

# The Niagara Bound Tour Experience

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## What inspired me to do these tours?

In the 1970s when early Canadian Black History was first being recognized in the Niagara region, authorities would not accept information unless it was written. Descendants of Freedom Seekers are in some cases similar to Native Canadians. Some Freedom Seekers families have family Bibles which chronicle their history, but many know their history orally. It should be noted here, too, that some during these early times would not have been able to read or write, so telling their story could only be done orally. Although my family was supposed to have a family Bible, I have not been able to track it down. My stories came to me through my Great Uncle Kit, who was the grandson of a Freedom Seeker. Although disappointed with the rejection of those that wanted this kind of information, it remained with me that I would do something someday.

Seven years ago, I turned 50. At that time, I had to figure out what I was going to do with the rest of my life. A tourism business came to mind as it was a field in which I had many years of experience. How the focus on doing early African Canadian tours in the Niagara region came about, isn't clear in my memory. However, telling these stories and showing the sites has become a calling for me.

## Where does the tour go?

The first stop on the tour is the location of an old ferry crossing in Fort Erie. This site is the most important one for me, personally. My family came to Fort Erie in 1850, and so could have very easily landed at this site, as did many other Freedom Seekers. One of the most famous to have landed here was Josiah Henson, believed to be the inspiration for the main character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Next it's off to visit the Colored Cemetery where former slaves, including my ancestors are buried. Stories are told here.

Then we usually travel the beautiful Niagara Parkway on our way to St. Catharines. Sites are pointed out along the way. In St. Catharines we participate in a tour and a talk at the British Methodist Episcopal Church – Salem Chapel. The tour is conducted by a church member. The BME church had a very famous parishioner, who assisted in an advisory role during the construction of the church and attended it when she was in town. It is Harriet Tubman, Black Moses, that I refer to here. They have a wonderful collection of papers and illustrations displayed in the basement.

After the church visit, a short stop is made at a park where I talk about a man named Richard Pierpoint. A portion of his land was located on this site. Pierpoint was only sixteen years old when he was taken from his home village in Senegal. I tell his story, which includes how he ended up in St Catharines.

The last stop is a visit to the grave of Rev. Anthony Burns, who also lived in St. Catharines. He had been a Freedom Seeker during the time of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. He was one of the unfortunates who made their way to freedom in the north but were found by their enslaver, and because of the Act, arrested, convicted and returned to the south. The group is told how he eventually ends up in St. Catharines.

That's the basic tour. Because Niagara-on-the-Lake does not permit buses on their streets, I usually don't go there. I do tell the groups that it was there, in 1793, that Governor General John Graves Simcoe signed the Anti-Slavery Act that started the process to eliminate slavery in this country.

### **Tour experiences and Feedback**

My base is broad as to who comes on these tours. They are young, old, black, white, well-informed regarding this history and those who think they will actually see railroad tracks. Reactions to the tour vary. Some are awestruck by the sites and the information that is shared. Some are moved to tears. But the reaction I find most gratifying is when someone leaves the tour wanting to learn more about this wonderful history and/or becomes curious about his or her own family history

### **Conclusion**

It has been said that this is a dark spot in African-American and African-Canadian history. I disagree with that statement completely. My ancestors, along with the many other Freedom Seekers were a people of great faith and strength. Many were broken both emotionally by loss of family and physically due to the cruel environments in which they were previously forced to live. Then they had the difficult journey to get here. Not easy to do would be an understatement considering that, as well as dealing with all the other things that would put them in peril, many travelled at Christmas time, when the weather can be cruel. By faith they survived very difficult circumstances in search of freedom. These people have left their descendants a legacy of pride. Because of their struggles, we must strive to make them proud, demonstrating that respect in ourselves, which we feel for them. This is the message I try to get across to all who take this tour, especially the students. We all have a legacy to uphold and take pride in, no matter what our background may be. We must all, always, be the best we can be for them as well as for ourselves.

*Editors Note: for more information, visit [niagaraboundtours.com](http://niagaraboundtours.com)*