

By Any Means Necessary: The Silver Shoe Settlement and its Cemetery

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The little-known Black settlement called “The Silver Shoe” existed in the New Lowell area of Simcoe County for at least twenty years prior to the 1837 Upper Canada Rebellion. The Morgan and Thompson families were the first Blacks to arrive in the district in the early 1800s. Both families were Loyalists who made their escape from slavery during the American Revolution, under the protection of British garrisons and Aboriginal villages. Eventually, they were joined by other fugitives, until more than twenty-five families had made their homes in the great pine forest of old Sunnidale Township.

Around the same time, the government-sponsored Black Settlement in Oro had been established in defence of the Province’s northern frontier. Black veterans of the War of 1812 were offered land grants in exchange for their willingness to fend off possible attacks by advancing enemy forces. It is not surprising that the two communities became enmeshed, in light of their mutual cultural backgrounds. Although, neighbouring whites were, for the most part, very accepting of their Black brothers and sisters; the practice of “separate but equal” was usually maintained. In general, the two were forced to work together to survive the elements of nature in the harsh environment of Simcoe County.

When the railroad arrived in the County, industry was not far behind. Blacks began migrating between the respective settlements in search of work. As the Oro Settlement began its decline, The Silver Shoe’s population virtually exploded. Men, women and children were able to find employment in the lumber camps, as choppers, teamsters and cooks. The Jacques & Hay Company was a major employer of the time, providing work for spinners in their furniture and rope factory, as well as in their lumber mills.

A Black man, named Valentine Speers, became a trusted and respected foreman with the company. Isaac Jefferson was the first Black man in the settlement to own his own business. He was a blacksmith by trade and opened his shop near his home at the intersection of the present day intersection of the 9/10 Highway and Hogback Road. Charles (Charlie) Morgan, who was a grandson of John Morgan Sr. (one of the original settlers), operated a lucrative cab business transporting passengers to and from the train station. Other Blacks were instrumental in the development of the tobacco industry in old Sunnidale Township.

By 1997, the Pioneer Cemetery, which had been the hub of the community, had fallen into a state of disgrace. It had long since been abandoned and was tragically neglected. The Silver Shoe Historical Committee was formed to rectify the situation and

set about the horrendous task of restoring the site to a place of dignity. The restoration work has been on-going for the past ten years under my direction. In that time, over 400 deceased persons have been recorded, although only seventy-five stone and two wooden grave markers remain intact in Sites “A” and “B”. There are many remnants of grave markers scattered throughout an adjacent ravine that must be raised and documented.

Recently, research began to obtain as much information as possible about the original pioneers and, to trace the migration of the Black settlers between the Oro Settlement, through the Silver Shoe and, onward through various communities to the northern terminus in Owen Sound. In due course, this research resulted in an unforeseen discovery. More than 100 additional unmarked gravesites were located in the forested area (Site “C”) to the north of the main site.

With the assistance of Mr. Les MacKinnon of the Priceville site, the wheels have subsequently been put in motion to lobby the municipal and provincial Governments with a view to the restoration and preservation of the newly-discovered site. Site “C” is believed to be the original fugitive burial ground that surrounded the location of the first Sunnidale Black church in the early 1800s.

The Committee understands that many wrongs were committed in the name of progress, in all parts of the Province during the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, there were no laws in place to protect sites such as this. Municipal officials, pressured by complaints from the community “to do something” and tax payers’ demands for road and sewer improvements in newly-acquired wards, sought a quick fix. Property lines were altered and bulldozers were used to remove debris as a way to cut the budget for over-loaded municipal works departments. Put in simple terms, there was no one competent enough, old enough or, educated enough to contest the decisions made by municipal councils. Therefore, the clean-up work continued as they saw fit and, with the full protection of the law. With due respect for municipal officials in all parts of Ontario, the problem of abandoned cemeteries became an issue of the rights and interests of the living versus protecting the bones of dead men, women and children who no longer have a voice to defend themselves.

In recent years, the Silver Shoe Historical Committee is pleased to report a good working relationship with Clearview Township, and remains hopeful that an amicable solution will be found. Regardless, present day municipal officials must realize and accept that this is no longer a case of “out of sight...out of mind.” The ancestors have not been forgotten; they are no longer without an advocate who is willing to stand up and be counted in defence of what is right. The Silver Shoe Historical Committee is that advocate, and is resolved in their motto: “Preserve & Protect... BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY.”