

# BABY STEPS TO FREEDOM



# *Baby Steps To Freedom*

*Was created exclusively for*

*Buxton National Historic Site & Museum*

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Mama said I was born way down in Perry County Missouri. She and Daddy were slaves there, so when I was born, I was a slave too. That means we were all the property of another man. Mama called that man her master. She said some slaves had cruel masters who made them work from the time the sun came up until it went down again. Sometimes they were whipped if their master didn't think they were working hard enough.

Mama said she was born a slave in Maryland. When she was still young, she moved with her master to Missouri. She said her master had owned her mother and she had never been owned by anyone but him. Mama said he was a kind man. She had never seen a slave get beaten. She knew that sometimes slaves were sold away from their families, but she had never seen it happen, to any slaves she knew.

Mama said she was never sent to school. Her master's daughter had taught her to read and spell some, but they would not teach her to write. She was allowed to go where she wanted, when she wasn't working, as long as she stayed close to home. Mama said we lived in a comfortable hut and that her master made sure we always had enough to eat and enough clothes. She said she was treated real good, but still, she sometimes thought she would like to be as free as the white people were. Sometimes when she was angry, she told them that they had no more business with her than she had with them. This didn't make her feel free, but after she told them, she was not so angry.



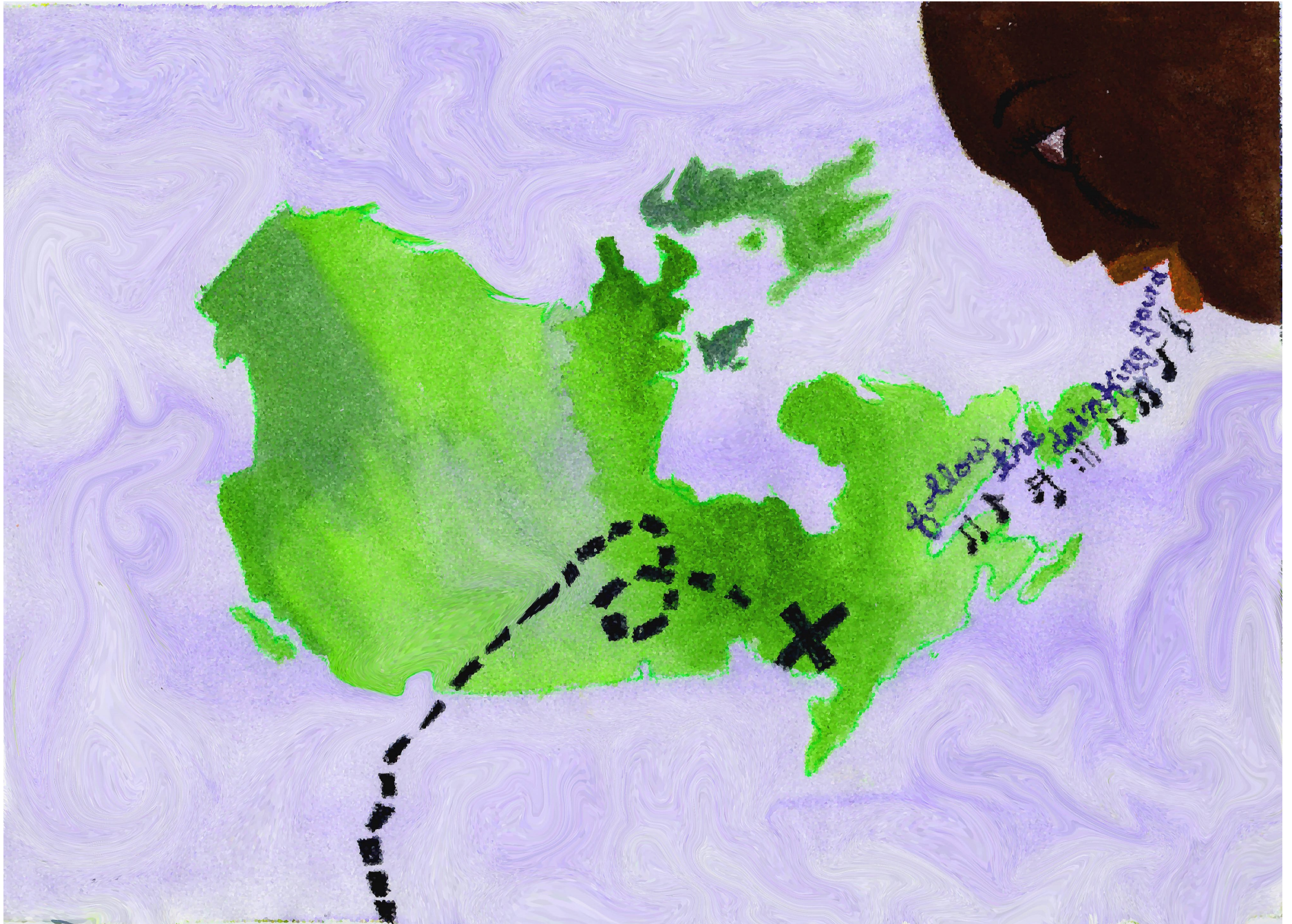
Mama and Daddy liked going to camp meetings. They liked to sing and talk to all the other slaves at the meetings. Sometimes slaves got married at those camp meetings, by jumping over a broom together in front of all their friends. Sometimes at the meetings, they heard about other slaves who had run away from their masters. They talked about Queen Victoria's land, where there were no slaves. When they reached that place, everyone was free. It was in the north, and it was called Canada. They sang songs that had secret messages about how to get to freedom. They talked about other things that helped runaways on their journey to freedom.

