate schools and churches due to black request
3. Several generations removed from the "**depressing influences**" of slavery and social ostracism are needed before the "**question of mental equality**" can be answered.

(moral)

B. The Provincial Penitentiary at Kingston (established in the 1830's) has only ever had 375 black persons committed for crimes; presently (1865) there are 64 inmates and when averaged by estimating the black population at 15,000 is 1/238 black people.

"I regard the colored people of Canada as a useful class of citizens. All their vice grown out of their former condition of slavery. Thieving is natural to them. But one thing you must bear in mind; it will not do to trust the criminal statistics, for if a man with black man in put into the box (accused), it is almost tantamount to conviction." (Hon. George Brown, M.P.)

"The owner in his daily practice, violates the most sacred right of property, by taking the slaves labor without pay; and the slave imitates him by violating the less sacred right of property, in stealing what he can lay his hands on. The fact that there is any honesty at all left among them is proof of the natural strength of their moral character.....slaves come to Canada with these habits, which seem to have been made a part of their very nature by generations of servitude; and yet they rapidly lay them aside."

(religion)

C. Slaveholders used the virtues of the blacks to hold them in bondage, masters ('like the devil') knew how to quote scripture to make slavery seem justified and violated the spirit of true religion.

1. Slave owners knew that the religious instincts of the slaves could not be suppressed so they perverted religion to not affect the market value of the person.
 - a. the lifestyle a slave was forced to live to survive prevented a true understanding of morals from developing or rule his/her life
 - b. assertion have been made about the 'immoral' lives of slaves, but "*a can fountain rise no higher than its source*"
 - c. difficult/impossible for the average person to form deeper spirituality when they person owns nothing - not his time, children or even himself
 - d. several black men explained they had shied from marriage when they were slaves because they had "*no security against forcible violation of their domestic honor*"
2. Effect of religious freedom on Canadian refugees:

"Love of God manifests itself less in care about themselves, and anxiety about their own future condition, and more in care for others. Their piety is less nasal, and more practical....They profess religion less, and practice it more."

D. Gentle disposition is among the moral qualities strongly exhibited by the black refugees through forgiving tempers and sincere affection.

1. Several examples are given of black people who witnessed or suffered indignities but they were not vengeful.
2. Many black persons recalled past kindnesses and would like to return to their former homes - but not as slaves.

V. CONCLUSION

"Finally, the lesson taught by this and other emigrations is, that the Negro does best when left alone, and we must beware all attempts to prolong his servitude, even under the pretext of caring for him. The white man has tried taking care of the Negro, by slavery, by apprenticeship, by colonization, and has failed disastrously in all; now let the Negro try to take care of himself. For as all the blood and tears in this revolutionary struggle (Civil War) will be held cheap, if they reestablish our Union in universal freedom, so all the suffering and misery which this people may suffer in their efforts for self-guidance and support will be held cheap, if they bring about emancipation from the control of the whites."