

Ever True to the Cause of Freedom

Henry Bibb: Abolitionist and Black Freedom's Champion, 1814-1854

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Black abolitionists in North America, through their activism, had a two-fold objective: end American slavery and eradicate racial prejudice, and in so doing promote race uplift and Black progress. To achieve their aims, they engaged in a host of pursuits that included lecturing, fund-raising, newspaper publishing, writing slave narratives, engaging in Underground Railroad activities, and convincing the uninitiated to do their part for the antislavery movement.

A host of Black abolitionists, many of whom had substantial organizational experience in the United States, moved to Canada in the three decades stretching from 1830 to 1860. Among these were such activists as Henry Bibb, Mary Bibb, Martin Delany, Theodore Holly, Josiah Henson, Mary Ann Shadd, Samuel Ringgold Ward, J.C. Brown and Amelia Freeman. Some like Henry Bibb were escaped fugitive slaves, others like J.C. Brown had bought themselves out of slavery. Some like Amelia Freeman and Theodore Holly were free-born Blacks. None has had a more tragic past however than Henry Bibb. Yet he would come to be one of the 19th century's foremost abolitionists. At the peak of his career, Bibb migrated to Canada and made what was perhaps his greatest contribution to the antislavery movement: the establishment of the Black press in Canada.

This discussion will explore Bibb's many contributions to the Black freedom movement but will provide a special focus on his work as a newspaper founder and publisher.

Henry Bibb was born in slavery in Kentucky around 1814.¹ Like so many other African American slaves, Bibb's parentage was biracial. His mother was a slave named Mildred Jackson, and his father James Bibb, a scion of a leading Kentucky family. According to American law, slave children inherited the status of their mothers and so Henry entered the world a slave. By the time he was ten this young slave was acutely aware of oppressive conditions under which he lived and began running away for a few days, or even a few hours. However, it was when he was 23 that he made a permanent bid

¹ In his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave*, Bibb notes that he was born in 1815. However, recent research revealed that his birth year might have been either 1813 or 1814. On 17 August 1814, William Butler, owner of Henry Bibb's teenaged mother, Mildred, gave Mildred "and her infant male child Walton" to his grand-daughter Harriet White. Deed of William Butler, Henry County's Clerk Office, 18 August 1814. Walton was Henry Bibb's middle name. He was his mother's first child.

for freedom. In the winter of 1837, Bibb fled Kentucky to Ohio. From Cincinnati he made his way to Detroit, Michigan and later on crossed into Essex County, Ontario.²

However, by this time, Bibb was married and the father of a daughter. So even though he had earned his freedom, his heart yearned for his family. In fact, before he fled slavery he had promised his wife Malinda that he would return to fetch her and their daughter, Mary Frances. Ignoring the advice of friends in Michigan and Ontario, Bibb returned to slavery to rescue his family. But he was betrayed and caught. However, by a stroke of luck, he once again escaped, but was recaptured. And so began for Bibb an odyssey of flight and recapture, and at last freedom in the winter of 1841. When he made his way to Detroit in January 1842, he had escaped from slavery six times and had served a total of eight masters. Bibb's slave experiences varied. He worked as a body servant, and as both a house and field slave. He also experienced and witnessed slavery in both the Upper and Lower South.³

However, Bibb paid a price for his freedom. Sold away into Texas by a Louisiana slaveowner, Deacon Whitfield, Bibb was separated from his wife and child. The separation was permanent as he never saw them again. The love he bore his wife and child, and memory of them, was to stay with him for the rest of his life. It was from his Texan owner that Bibb took his last flight. Once in Detroit, Bibb devoted himself to the struggle to end slavery, and the campaign for Black civil rights. He became a lecturer for the Liberty Association in Detroit, the Michigan state Liberty Party, and the Michigan Anti-Slavery Society. Audiences clamoured to hear someone who had had direct experience of slavery, speak. Bibb's slave experience gave him an authority and authenticity lacked by White speakers and free Black lecturers. So successful were his Michigan lectures that soon he began touring much of the Mid-West narrating his personal experiences of slavery. Bibb was an effective speaker. Newspaper accounts note that he often moved his audience to tears as he recounted slavery's barbarism and horror. His speeches converted many to the antislavery cause. Before Bibb's arrival in Michigan, abolitionist activities there were disorganized. He soon became the glue that unified much of the abolitionist ventures in Michigan and also the Mid-West, by linking Black and White abolitionist groups.⁴ The Black freedom struggle received a tremendous boost as a result. As Bibb became more popular, he was invited by various abolitionist societies in New York and New England to speak in, and tour these places.