Mama said that at one of those meetings, they learned of a person about thirty miles away who helped runaway slaves on their journey to freedom.



Mama said Daddy always talked about going to Canada. He had wanted to be free from when he was a small boy. Mama said she didn't want to be free, except when she got angry. She liked her master and her home. Mama said when I was born she did not get to look after me. She had to work while her master's family looked after me. She said Daddy was afraid that some day we would be sold down the river to New Orleans. She said Daddy talked more and more about running away to freedom after I was born. He saw some of the small boys in the neighbourhood going to work twenty miles from home. The masters were paid for the boys work. Daddy did not want to see me sent to work away from home. He did not want me to grow up without learning to read and write. He wanted me to go to school.

Mama said that one day a young man, one of her master's relatives, told her she should leave and go to Canada. The young man did not want me to be brought up as a slave. He was afraid that our master who was an old gentleman would die and we would be sold to someone else. He was afraid that I might not be treated as kindly as Mama was, as I grew up. So when I was seventeen months old, Mama finally told Daddy she was ready to run away to freedom.

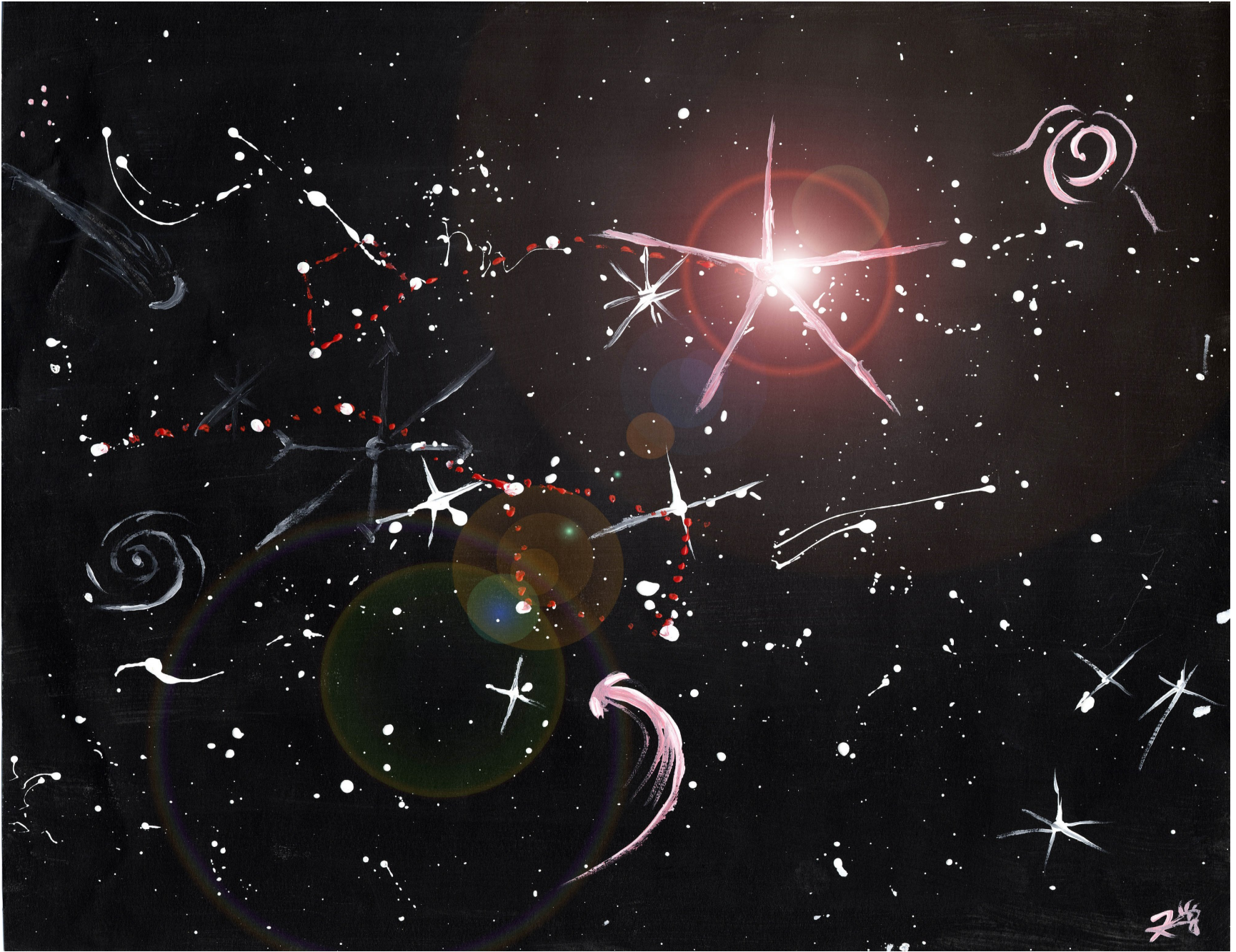






Mama said we were going to a camp meeting. Mama and Daddy had decided to run, when they went to that meeting. Our master knew we were going to the camp meeting. He trusted Mama and Daddy and never suspected that we would want to leave. They knew the camp meeting was a good time to leave because we wouldn't be missed for a couple of days. Mama said she had prepared for leaving by packing extra food for our journey. She said they waited until the meeting started.

She woke me up, and got me dressed in all my clothes. She picked me up and Daddy tied me in a blanket around her back. Mama said we were going to make this into a long camp meeting. She gathered together the food she had packed, and Daddy wrapped it in a blanket to carry with us. Then he wrapped the blanket around a long stick so he could carry it over his shoulder. Mama said that Daddy rubbed hot peppers she had brought from the garden all over the bottoms of their shoes. She said he did this so that if the master decided to get dogs to search for us, they would not be able to follow our scent. It was dark when we left, so we weren't missed right away. Mama said I must be very quiet and not make a sound. We crept away from the camp, and Mama and Daddy ran towards the woods. I was on Mama's back.



