

Uncovering the Hidden

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Every time I participate in the Black History Field Trip to Grey County, I see the excitement of the first-timers to be learning history that was never taught to them. Most people of a certain age who attended school in Ontario learned nothing of its Black History. Those a little younger may have learned about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, presented as if the arrival of escaped slaves to Canada solved all their problems. An honest examination of the lives of early Black settlers in Canada is usually absent, even today.

Professor Naomi Norquay and I have been bringing groups of people together for one day in May for the past five years to learn about the early Black settlers in Grey County, particularly along the old Durham Road. Some come from the Toronto region, others from Owen Sound, and this year there were several local residents.

Kate Russell, Curator of the South Grey Museum in Flesherton, has brought a dynamic, fresh approach to highlighting the area's Black history. She welcomed us to the Museum on the morning of May 25th, and together with some "Friends of the Museum", provided a much-appreciated lunch. Naomi gave us an overview of the history of the Old Durham Road and an update on the work being done on its Black Pioneer Cemetery.

The afternoon included a visit to four sites: McKechnie Cemetery - a white pioneer cemetery just west of Priceville; the intersection near Durham known as Darkies Corners; the former property of early Black settler Ned Patterson; and the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Cemetery.

I asked several participants for their comments on the highlights and impact for them of the day's events. Aly Boltman from the Grey County Historical Society said,

I was so excited to be a part of the Black history field trip. Naomi was a fantastic leader and really brought the history to life through the pre-tour slide show at the South Grey Museum and the on-site interpretations. There was a real warmth amongst the participants, who came from far and wide for this rare cultural offering. The shared interest in Black history was evident, and I think all of us left feeling much more knowledgeable and inspired to learn more. I sincerely hope that more research can be done with the local volunteers and the Ontario Historical Society or other like-minded groups to further investigate the oral histories that imply the nearby locations of other tombstones as yet uncovered.

Among the participants, there was considerable concern regarding the missing tombstones from the Black Pioneer Cemetery. We were fortunate to be able to meet with some of the Cemetery Committee members and a donation from the Elementary Teachers of Toronto union was provided for their work. Lisa Guthro is a Toronto teacher and a member of the union's Anti-Racism, Equity and Social Justice Committee. These are her comments:

Everyone introduced themselves and it was great to be part of a group with such diverse reasons to be there. The home-made lunch was wonderful, but the conversations during the lunch and along the way reflected a certain commonality amongst the participants. It was rich conversation over great food.

The participants were asking questions such as:

1. What is hearsay? What is history? When does a story become history?
2. What are the ethics surrounding the disruption of graves?
3. Why does the sign Darkies Corners stand in such a vacuum?
4. What is the construction of history?
5. What is the connection between politics, history construction and science?

It was the unanswered questions that were the most interesting: showing the necessity to keep asking questions.

It was wonderful to have the finale at the Black Pioneer Cemetery on the Old Durham Road, powerful to have people meet us there - as if we were all arriving at a funeral....to participate in community mourning, in learning about a community's ancestors, to reflect on de-colonial thinking and the absence/omission of stories that reflect a not-so-subtle exertion of power in our so-called Canadian history. We were all there participating in the respect and dignity of Black immortality and, guided by the hope that this discussion will, in a small way, enable a new discursive space.

So, if the beginning and middle of the trip were about questions, the end at the cemetery location was definitely about a moral imperative to honour and remember the founders and members of Ontario communities. The experience of exploring Grey County's Black history has often left participants with mixed feelings. Wilburn Hayden is a professor of Social Work at York University with roots in South Carolina. He offered this comment:

I was honoured to walk the road that early freed Blacks used to build a community. Being there was both sweet and bitter. Sweet to know that Black people in the early 19th Century settled in a region of Ontario with Aboriginals before white settlers. Bitter to know that, in time, whites resettled the region and, until the work of Naomi and the folks with the South Grey County Museum, nearly erased its Black roots.

We are all fortunate that Naomi and the South Grey Museum are part of a growing network of cultural and historical workers in Grey County committed to "uncovering the hidden".