By 1847 Henry Bibb had become a prominent and sought after abolitionist speaker. He worked with antislavery activists of different stripes. Though he supported moral suasion he strongly advocated political abolitionism, believing that the ballot must

² From 1791 to 1842, the geographic region we now call Ontario was named Upper Canada. Between 1842 to 1867, it was called Canada West. The current name Ontario came into usage in 1867 at the beginning of Confederation. I will be using the modern terminology throughout this discussion.

³ Bibb told the story of his enslavement and eventual freedom in his autobiography *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave*. This book was first published in 1849.

⁴ David M. Katzman, *Before The Ghetto, Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

be utilized to bring about the end of American slavery.⁵ As an advocate of political action, Bibb therefore supported both the Liberty and Free Soil parties through speeches, letter writing, and other kinds of advocacy. He was also a practicing Christian and, remembering his years on a Louisiana plantation, felt that slaveholders deliberately kept slaves in ignorance by denying them religious instructions. Bibb also felt that slaveholders denied the enslaved the right and opportunity to read the Bible by keeping them illiterate. With that in mind, Bibb joined the ‘Bible for the Slave’ crusade, a project sponsored by the antislavery American Missionary Society, under the leadership to two Christian political abolitionists, Joshua Leavitt, and Lewis Tappan. Bibb toured many of the free states, lecturing on slavery, and collecting funds used to buy Bibles to distribute to slave families in the South, and free Blacks in the North.

Bibb also became an important abolitionist writer. He wrote numerous letters and articles to antislavery journals, giving details about slave life, his work as a lecturer, and on Black civil rights in the North. He also wrote a history of slave revolts in the United States, and *The Anti-slavery Harp*, a book of antislavery songs. However, it was the 1848 publication of his autobiography *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave* that crowned Bibb’s literary efforts so far, and established him as a prominent abolitionist writer. The book was an instant success. It went through three editions in eighteen months and was published in the United States and Europe. The book was a “startling narrative” of life under slavery live, and the inherent degradations. Bibb centered the story on his attempts to rescue his wife and child from enslavement and his lack of success. Thus *Life and Adventures*, in addition to being a story of love, was also a story of sorrow.

Bibb’s great sorrow in losing his wife and child in 1841, was assuaged when in 1847, he met the well-known Black abolitionist, Mary Miles. Miles was a free-born Quaker woman from Rhode Island. She was trained as a school teacher at the Lexington Normal School in Massachusetts, and had the distinction of being the first Black woman in North America to graduate from a teacher-training institution. This she did in 1844.⁶ Immediately after leaving the Normal School, Miles taught at the Black school in Boston, but later moved on to teach in Albany, New York, and Cincinnati, Ohio. She met Bibb at the annual meeting of the American Anti-slavery Association’s meeting held in New York City. They began a correspondence shortly after, and in 1848 took matrimonial vows.

⁵ Moral suasion was an ideological and philosophical concept advocated by some abolitionist (mainly those led by Boston’s William Lloyd Garrison) for bringing about the destruction of slavery. These activists felt that the most effective way to bring about slavery’s demise was to appeal directly to the conscience of the slaveholders, and Americans at large. Once their conscience was awakened they would see that slavery was wrong and end it immediately. Moral suasionists sought to educate the public on the wrongs of slavery through the press, petitions and lectures. Of course, moral suasion did not bring about the destruction of slavery. It took political action—the coming to power to the Republican Party, and military action—the Civil War, to end slavery. For a discussion, see James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988).

⁶ I have looked at Mary Bibb’s career as a schoolteacher and abolitionist in Afua P. Cooper, “Black Woman and Work in Nineteenth-Century Canada West: Black Woman Teacher Mary Bibb,” in Peggy Bristow, et al *We’re Rooted here and They Can’t Pull Us Up: Essays in African Canadian Women’s History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994) 143-170.