I was only 17 months old, but Mama said I could walk for a little while without getting too tired, but she said Daddy usually carried me. Sometimes he would put me in a blanket and tie it on Mama's back and I would sleep while they walked. I don't remember our journey to freedom, but Mama said we walked all night and part of the next day before we found the house of the man who helped runaways. Mama said this man was a good friend to runaway slaves and that he hid us for many days, until they had stopped searching for us. Then he sent us on our way with some food, and directions to another house where we would be welcomed and helped.

She said we usually traveled at night and found a safe place to sleep in the woods during the day. She said Daddy would look up into the night sky and find the drinking gourd. Once he found it, he could see the North Star. He walked, keeping the North Star in front of him. Mama said, sometimes it was cloudy, and Daddy couldn't find the drinking gourd. Then he would feel the trees to see which side had the most moss. He knew that moss grew best on the north side of a tree and he used the moss to help him find the way. Mama said, that each time we reached the home of a friend of the runaway slave, we would be given food and shelter and then were sent on with directions to the next safe house.



Mama said when our food ran out she gathered berries and plants from the woods for our food. Daddy was able to trap a few small animals, and even caught a few fish for us to eat. Mama said she only cooked it for a little while, because making a fire was so dangerous. She said when we were very hungry Daddy would sneak into a cornfield and take a few ears of corn. Mama said some days we went hungry, because looking for food was just too dangerous.

Mama said it was a long hard journey to freedom. She said she was afraid many times that we would be caught and sent back to Perry County. She said that once we crossed the Mississippi River into Illinois, she wasn't as scared. Illinois was a free state then, but we still weren't safe because there were lots of slave hunters who would catch us and send us back. She said they would get a reward for returning us to our master. But she told me that she was so thankful for the kind people who helped us along the way. Mama said, we made our way to Chicago, and then on to Detroit. She said Daddy was excited when we reached Detroit. He knew that when we crossed that river we would finally reach Canada. We would finally be safe.



I don't remember when we first came to Canada, but Mama said we crossed the river to Windsor. She said we found a place to live near the French people. Mama stayed home with me while Daddy went to work. He did not like his job, because he had to work morning until night up to his knees in water, and his wages were very small. He earned just enough to take care of us but he could not save any money to get us a home. Daddy crossed the border and found a better job in Michigan. It paid more but Daddy did not want to stay because he did not feel as safe in Michigan as he felt in Canada. The people in Michigan wanted him to stay, and offered to build him a house. Mama said she was glad when Daddy decided to leave.

