

Roots of Freedom Project

Terri Jackson

Background:

Many people have stopped me to ask “What is your interest in Black History?” My interest in Black History began as a small child raised on the east hill of Owen Sound, Ontario. This area was home to many Black families who were my neighbours and with whom I went to school. My father raised me with a strong sense of equal rights for all. Having served in the Second World War, he believed that “You are no better than they, and they are no better than you.” This one line has stayed with me all these years and inspired my own sense of equality. So when I was approached in June of 2003 to sit on an ad hoc committee responsible for planning and erecting the beautiful Black History Cairn in Harrison Park, Owen Sound, I was honoured to serve. With the other committee members I assisted in every aspect of the project, from deliberating on the Cairn’s design, to making the brochure and the CD. It was a proud moment for me when it was unveiled on July 31, 2004.

In September 2006 I was awarded the opportunity to begin a “Freedom Trail Project” for the City of Owen Sound and to research the Black History of the Scenic City. The project was intended to create a pathway - a Freedom Trail - from the Cairn in Harrison Park, over the Rainbow Bridge, across 2nd Avenue to the 7 Bends, and into Greenwood Cemetery. My job was to learn the workings of this historic cemetery and to investigate its records with a view to learning more about the hundreds of Black Owen Sound citizens who were buried there. My office was located at the cemetery. There, I assisted people doing genealogical research and learned much from the records about some of the Blacks who were interred at Greenwood, as well as a few white abolitionists. Unfortunately, time ran out on the grant before I could complete my research there.

The Roots of Freedom Project:

As luck would have it, I was able to take all that I had learned and apply it to a wonderful opportunity that came to me in the form of a grant by Citizenship and Immigration to celebrate the “Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1807”. I was awarded the honour of continuing this research on behalf of the Bruce and Grey Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society, Heritage Pathways and the Black History Event. The mandate of the Roots of Freedom Project’s is to research Grey County’s historic Black community, from its most southerly border up to Owen Sound. I have been pouring over nineteenth century records in pursuit of this historical community.

The grant has given me the opportunity to interview some very interesting people including Cora Miller, an elderly black woman known to Owen Sounders as “the lady who kept our sidewalks swept clean”, and Phyllis Armstrong of Orangeville, who is a

descendant of Rev. William McAdam Luke, a minister from Markdale, who went to Alabama to educate Black workers and their children. He was the first white man lynched by the Klu Klux Klan. Mary Reid of Walter's Falls told me the intriguing story of John Walter and how he brought one Henry Boeoy from Toronto to the Falls. Harry Boeoy worked at the mill and is thought to be the man who built the wall that supports the falls. Much to my disappointment, I have not been able to trace what happened to Henry Boeoy. A Robert Boeoy purchased two burial plots at McLean's Cemetery in Walter's Falls, but apparently no one is buried there. Henry Boeoy is an example of the challenges faced doing this research: many nineteenth century Black citizens seemed to be gone without a trace. I searched census reports, township histories, cemetery records, surname collections, vertical files, crown patents, and other records in order to gather this unique history. Patience and diligence are my guide posts!

In the near future this research will be compiled into a publication for all to enjoy!



Replica BME (British Methodist Episcopal) Church window, part of the Black History Cairn at Harrison Park in Owen Sound