

The 3rd Annual Grey County Black History Event

Heritage Uncovered: Black Pioneers

April 16 & 17, 2004

By Stacy McLennan

The 2004 Grey County Black History Event commenced with the Opening Reception and launch of *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal* Vol.# 2 in Ayton on April 16.



Ken Turner

The speaker for the evening was Ken Turner, who is the President of the Essex County Historical Cemeteries Preservation Society and a member of our local Pathways to the Past Committee.

Ken spoke on his personal experience in locating and restoring pioneer cemeteries in Essex County, including several Black burial sites.

Greetings were brought from Grey County Warden Don Lewis and West Grey Mayor Delton Becker. A special presentation was made by Dinah Christie and Michael Schmidt concerning the upcoming Symphony in the Barn season. Event Committee member Gregory Smith emceed the evening with his usual charisma, and refreshments were provided by Neustadt Springs Brewery.

The next day dawned cloudy and wet, but that did not stop interested participants from enjoying an informative day in Durham. Rod Charles emceed April 17, and Grey County MPP Bill Murdoch brought greetings.

Norma Blacke Bordeau began the morning and afternoon sessions by singing spirituals created by Black slaves in the American South. As usual, Norma gave a very moving performance and the Event Committee was pleased that she could once again join us in Grey County.



Norma Blacke Bordeau

The first speaker for the morning was Tim Crawford, speaking on a group of Black pioneers who were settled in the Township of Oro, just outside of Barrie, Ontario. This talk covered the origin of these pioneers, their trials and tribulations, and their spirituality as evidenced from the historical records and artifacts that remain. Tim's readings of some journal entries were highly entertaining and very poignant. He also touched on the Oro African Church, which is now a National Historic Site, and his experiences with obtaining this designation.

Next up were speakers Jane Gibson and Paul Cornfield, discussing the creation of the Bluewater District Black History Curriculum initiative. As both presenters come from the education field, they lent a unique perspective to the lack of Black history that is included in school curriculum. It is their vision to have Black history incorporated into the local history component taught in Grey and Bruce Counties. As well, this initiative may become a template, which could serve as a model for other school boards in Ontario for similar projects in the future.

After an exceptional lunch catered by Linda Leith, and time to view all of the vendors' tables, the afternoon sessions commenced. The first speakers for the afternoon were Bryan and Shannon Prince from the historic Canadian Buxton Settlement.



Bryan & Shannon Prince

They spoke on the Underground Railroad as witnessed by some of the women who were intimately involved – as slaves, as conductors, and ultimately as free persons. Shannon gave life to these women through the readings she performed, and there were more than a few tears in the audience when she was finished!

The final speaker was Karolyn Smardz Frost, an historian, educator, and professional archaeologist. She discussed the life of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn, fugitive slaves from Kentucky who settled in Toronto and started their own successful cab company. The Blackburns were recently designated “Persons of National Historic Significance” by the Historic Sites & Monuments Board of Canada. This talk was the perfect end to the Event, not only because it is a fascinating story, but also because it embodies the theme of this year’s Event – *Heritage Uncovered: Black Pioneers* – as the life of the Blackburns was literally uncovered on an archaeological dig led by Karolyn.

Attendant events included:

- Book signings by authors Tim Crawford of the *Oro African Church*
- David Beasley of *Sarah’s Journey*
- Tombstone repair workshop lead by Ken Turner and hosted by the Heritage Pathways Committee
- Bus tour of Black sites in Grey County hosted by the Heritage Pathways Committee
- Heritage Pathways Committee Annual General Meeting