In September 1850, the American Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law. The FSL empowered slave owners to find and recapture their alleged fugitive slaves who had been living in freedom in the northern states and elsewhere. This draconian law caused great panic in the Black northern communities where many ex-slaves had been living as free people. As a result of this law, thousands of African Americans knowing that their safety was jeopardized, left the United States. They fled to Canada, Mexico, the West Indies, and even Africa. The majority came to Canada, mainly to the province of Ontario. And Henry Bibb was among them. He was not really fleeing from a slaveowner because his last owner was long dead. However, he was still legally a slave and could be claimed by the government as property. Bibb left the American Republic because of two main reasons: outrage at the passage of the FSL, and a desire to lead the burgeoning refugee community in Ontario. He was supported in his desire to fill the leadership vacuum in Southern Ontario, by his colleagues in Michigan and New York.⁷ So in November of 1850, he crossed the Detroit River into Sandwich, Ontario with his wife Mary, and his Mother Mildred, whom he had rescued from the South, and who had been living with him for some time.

Bibb's antislavery and race uplift activism took on a new urgency in Ontario. Immediately after his arrival, he threw himself in community work. Literally hundreds of fugitives were arriving at the Windsor border on a daily basis and many needed help. The Bibbs' home became a shelter and information dissemination centre. Bibb notes in an 1850 letter to Lewis Tappan that "for the last 6 or 8 weeks our house has been filled with strangers almost every day & night but we have never turned one from our door without food or lodging if they could put up with such as we had."⁸ Two weeks after his arrival he called the Sandwich Convention. At this meeting, delegates discussed the best way to help the burgeoning refugee population. Bibb proposed a land settlement project because he believed that land was what the refugees needed most of all to elevate themselves and become self-sufficient. From this meeting evolved the Refugee Home Society, an organization designed to help landless Blacks become landowners and farmers. At the time of Bibb's death in 1854 over 100 families had purchased RHS land. It was also from the Sandwich Convention that Bibb articulated the need to have a newspaper serving the Black community.

Bibb also became an ardent champion of Canadian immigration. For him Canada was the best place on the continent for Black people to live. In his articles and letters he urged Black Americans, both free and slave, to 'separate' themselves from the United States and taste 'true freedom' in Canada. He argued that in the United States Blacks had no rights worthy to speak of. The slaves were held in bondage and free Blacks were only nominally free because their lives were circumscribed by Black codes.⁹ To this end, Bibb

⁷ In a letter by Bibb letter written from Sandwich on 14 December 1850 to Lewis Tappan American Missionary Association's leader, he told Tappan that he was encouraged to migrate to Canada by "friends of humanity" to organized community uplift mainly by starting a newspaper. See Bibb to Tappan, American Missionary Association Archives, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Bibb has been erroneously called a separatist because he urged Black Americans to 'separate' themselves from the United States. Likewise, he was attacked by Mary Ann Shadd and her supporters for setting up 'segregated' settlements under the auspices of the Refugee Home Society. Shadd took no such issue with

called and chaired the most important Black convention held in Canada during this period. It was the historic North American Convention of Coloured People. The convention was held at the St. Lawrence Hall in Toronto, in September 1851 and brought together over 53 registered delegates from across Ontario, the free American states, and the West Indies. For three days delegates discussed issues germane to the Black community. But the main item on the agenda was the safety and security of the Black people of North America.

At the end of the meetings, the delegates concluded that Canada provided the best security for Black families. They list several reasons: it was close to the United States (thus immigrant Blacks could still keep in touch with their American brethren), its soil type and climate were similar to that of the northern United States, and of course, it was mainly English-speaking (therefore the new immigrants did not have to learn a new language upon arrival). At this convention Bibb and his cohorts called for the creation of the North American League. The League, would be based in Ontario, and run by Black abolitionists. There would also be branches across the Americas. One central objective of the League would be to purchase land in Jamaica and Canada upon which refugees from American slavery could establish farms. Again, as with the RHS, the central idea underscoring the League was that agriculture was one of the bases for race uplift. Bibb also proposed projects such as a shipping line, and free produce stores that would link the Black populations of the West Indies, South America, and North America.¹⁰

Harping on the theme of self-reliance Bibb and some of his fellow delegates called for the establishment of a mill and general store in the Black community. The Canada Mill and Mercantile Association was later created by some of these delegates, (they created a joint stock company in order to realize this). The CMMA was “an attempt to encourage black business independence through the establishment of a sawmill, a gristmill, and a country store [in] Buxton.”¹¹

The ideas that Bibb brought to the convention revealed him to be an ardent champion of Black freedom, an early Pan Africanist, and a visionary who was well ahead of his time.