Mama said we went to St. Catharine's to live. It was a long way from Windsor. Daddy was paid more in St. Catharine's. He made fifty cents a day then. She said they were able to save some money when we lived there. I remember St. Catharine's. I had a little brother then. I remember my little brother Jerome and I used to play outside our house. Mama and Daddy liked St. Catharine's, but they were disappointed that I could not go to school there. Mama had been teaching us to read, but they wanted Jerome and me to go to school so that we could have a better life.



I remember the day that Daddy was very excited when he got home. He had heard that a man named Rev. King was starting a new settlement for fugitive slaves. Daddy said it was in the newspapers. He went out and got a newspaper for Mama. She read that Rev. King would be starting a mission school and church for the people in the new settlement. They read that we could buy land there and have our own farm. Daddy said he thought he had saved enough money for a down payment on the farm and would have enough left over to buy the animals and supplies we would need to get started. The newspaper said Rev. King was bringing his own slaves there from Louisiana, and giving them their freedom. It said Rev. King was getting 9000 acres, from the land reserved for the churches. He and his helpers would be getting it surveyed and divided into small farms to be sold for \$2.50 an acre, the same price they had paid for it. The land was in Raleigh Township, which was close to Chatham. Daddy said that was far enough from the United States so that we would not have to worry about slave catchers.

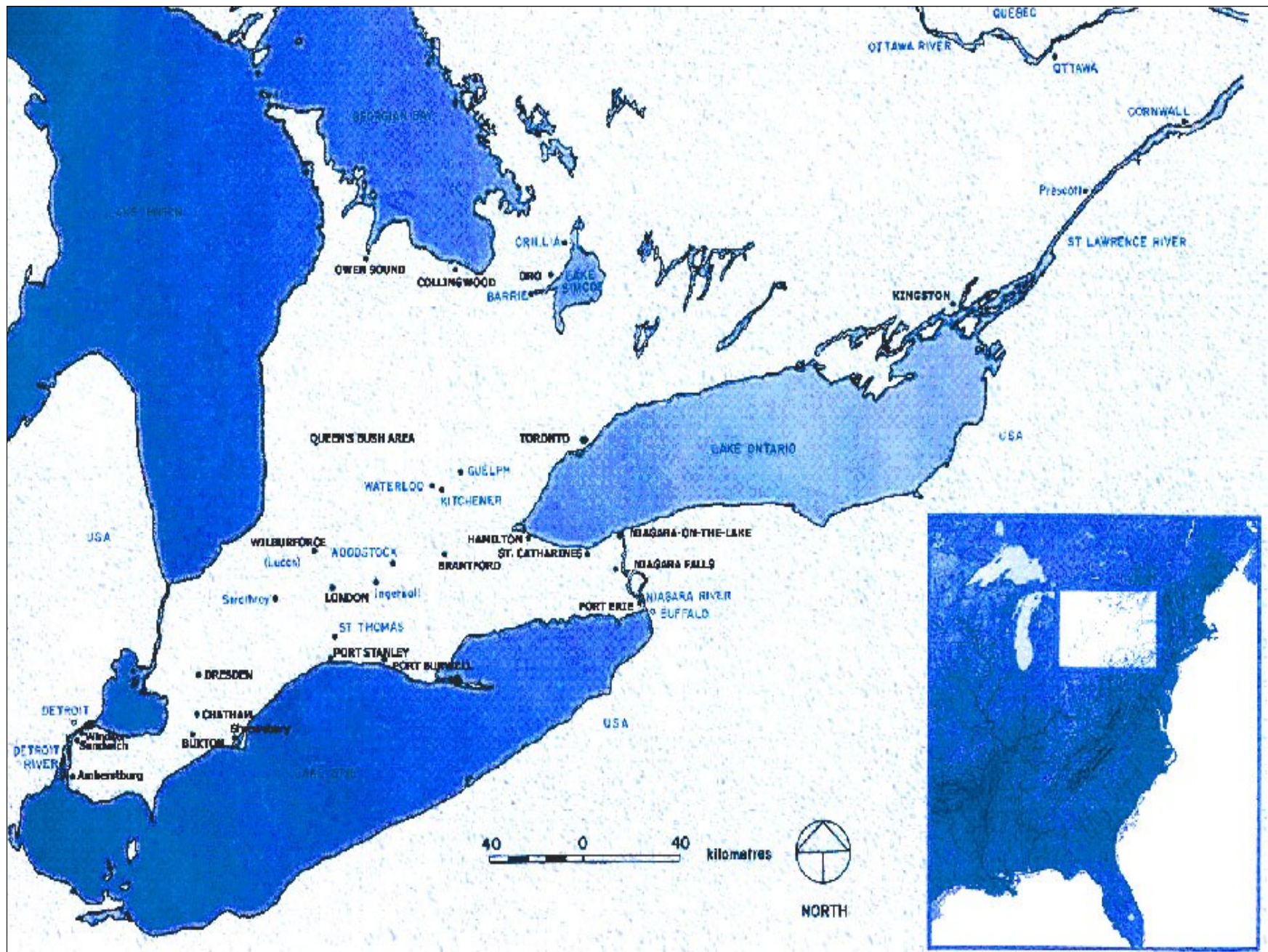
Mama and Daddy decided that we would leave St. Catharine's and go to Rev. King's new settlement, but Mama said she would not leave her things behind like she had done when she left Missouri, and that she would not walk to our new home. Daddy bought a wagon and a pair of horses.

