

# **Celebrating our Black History: Owen Sound's Black History Cairn**

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## **Background:**

From 1830 through the end of the American Civil War, escaped slaves made their way across the border via the Underground Railroad. The *Fugitive Slave Act*, passed by the American Government in 1850, led to bounty hunters raiding border communities forcing many Blacks to move north for safety. Grey County began to open up to non-Native settlers in the 1830s, which led a number of escaped slaves and freedmen to settle in the region. Their courage and hard work contributed to the growth of both the County of Grey and the City of Owen Sound.

On July 31, 2004, the Black History Cairn Committee unveiled a commemorative cairn during the 142<sup>nd</sup> Emancipation Day Celebrations at Harrison Park in Owen Sound. According to Webster's 1913 Dictionary, a cairn is "a rounded or conical heap of stones erected by early inhabitants of the British Isles, apparently as a sepulchral monument." In this case, the cairn is a memorial to Owen Sound's Black settlers.

Through symbolism and interpretive plaques, the cairn traces the route of those abducted from their native Africa, forced into slavery in the West Indies and the United States, and how many escaped to Canada via a network called the Underground Railroad.

The idea to create a cairn to commemorate the contribution made to Grey County and the City of Owen Sound by the early Black settlers was first discussed in the spring of 2003. The concept was brought before the Tourism Advisory Committee and a sub-committee was formed.

## **Black History Cairn Conceptual Rendering:**

The Black History Cairn project is an interactive monument site that allows visitors to approach the site and have a sense of shelter and protection. This atmosphere creates a mood of reflection, perhaps even reverent celebration for the African descendants that travelled the Underground Railroad.

The church was central to the Black community. The windows used in the monument are shaped from the original window frames of the "Little Zion" church that was the first Black church in Owen Sound. (These windows were taken from the structure in 1986, and stored. The structure was then torn down.)

Here in the Owen Sound area, they would have seen many views such as the one through the church windows that look out over the Sydenham River. Here is where

thanks to God was given for safe passage from slavery; and prayers for their continued freedom went up in loud praises of song or quiet meditation.

The interactive site fosters different feelings and moods around the structure given the season, the weather and the time of day. For example, sunlight shining through the windows will create a dramatic feeling. There are a variety of moods both “inside and out” of the structure.

The “ruin” look to the structure is reflective of all cultures past, and their link to the future. Tragically, the African descendent has no Motherland structures in this country, but rocks used in the cairn from many of those African countries replicate a simple humble structure that became home and church to them.

The apple trees reflect a sign, which some people used to indicate the movement of the Underground Railroad northbound. They were told to follow the apple blossoms and they would get north. The blossoming season is later as one moves north. Also, the early Black community was rural, farming quietly and carving a place in the wilderness of their promised land.

The quilt patterns found in the ground on the “inside” of the structure also repeat patterns of codes, messages that the runaways were instructed to follow. Some of these patterns were “Flying Geese,” “Monkey Wrench,” “Drunkard’s Path” and “North Star”.

Cairn conceptual designer: Bonita Johnson-deMatteis

Quilt tile designer: Jim Hong Louie

Cited Sources: [www.jeanepasaero.com](http://www.jeanepasaero.com);

[www.geocities.com/ams201\\_2001/african\\_american\\_history\\_html](http://www.geocities.com/ams201_2001/african_american_history_html);

Brain Quest Black History Games by Workman; Grey Roots: Museum & Archives; Stephanie McMullen; Bonnie Landry