Bibb and his wife Mary impacted the abolitionist and Black civil rights movement in diverse ways. They built schools and churches, founded temperance, and literary, and antislavery societies. Bibb also worked with the Detroit Vigilance committee helping numerous fugitives on the Underground Railroad. Moreover he kept up a hectic lecture schedule, speaking frequently on tours in Ontario, and in the Mid-West.

Of all the undertakings we associate with Henry Bibb, the *Voice of the Fugitive*, the newspaper he founded, edited, and published, is the one he is most remembered for.

white leader William King when he established an all-Black colony at Buxton close to Chatham. Bibb's designation as 'separatist' and Shadd's quarrels with him are beyond the scope of this paper. However for a discussion see Roger Hite, "Voice of a Fugitive: Henry Bibb and the Ante-Bellum Black Separatism," *Journal of Black Studies* 4, 3 (1974) 269-284.

¹⁰ The Proceedings of the North American Convention are printed in the *Voice*, 24 September 1851. The *Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume 2*, C. Peter Ripley, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 149-169 has also reprinted the proceedings.

¹¹ Ripley, *BAP*, 157.

Without a doubt, the *Voice* was Bibb's crowning achievement and his greatest contribution to Black freedom. His founding of the *Voice* placed him in the ranks of the notable "firsts" in Canada, for the paper has the distinction of being the first sustained Black newspaper in the country.¹² As the founder of the Black press in Ontario and Canada, he left a lasting impression on Canadian journalism as a whole and the African Canadian press in particular.

On 1 January 1851 the first issue of the *Voice* rolled off the press. The *Voice* was a fierce and staunch abolitionist bi-weekly which advocated the immediate end of American slavery, called for Black civil rights in the United States and Canada, and supported temperance, Canadian emigration, education, agriculture, and Protestant Christianity. Bibb as energetic editor and publicist ensured that the paper had a wide circulation. In Ontario he had agents in Toronto, Amherstburg, Windsor, Chatham, and other urban centres; and in the United States the paper circulated in New York City, the main towns of New England, and the Mid-West. The paper also had trans-Atlantic circulation in London and Dublin. The *Voice* detailed Black life in Ontario, and the United States, and today stands as a veritable source of Black Canadian history. As the *Voice* entered its third year, Bibb changed the name to *Voice of the Fugitive and Canadian Independent*. The *Canadian Independent* component of the name points to Bibb's awareness and recognition that even though the majority of Blacks came from the United States, Canada was now their home and it was important that "our conditions in Canada might be better understood by the whole civilized world."¹³

Mary Bibb also helped in the launching and sustenance of the *Voice of the Fugitive*. She had more formal education than her husband and used her writing skills to edit, publish, and promote the paper, especially during the periods when her husband was away on the lecture circuit. She also used her network in the United States to obtain subscribers.¹⁴

The office of the paper burnt down in October 1853. But Bibb revived it and continued its publication until his death in August 1854. The longevity of the *Voice* was a feat considering the difficulties Black newspapers experienced to stay afloat.

Why did Henry Bibb start the *Voice of the Fugitive*? Bibb came into Ontario with a very clear aim of leading the Black community, at least that of the southwestern portion of the province. The Black population there was rapidly expanding because of the Fugitive Slave law. Friends and foes of Blacks were interested in knowing how they were doing in Canada, and a newspaper was the best way to disseminate such information. In a (previously cited) letter to the AMA, Henry Bibb stated that one of the main reasons he migrated to Canada was to lead the Black in expanding Black communities, and to publish a paper "through which their wants and conditions might be made known to our

¹² A paper, *The British American*, was launched and edited by a Canadian Black in 1845. But according to Robin Winks it "survived less than a month." Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (1971; reprint, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) 394.

¹³ *Voice of the Fugitive*, 16 Dec. 1852. The *Voice* can be obtained on microfilm at the Toronto Public (Reference) Library, the National Archives of Canada, the Robarts Library at the University of Toronto, and the University of Windsor Library.