We loaded everything we had into the wagon. That left enough room for Jerome, Mama, our new baby brother James, and I. Daddy sat up front and drove the wagon. Sometimes Mama sat with him, and sometimes she stayed in the wagon with us. James was only a year old. Jerome was five years old by then and I was seven.



It was a long ride, most of it along a military road, laid out by the Government. I remember that on both sides of the road the land was cleared up, in some places just a short distance, and in others for about half a mile. In many places, the woods were very close to the road, and in other places, there were farmhouses scattered along the road. The settlers were mostly English, Scotch and Irish, and they were taking in the crops on the farms.

When we finally got to Chatham, we found out that we had to go on to Sandwich, near Windsor, to get a location ticket for property in King's settlement. Daddy drove the wagon there and we got a ticket for one hundred acres in the new settlement. Daddy said he wanted to live close to the school King would be building. He got the lot right next to Rev. King's home. Daddy said being so close to the church and school would help us to get a good education.





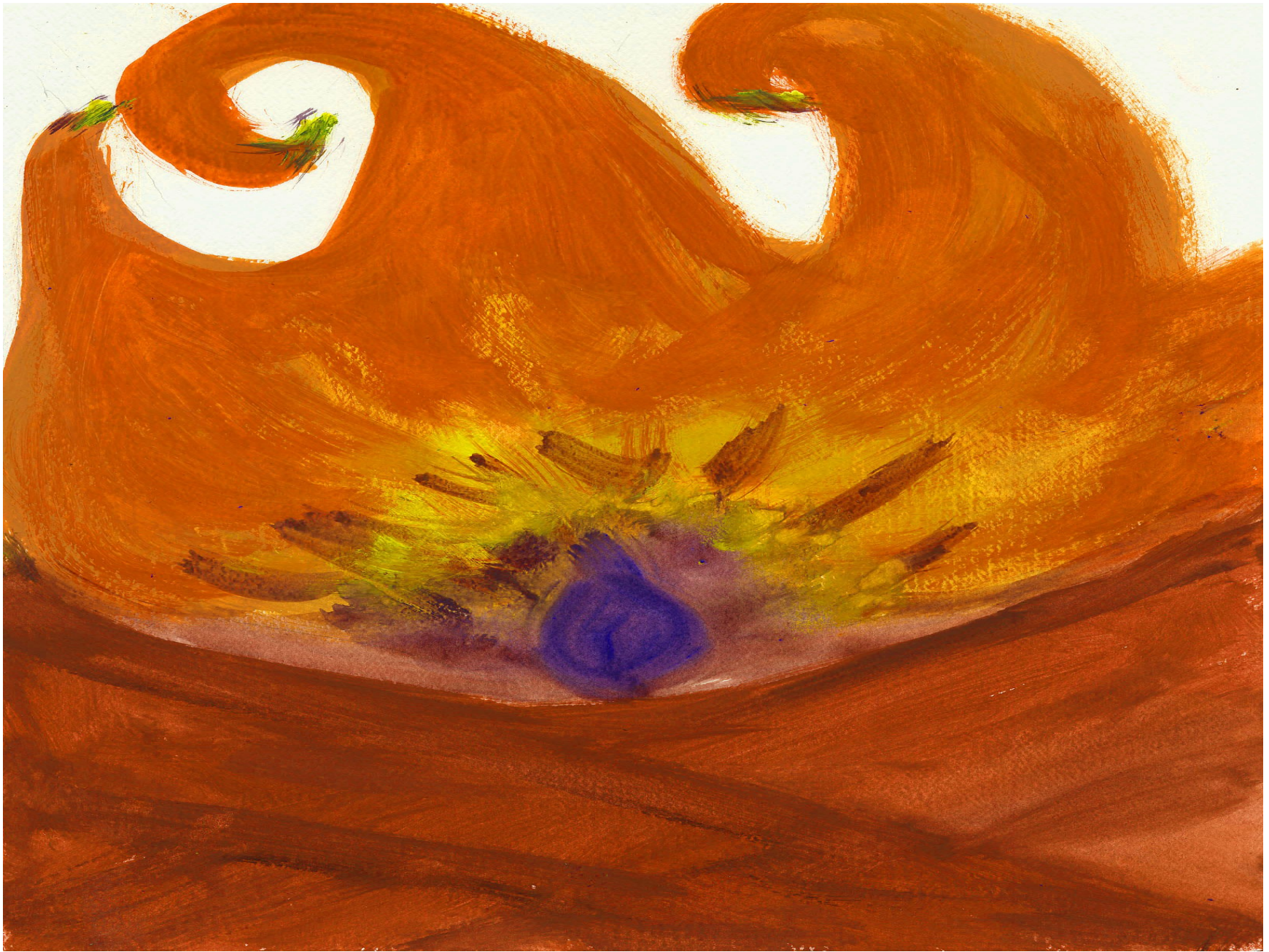
We went back to Chatham and found our way out to where the new settlement was to be. It was mostly bush with just a few cleared farms. I remember when we found the farm that Rev. King had bought for his home. It had a large barn. Rev. King had not arrived yet, so Daddy said we would camp out in his barn until Rev. King got there.

