

Tragedy of “Nellie Gray” **Linked with Owen Sound Colony of Escaped Slaves**

Former Resident Contributes Two Early Stories, One Local and One American , which Together Tell of the Failure of a Lover’s Plot to Find Sanctuary Here and the Far-Reaching Results Of That Failure.

This article is as it appeared in the May 8, 1937 issue of *The Owen Sound Daily Sun Times*. This article is republished with the kind permission of *The Sun Times*. The author is unknown. You will note that terms which are now considered racist and/or sexist are used freely.

A former resident of this district, a graduate of the Owen Sound Collegiate of 47 years ago, who prefers to remain anonymous, has contributed the appended fascinating historical article, which deals with early life in this community from an angle which has rarely if ever been touched upon before. He refers to the Negro colony which formed part of Owen Sound in the early days and at the same time to the American colony before the Emancipation of the slaves. With a good deal of sympathy and pathos the writer tells of the tragedy which befell a young Negro couple in Pennsylvania.

This young couple, according to the narrative, had planned to get their freedom and sanctuary was awaiting them at Owen Sound. The tragedy which befell them inspired the song, “Darling Nellie Gray.” This immortal song swept the country and it is believed to have wielded a great influence in the moulding of the Union of the States by breaking down the slave system which was the foe of the Union.

The article also describes the coming of the Negroes to Owen Sound, through the aid of the friendly Indians and the Jesuit missionaries. Many of the present day Negro citizens of Owen Sound are descendents of they who escaped over the border and settled at Owen Sound. The article is very interestingly written in the first person. It opens with events of nearly one hundred years ago:

I was called after my grandfather, Angus Gillies --- Gillies was a Presbyterian catechist, who preached both in Gaelic and English. He was sent out by the people of Stornaway and Cromerty in Scotland to carry the gospel to one of the many fast growing settlements in Upper Canada, which colony was increasing very rapidly about the middle of the nineteenth century. Gillies was appointed by the Kirk to serve a village surrounded by a small community of farmers and fishermen. The little settlement was in a small but very beautiful valley, surrounded on three sides by rocky hills. On the map it was a little dent on the south shore of Georgian Bay, known as Owen Sound.

In reporting the result of his missionary labours to his friends to Scotland, the preacher always referred to another congregation over which he had charge—a

congregation of escaped Negro slaves. The part of Owen Sound west of the river was then known as [N----- Town]. Gillies was very fond of this little community and held very strong views on the question of Emancipation.

The pioneer missionary visited monthly another small settlement at a place then called Griffin's Corners. Griffin was said to be himself a Roman Catholic, but he was a very sincere friend of and a very great assistance to the Protestant preacher. This religious tolerance and cooperation is one of the most common features of pioneer life. Philip MacIntosh was also a very close friend. The place is now Dornoch. The MacIntoshes are there at the present day.

My grandfather died at Griffin's Corners and was buried in a grave unknown to any of the present generation. After his death my grandmother lived with us for many years. She often referred to a letter they had from the States. This letter advised them that in the course of a couple of years they might expect a visit from an escaped Negro slave, that the Negro would have money and that they were to send the money to a teacher in the States. The teacher would buy the freedom of a young girl slave, who would then be at liberty to come to Canada and there join her lover. The meeting place was to be Owen Sound. Though long looked for no Negro ever came. This was the story that at the time I considered of little or no importance.

After the events just related, more than half a century passed by. One day conversing with an American traveller we discussed the problems of pioneer life. He was a very interesting conversationalist. He said among other things, that it was unfortunate that, owing to the lack of newspapers and other means of keeping records of the happenings during the early life of a community, that things were forgotten that would have been of great interest to succeeding generations.

For instance, he said, his father went to a college presided over by an old Scotch professor. The old man was a very strong sympathizer with the slaves and was a very strong advocate of Emancipation. It was probably on account of his well known views that he was visited one day by a very intelligent slave named Ned. This boy made a confidant of the professor and confessed among other things that he was heels over head in love with a very amiable young wench on a farm nearby. But because of the policy of slave owners to keep slaves segregated (because these were the days when a phrase first came into use "plotting against the whites") the courtship of Ned and Nellie must be carried on through an intermediary. The go-between was the old school teacher himself.