¹⁴ See Mary Bibb to Gerrit Smith. 8 November 1850. Reprinted in Ripley, *BAP*, 108.

friends in the States and which should be devoted to elevation of the condition of our people generally.”¹⁵ So the race uplift agenda was uppermost in Bibb’s mind when he started the paper.

Thus fugitives now living as free persons in the province, and the people of freeborn origin needed “uplift” guidance, or so a Black editor like Bibb thought. Black leaders felt that the masses had to be instructed in things like moral reform and how to educate and elevate themselves. And as journalism scholar Frankie Hutton notes, Black editors consciously saw themselves, given their strategic positioning, as the leaders in the best position to instruct their fellows in uplift.¹⁶

Yet there was another if not more pressing need for the founding of the *Voice of the Fugitive*: the Black community was under attack from the white news media. Even though the British government had offered Canada as a haven for the fleeing fugitive, white public opinion—in high and low places—generally opposed the Black presence and the continued Black migration. While many white Canadians, many of them recent emigrants from Britain, could tolerate the few thousand ‘indigenous’ Blacks scattered across the Canadas and the eastern colonies, they found the mass migration of American Blacks into the country was harder to swallow. Governor-General Elgin captured this sense of alarm in a letter to one of his colleagues, where he wrote that because of the FSL Canada would likely “be flooded with blackies....”¹⁷ White men and women also feared that an increase in the Black population could lead to “amalgamation” or the “pollution” of white “blood.”¹⁸

According to another view, Black migration would lead to a destruction of white society and civilization, or so the thinking went. The attitude of many white Canadians toward Blacks had been informed by their imperial and colonial experiences as British subjects and citizens. From this context evolved a white perception which saw Black people as second-class humans; in fact, white citizens often relegated Blacks to sub-human categories.¹⁹ In addition, at the same time that many American Blacks sought to emigrate to Canada, Britain was still a slaveholding kingdom;²⁰ and the colonies that eventually came to make up a large part of Canada had since the beginning of their early written history practised Black and Native slavery.²¹ So there was an already established

¹⁵ See Bibb to Tappan, *op .cit.*

¹⁶ Frankie Hutton, *The Early Black Press in America, 1826-1860* (Westport, Connecticut Greenwood Press, 1993) 33.

¹⁷ Arthur Doughty, ed. *The Elgin-Grey Papers, 1846-1852*, Vol. 2 (Ottawa: J.O Patenaude, 1937) 720

¹⁸ See J.T. Fisher’s article on the agricultural union in the *Voice*, 3 Dec. 1851.

¹⁹ Allen P. Stouffer, “A Restless Child of Change and Accident: the Black Image in 19th-Century Ontario,” *Ontario History* 76, 2 (1984) 128-150.

²⁰ Britain officially abolished slavery in her empire, which included Canada, in 1834. Michael Craton *et al.* *Slavery: Abolition and Emancipation: Black Slaves and the British Empire* (London: Longman, 1976).

²¹ The two standard sources for Black slavery in Canada are William Riddell, “The Slave in Canada,” *Journal of Negro History* (1920), 261-377, and Marcel Trudel, *L’esclavage au Canada Francais* (Quebec: Les Presses Universitaires, 1960).

tradition of expressions of Black inferiority/white superiority in the British Empire, which gave white Canadians a context in which to form and develop negative attitudes toward Black people.²² Being neighbours to another set of whites, who held Blacks in bondage, also helped white Canadians shape and articulate their anti-Black racial attitudes and assumptions.²³

Even though a “tame” kind of anti-Americanism fuelled Canadian reception toward the so-called fugitive Black, this did not mean that many Canadians were pro-Black. Some managed to espouse anti-Americanism and afrophobia at the same time.²⁴ It was the white press that led the assault in “Canadian Negro hate,” as Samuel Ringgold Ward termed it. Several white newspapers presented Blacks as undesirable settlers. They were described as rapists, criminals, and lunatics. Even their humanity was questioned when one politician called them orangutans. Therefore, when Bibb, and others, noted at the Sandwich convention, that “we struggle against opinion,” and “we need a press, that we may be independent of those who have always oppressed us,” they were very much aware that newspapers were formulators of public opinions, and that the white papers used their power to verbally abuse Black people, to create false images about them, and in so doing contributed in a very real way to their continued oppression. These verbal abuses sometimes were translated into physical assaults, as whites sometimes attacked Blacks, beat them up, and destroyed their homes and properties.²⁵