I remember Daddy going out during the day to help the surveyors. They were surveying the settlement and laying it out into regular sections. The roads they laid out divided the land into sections of 200 acres each. Then they divided the sections into farms of 50 acres each.

The farms were to be sold to the people who came to the settlement for \$2.50 an acre. The people had to pay \$12.50 down when they arranged to buy their land. Then they could take ten years to finish paying for the land. Daddy made the down payment on 100 acres for us.

It wasn't long before more people joined us in Rev. King's barn. I remember Mr. Bean, Mr. Jackson, Mr. Grale and Mr. Chase being there. I think that Peter Gray, William Gields, and Isaac Hardin came then too. I especially remember Mr. Green Doo. I thought that was such a funny name for a man, Green. I remember Jerome and me pretending that we were Orange Riley and Purple Riley. We called James Blue Riley.

It was November and it was cold in that barn, but the men kept a pile of wood cut, and we warmed ourselves beside the fire. I remember the excitement the day Rev. King arrived with the fifteen people he had freed from slavery. There was Eliza, Molly, Emmeline, Harriet and Fanny. Mama was so happy to have some more women to talk to and to help with the cooking for all the men. They told Mama that they had learned how to preserve fruits, vegetables and meat and had even brought some to help us get through the winter. Daddy and the other men were sure glad to see Talbert, Jacob, Ben, Robin, Ise and Stephen. Most of them, except Old Stephen, were strong young men and they had learned how to clear land and build the buildings that we would need while they were staying in Ohio with Rev. King's family. Jerome and I were really happy to meet Sarah and Amelia, who was seven years old. We were especially glad to welcome Peter and Solomon.







Peter was a good companion for me and Jerome quickly made friends with Solomon who was his age. Old Stephen did most of the talking at first. The others said he had been their spokesman for most of the trip. Rev. King was surprised to find all of us waiting in his barn, but he welcomed us to the new settlement.

It was to be called the Elgin Settlement, but soon we were all calling it Buxton, after a famous man in Britain who fought to end slavery there. Those first few months just flew by as we all worked to get homes built for all the new settlers. The men worked in crews. Twelve men and a pair of oxen could cut the logs and put up a cabin up to the roof in just one day. Two men cut the logs, one man hauled them in, four men cut the corners, and the other five men put the logs in place. Our mothers helped too with the cooking and with the clearing of the land. We children were able to help out some, but by April the school was built, and then that is where we spent our days. We helped out some in the evenings.

Every Thursday evening some of the men and women went to the school where Rev King held classes to teach them to read and write too. Once our cabins were all built we had to build shelters for the animals, and then we were busy day and night cutting the timber and clearing the stumps so we would have some land ready to plant a crop in the spring.

One of the first things Rev. King did after he got here was to hold a church service. We went to the school just down the road from Rev. King's farm, but the door was locked. They say the people in the area didn't want us in their schoolhouse, but Mrs. White, the wife of the farmer Rev. King had bought his farm from had a key and she opened the door and let us go in to worship. Rev. King did not want to have any trouble with the neighbours, so he said that we would hold services in his house until we could get a church built. As soon as the school was built, the men started on a small church. They were called the Buxton Mission School and the Buxton Mission Church.