Now the three just mentioned formed a plot, which was that the professor should loan to the slaves a few dollars in coin. He was at the same time to prepare a hamper of food. It was well known that if a black was seen with any more money than a coin or two, or was seen to buy more food than three or four buns or five corn dodgers, he was at once suspected of being supplied by some friendly white and that a getaway was being planned. Hence the coin. Hence the food. The country was infested with a gang of rascals, always on the look out for "Skiddaddlers" in order to get the twenty dollars bounty for the runaway slaves. But the professor was confidant that Ned with his resources would be able to escape into Canada; that he would find employment and be able to save in the course of a couple years to be able to ransom the girl. Then he would get in touch with a Scotch missionary and arrange to meet his freed lady love.

It is interesting to note here that this plot was made in Pennsylvania, a state settled by the Quakers, a very religious and very honest people. Pennsylvania had made strict laws to prevent maltreatment of the blacks. The state had also made laws by which the freedom of a slave could be purchased. Two hundred dollars seems to be the price fixed, so the old teacher was justified in the belief that not only his friend would be able to earn the money but also that he could obtain freedom for the girl.

Sold to a stranger

On the very eve of attempting to carry out the plot, a most unfortunate event happened, a real tragedy. The young girl slave disappeared. Careful enquiry elicited the information that a stranger had visited the plantation, riding a horse and leading another with an empty saddle. He looked over the slaves. He had been seen to pay the farmer a considerable sum of money and then placed Nellie in the empty saddle and away they went. Every one who had seen the man declared that he was an utter stranger, who had never before been seen in the neighborhood. From this it was evident that her new home was a considerable distance away and that any hope of tracing her was out of the question.

There was another reason also which made the recovery of the girl hopeless. Slaves had no names. They were simply called after their owners – Johnson's Jim, Thompson's Dick, So and So's Nellie or Susan. So that Nellie in her new home would be called by a new name. Ned and his friend were in despair. The teacher, in order to express his own feelings and his sorrow for the lover, designed a little verse. Then he invented a little tune. He taught it to his glee club. He taught them to sing it with such an expression of sorrow and pathos as could hardly be imitated by the present generation. It became very popular, so much so, that letters of enquiry came to the little village quoting the first line and asking where the new song could be obtained. It wasn't a song. It was only a verse, what people in those days called a little ditty.

Here is the verse:

“O poor Nellie Gray they have taken her away
And I shall ne'er shall see my darling any more,
They have taken her to Jordan to wear her life away
And I shall ne'er see my darling Nellie Gray.”

So many enquiries were made for the song that the author became aware that if it were a song, it would be a popular one. So he set to work and designed two more verses. He had his pupils answer the letters, quoting the verses and adding that the music had never been written, but that it could be picked up by ear from some neighboring songster. But from some unknown source the song appeared for sale on newsstands with both words and music printed. In a very short time it was both sung and whistled in every state. It was said to have considerable influence in moulding opinion and helping bring about the Democratic victory in 1860, when Abraham Lincoln with his emancipation policy was elected President of the United States.

It is interesting to add that the little Negro colony would never have successfully made their escape were it not for the assistance of friendly Indians. Beating their way through the dense Michigan forests the Negroes at length arrived at the Indian village of

Mackinac. Here the Indians not only furnished them with a couple of canoes but taught them how to row them and directed them how to get from one village to another. It is an interesting historical fact that when a Negro met an Indian he found a friend. The Indians seemed to figure, here is another colored race, plundered, enslaved and persecuted by the ruthless pale-faces. Hence the friendship.

It is also a fact that the [r--] men were more kindly disposed toward the Canadian whites than their American cousins, especially the American soldiery, whom they called Long Knives. It may have been that they received kinder treatment from Canadians. Or it may have been their horror of slavery that caused them to look on Canada as the land of freedom. But the chief cause undoubtedly was the result of the efforts of the Jesuit missionaries in their attempt to civilize and Christianize the Indians. This influence reached far beyond the political boundaries of Canada.

It was the intention that the Negroes should go from island to island and finally escape to the Jesuit mission at Penetanguishene, rather than the Protestant mission at Owen Sound. But the lateness of the season and the wide expanse of the treacherous waters of the Georgian Bay forced them to make changes to their plan and to make their escape to the last named mission.

During eighty years the moon has climbed the mountain many thousand times, many things have happened, most of them forgotten. Very few of the inhabitants of Grey have ever heard of ["N----- Town"]. In fact the only relic that I know of is the name of a river that emptied into the Georgian Bay right at the door of the little black community. The name is an attractive one, "Pottawatamie."