Historian Jason Silverman comments on the afrophobia prevalent in nineteenth-century Ontario white newspapers. “As a vehicle of public opinion,” he astutely observes, “newspapers were quickly employed by Canadian whites for catharsis; that is, in lieu of an illegal physical attack, it was much easier and convenient, not to mention legal, to launch a written assault upon the black fugitives.” Silverman continues: “Letters, editorials, and advertisements all revealed a blatant and burgeoning negrophobia on the part of white Canadians.” He concludes that “the more readily apparent the fugitives became in Canadian society, the more intense and vehement the anti-black sentiment became in the white press....with few friends in the white press, the fugitive slaves could hope for at best, ambivalence, and at worst, vicious racist propaganda.”²⁶

²² Vron Ware’s *Beyond The Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (London: Verso, 1992) 35-44, makes the case for the influence of British imperialism, and its attendant anti-Black racism worldwide. See also Kay Anderson, *Vancouver’s Chinatown, Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991).

²³ Stouffer, *opcit* “Restless Child of Change and Accident.”

²⁴ Jason Silverman, *Unwelcome Guests: Canada’s West’s Response to American Fugitive Slaves, 1800-1865* (New York: Associated Faculty Press, 1985).

²⁵ The St. Catharines race riot is one cogent example. On 28 June 1852, whites became incensed at the parade of Black militia men. The whites organized themselves into a white mob and attacked these men. The rioters then rushed to the Black section of the town where they destroyed homes and properties. *Voice*, 16 July 1852. Samuel Ward to the editor of the *Toronto Globe*, 27 July 1852.

²⁶ Jason Silverman, ““We Shall Be Heard!” The Development of the Fugitive Slave Press in Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 65, 1 (1984) 54.

Examples of this “vicious racist propaganda” came from the pen of one “W.C.,” who during 1851-52 was a regular contributor to (perhaps even the editor of) the *Canada Oak*. W.C. commented that the Black immigrant was “a sensual animal out to defile the fragile flower of white womanhood.”²⁷ Clearly W.C. was concerned with miscegenation and invoked the stereotype of the Black male as a rapist out to deflower the vulnerable, white woman. The sexual terrain as the site where whites, males in particular, were to play out their racial tensions regarding Black people, in particular Black men, would be used over and over again by Canadian whites in their verbal assaults on Black people.²⁸

The *Hamilton Spectator* between 1851-53 cast Blacks in the role of criminal, and argued that slavery was ‘the best thing for them.’ Meanwhile, in 1851, the *Toronto Colonist* called for a poll tax to be imposed on all Blacks.²⁹ Edwin Larwill, a British emigrant, self-defined afrophobe, and white supremacist, soon joined the anti-Black crusade. Larwill, whom Jane and William Pease describe as “violently and actively anti-Negro,” as a member of the Canada West legislature, led the opposition to the founding of the Elgin settlement and called for the deportation of all “Africans” to the United States.³⁰ After his unsuccessful campaign against the founding of Elgin, Larwill turned his attention to the Blacks in the Windsor border region. He did so by way of the *Amherstburg Courier*. As with many prominent haters of Black people, Larwill’s chief concern seems to have been that the emigration of Black people to Ontario would result in racial mixing, or “amalgamation.”

The *Voice* in its inaugural issue took up the cudgels against Larwill, the *Amherstburg Courier*, and “Canadian Negro hate.”

The *Amherstburg Courier*, of Dec. 7th, contains two slanderous communications against the character of the people of color who are settling in Canada. One of the writers signs his name Edwin Larwill, while the other is a little too modest to plank down his name under such a compilation of base slander and falsehood.... These writers first attempt to excite a public prejudice against the settlement of colored people,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 55. See also the *Voice*, 18 Nov. 1852.