We have been in Buxton for two and a half years now. Now, Jerome, James and I have a sister named Ann. She is just a year old now. Jerome is eight, James is four years old and I am ten. There are about 90 families living in Buxton now. Our schoolhouse is made of log and is about twenty feet long and eighteen feet wide. It is whitewashed and has some large arched windows that let in lots of light. There are many students in the school. I am learning Latin and Greek. Two of my friends who came with Rev. King from Louisiana are in my Latin class.



We can translate Latin into English. The Latin is hard to learn, but I really like school, and try hard to learn all that the teacher tries to teach us. I know that I sometimes make mistakes in changing the Latin into English. Everyone is trying so hard, and no one laughs at our mistakes. Rev. King and my teacher think I can do well enough to go to College in Toronto when I am finished grammar school. Daddy and Mama are saving their money to send us to college, if we do well enough.

We have a tower right next to the school with a very special bell hanging in it. The coloured people in Pittsburgh sent it to us. They asked us to remember our brothers who are still in slavery when we hear the bell ring, and pray that they may also someday know freedom. We ring the bell every morning at 6:00 and every evening at 9:00. We also ring it, whenever there is an emergency - like a fire, and whenever a new runaway reaches freedom from slavery in Buxton. We welcome them and help them get settled in Buxton.

We have a post office now too, near the school. It is called the Buxton Post Office and Rev. King is the postmaster. We also have a Blacksmith shop and a brickyard. Buxton is growing very fast.