²⁸ Prominent suffragist activist Dr. Ella Synge, in opposing Black emigration to the Prairies in the early 1900s remarked: “The finger of fate is pointing to the lynch law which will be the ultimate result, as sure as we allow such people to settle among us.” Colin A. Thomson, *Black in Deep Snow: Black Pioneers in Canada* (Don Mills: J.M. Dent, 1979) 81-82. Emily Murphy, another famous Canadian feminist, wrote a novel called the *Black Candle* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publisher, 1922). The *Black Candle* revealed itself as a text in which the author, concerned with the ‘purity of the Anglo-Saxon race’ expressed her tensions regarding the ‘clear and present danger’ of Black and Chinese men to white women. Though this book is, purportedly, about the evils of opium smoking, most of the pictorial representations are of African Canadian men (not Chinese) in bed with ‘fallen’ white women.

²⁹ Silverman, “‘We Shall be Heard!’” 55-56.

³⁰ William and Jane H. Pease, “Opposition to the Founding of the Elgin Settlement,” *CHR* 38, 3 (1957) 202-218.

and their ground of complaint is that we are an inferior race, and that we are ignorant, idle, &c. &c. But to cap the climax, they seem to be awfully afraid, that if the colored people should be allowed to settle in Canada, that the result will be that an amalgamation must take place; they will marry with the whites, and both races will be degraded, and what then? Nothing short of a slave holding philosopher could tell what would be the result.

Rhetorically, Bibb asked why whites would want to marry Blacks about whom “they have already said were ignorant, idle, vicious, and degraded.” “Indeed,” he adds, “we think it would be paying their daughters a very poor compliment to suppose such a thing if the colored people were half as worthless as these writers have represented them.”³¹

Larwill, who seemed determined to make a career as a traducer of Black people, was also ensconced in the editor’s chair at the *Chatham Journal* and he used his position to mount further attacks on the Black population. As the *Journal’s* editor, his diatribe was not new; but it showed the extent of his depravity and his hatred of Black people, whom he placed in a sub-human category—the link between the orangutan and the monkey.³²

White lawyer, politician, British emigrant, and land baron, Colonel John Prince, though initially (supposedly) sympathetic to the Black migrants, also joined the afrophobia crusade. By 1857, Prince was saying that Blacks were “extremely demoralized, repaying with ingratitude, with pilfering, theft and other vices and crimes the kindness they have received....” Prince advocated the removal of Blacks from white society. However, perhaps knowing how ridiculous and possibly ‘unBritish’ it would sound to call for mass deportation of Blacks to the United States, Prince suggested that all Blacks be sent to an isolated place—such as the Manitoulin Islands.³³ The hostile attitude on the part of the white media toward Black people led Silverman to conclude that “the fugitives were assailed in this manner from virtually every white newspaper in Canada West.”³⁴ These anti-Black views were not held by a few ‘crackpots’ or ‘ignorant’ whites but by influential and powerful people. People like Larwill, Prince, and W.C., as members of a political, social, journalistic, and economic elite, represented “a...fundamental and dangerous mentality permeating white Canadian society.”³⁵

³¹ *Voice*, 1 Jan. 1851.

³² Silverman, “‘We Shall be Heard!’” 57. Larwill also used the *Essex Advocate* to inveigh against the Black settlers. See the *Voice*, 26 Feb. 1851.

³³ Silverman, “‘We Shall be Heard!’” 57-58. Prince was ‘sympathetic’ when it suited him, which was usually around election time. He was never really a friend of the Blacks. Prince did not wish to associate with Blacks and in 1852, purchased land to separate himself from them. See also R. Alan Douglas, *John Prince, 1796-1870*, (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1980) 117, 156-157.

³⁴ Silverman, “‘We Shall be Heard!’” 56.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 60.

The Black settler—whether a fleeing fugitive from slavery, a freeborn person escaping proscriptive Black laws, or the person who had escaped slavery but was living in freedom for a long time—must have been perturbed and angry at the pro-slavery and pro-planter bias that the white editors and the contributors displayed in their papers. Those Black people who were born in the province or who had family roots going back several generations must have been particularly perturbed. Furthermore, they lacked an appropriate vehicle of response. There is no indication that the editors of the papers allowed any letters of response from Blacks, though it is certain that Blacks themselves penned letters of rebuttal to newspapers. Generally speaking, as Silverman observes, “black appeals for justice went unheeded in the white Canadian press.”

Anti-black statements continued unabated, and the white readership quickly endorsed the opinions of prejudiced reporters and editors. As justifiable black dissatisfaction towards the white press increased in fervour, the fugitive blacks assumed the initiative themselves, by their creation of a viable and vocal Black Canadian press.³⁶

The *Voice* emerged out of this context of white hostility and assaults. It arose out of the need of a people to defend themselves against vituperative attacks from hostile white neighbours. Of crucial importance was that Bibb realized that it was not Blacks themselves who were creating images of themselves. Instead, as he put it, “we struggle against opinions.” That Black people were not in charge of shaping and creating their own public identity, and of fostering positive images of themselves was the major reason behind the creation of a Black press. A Black newspaper marked an important step in Black consciousness. With it Blacks would build and create healthy images of themselves, and also wage war against oppressive opinions. With a press, they would decide and determine how they would perceive themselves and be perceived by others.

While oppression clearly provided a context for the founding of Black newspapers, as previously stated, it was not the only impetus. As more and more Blacks in free communities became increasingly literate, a collective effort (bolstered by lack of positive representation in the white press) demanded that Blacks establish their own press. The Black press, like the schools, churches, and temperance societies that Blacks founded, were part of the institution-building process that Black people engendered as they became a ‘community,’ and further, as Bibb remarked, the Black press was an important facet of race uplift.

The *Voice* spoke for the Black community, slave-born and free-born, both Canadian and American, or even Caribbean. The paper published articles on such dramas as the Shadrach Minkins extradition case and the Christiania riot.³⁷ It discussed

³⁶ *Ibid*, 58

³⁷ On the 15 February 1851, Shadrach Minkins (or Wilkins), an escaped slave who had been living in Boston as a free man, was apprehended by federal marshals bent on enforcing the FSL. Minkins was rescued by Black antislavery activists and spirited away to Montreal. William Parker was another fugitive slave living in freedom in Christiana, Pennsylvania. In September 1851, his slave owner turned up at this

“colorphobia” in Canada. It reported widely on the state of education for Canadian Black children, and it promoted Canadian emigration in its columns. It reported on the arrival of runaway slaves into Canada (Bibb had a habit of going down to the Windsor ferry station and meeting and interviewing fugitives as they disembarked from the boat). The *Voice* also published accounts on the best way to travel to Canada through the Underground Railroad. The paper became a forum where abolitionists met and discussed issues pertinent to Black freedom. For example Bibb published letters written to him by such activists as Amos Beman of Connecticut, Underground Railroad conductor, William Still of Philadelphia, Hiram Wilson of St. Catharines, and Jermain Loguen and Gerrit Smith of New York. The paper published practical advice for new immigrants on the best way to grow potatoes, wheat, and flax, and provided information on where cheap land could be found for purchase. In addition to publishing on a variety of political, social, and economic issues, the editor of the *Voice* printed articles on various day-to-day facets of Black life: weddings, baptisms, funerals, graduation ceremonies, and a slew of other social and cultural activities. Therefore Black people were presented as human beings and not the stereotypes promoted by white editors.

For posterity, Bibb has left an unshakeable legacy. Today, in almost every major Canadian city, there is at least one Black newspaper. The current Black newspapers perform similar roles to the *Voice*. Though slavery is no more, these newspapers still carry out an uplift function and also seek to create favourable images of African Canadians.

Bibb’s legacy was recently recognized by the Canadian federal government. Both he and his wife Mary were designated as persons of national historic significance in a plaquing ceremony held in Windsor, Ontario on 8 October 2005. The unveiled plaque commemorated the work of the abolitionist couple. Henry Bibb has also been designated as a historic personage by heritage groups in the state of Kentucky. Plaquing ceremonies recognizing Bibb’s importance to Kentucky and American history are planned for 2006.

door with federal marshals. Parker and his supporters put up a spirited defence, now known in history as the “Christiana Riot,” in which the slave master, one Edward Gorsuch, was killed. For accounts of both incidents see, Gary Collison, *Shadrach Minkins From Fugitive Slave to Citizen* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1997); and Jonathan Katz’s *Resistance at Christiana, the Fugitive Slave Rebellion*, (New York: Crowell, 1974). See also Bibb’s editorial in the *Voice of the Fugitive*, 3 June 1852