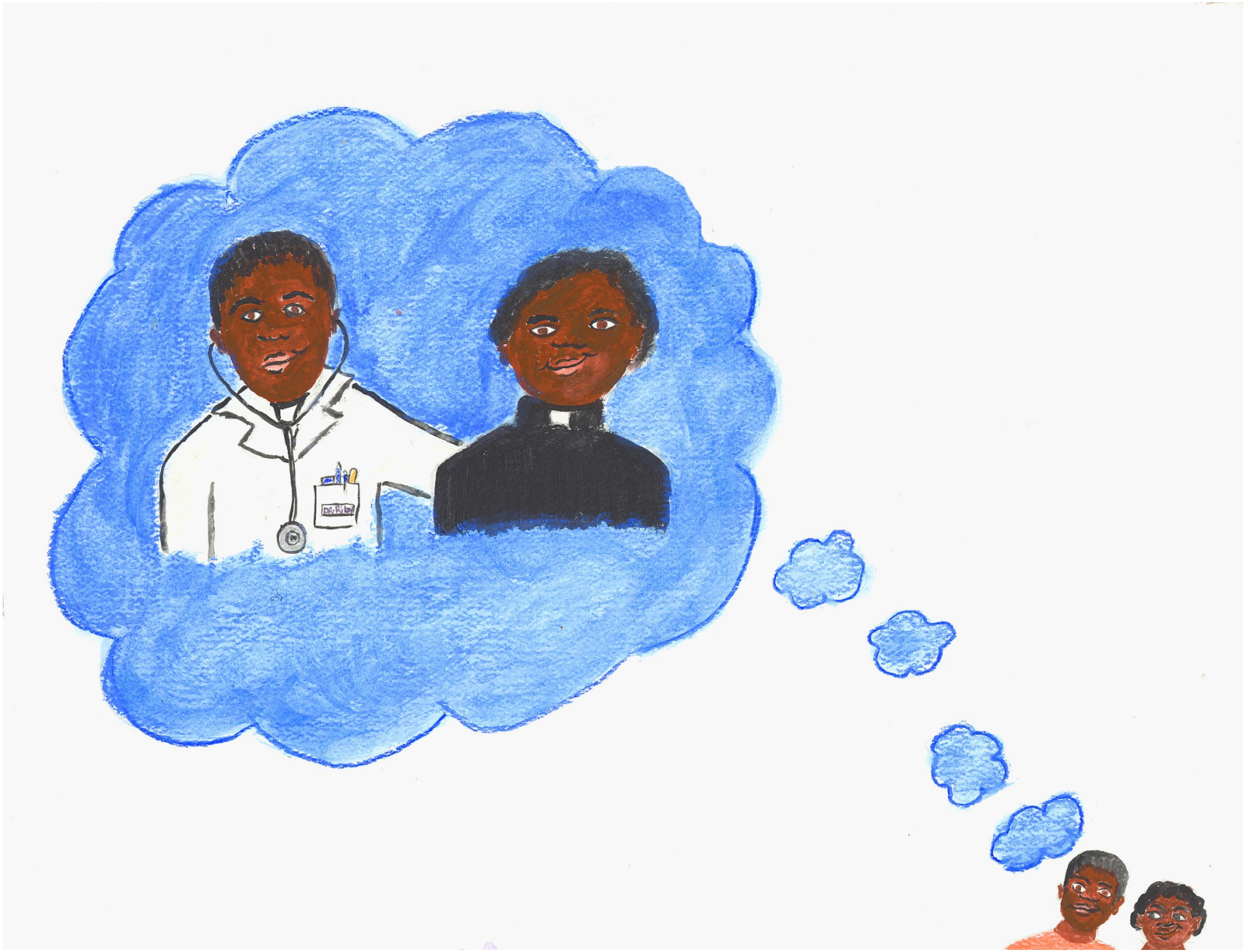


One day not too long ago, some young white men were roaming about the woods on Sunday morning when most people are in church. This happens a lot out here in the bush in Buxton. I guess a few of them are not yet used to the coloured people here in the settlement. They look in the windows and sometimes, when the door is not fastened, they come in and look around the cabins. I guess they are just curious to see how we live.

One Sunday Mama was at home with James and Baby Ann. Daddy, Jerome and I had gone to church. The men came to our farm and looked in the window. They saw Mama reading the Bible and praying. Mama didn't see them looking in at her, but she heard about it later. We heard that these men stopped looking in the windows of the cabins in the settlement after that. They decided that people, who went to church, read the Bible and prayed couldn't be that bad.







Daddy and Mama are very proud of our farm. They both work so hard day and night to build a new life for us here in the bush. They say it is worth it, because we have bettered ourselves so much since we left slavery in Missouri. Daddy says it is surely true that we have had to work hard, and that sometimes we really have to struggle to get by. He says that sometimes he and Mama have been rather lonely, but he says he is happy that we have had good health, and have been able to pay quite a lot on our farm. He thinks we will soon own the whole hundred acres without owing anything on it. He is very proud of our comfortable house and our cows, pigs, chickens and ducks.

He is especially proud of our horses which he thinks are very fast, and of our wagon that we depend on to get us to where we have to go. He says that now we have neighbours, and he thinks we will soon have more and more, as Buxton grows.

He is especially proud of the school where Jerome and I are learning so much, and of our excellent church services, and of our roads that are getting better all the time. We don't have to climb over so many fallen trees as we visit our neighbours. Mama still misses the people in Missouri, but they both say we are very blessed to be here instead of in slavery where Jerome and I would be raised in ignorance.

Jerome and I like living in Buxton. We especially like our school. We learn a lot there and we have friends there that we like to play with. We are both working hard to learn, so that Mama and Daddy will be proud of us, and so that we will be able to go to college. Jerome wants to be a doctor, but I want to be a preacher like Rev. King and help folks to make a better life like our family has. Mama said she hopes Jerome's dreams and mine will come true some day. She says that she is proud of us already and that we will do great things one day, if we only try hard enough.



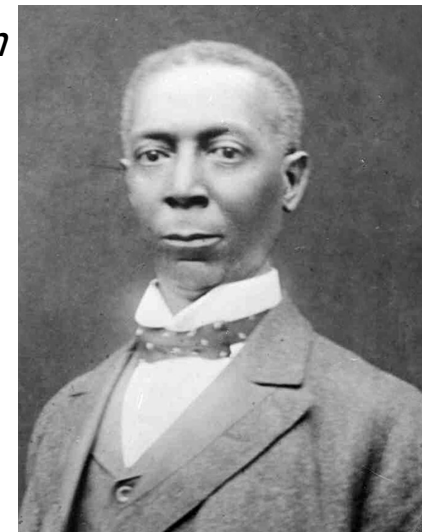
*"Baby Steps to Freedom" is based on the true story of Isaac and Catherine Riley, who escaped slavery in Perry County, Missouri with their infant son John, and came to Canada. They came first to Windsor, then to St. Catharine's, finally settling in Buxton.*

*The education of the Riley boys both in Buxton and then at Knox College is also well documented. After graduating from Knox College in 1867, John was licensed as a Minister in the Presbyterian Church in London. He went on to preach in Kentucky, Washington D.C., and Indianapolis. In 1904, John earned the degree of Doctor of Divinity. His brother Jerome, after graduating from Knox College, went on to Howard University in Washington D.C., where he earned a medical degree. He later practiced medicine in Brooklyn, New York where he was involved in public and political life.*

*The details regarding Isaac and Catherine Riley's settling in the Buxton Settlement are also well documented. They had 3 more children in Buxton, William, Anne and Michael. They remained in Buxton until 1880, when they left for Nebraska where they were homesteaders. Descendants of this Riley family continue to visit Buxton for the annual Homecoming Celebration.*



*Isaac Riley*



*John Riley*

