

# I Came as a Stranger: The Underground Railway

Bryan Prince

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Not, of course, a “railway” as one might inadvertently assume - rather an informal network of courageous people aiding Black refugees on both sides of the border, and providing safe havens as these people fled along the unfamiliar route - thousands of people desiring to escape slavery traveled this way. Only now is emphasis starting to be placed on this part of our Canadian history.

Bryan Prince is a descendant of slaves, living today where his Great-great-great grandparents arrived after escaping. In his own words, as well as in stories gleaned from personal accounts of those who escaped, a picture can be formed of the desperation driving these people to leave all they had ever known, perhaps loved ones, to flee northward. Cruelty beyond belief had been the lot of many of them. Their owners had purchased them; therefore they thought of them as chattels and treated them as such. Human beings were bought and sold, and used in any way the owner might choose. Slaves were considered property in the same way land or livestock was deemed to be, and often included as part of the estate forthcoming to his heirs when an owner died. Not only just the present slave, but also the slave’s own descendants would be subjected to being part of the inheritance.

Mr. Prince has set forth the details of the beginning of the slave trade in such a manner as to impress on the reader that the slaves came to the Western Hemisphere as strangers. Many were the reasons for their arrival here – captured by enemies and sold, sentenced to slavery as punishment for a crime, trickery of various sorts and even as children sold by parents to satisfy a debt. Strangers coming to an unknown land, never to be accepted, used, denigrated, oppressed, uneducated, and owned – these were people who in most cases in their homeland had been free! The possibility of escaping must have shone like a beacon leading them northward.

As well as the many stories of cruelty and the hardships of escape, there is documentation of those who aided the escapees, with great courage and danger to themselves. Many heroes emerged, working in what today would be known as “Humanitarian Rights”. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was in many homes as part of their small library, and included in the public school libraries of the day.

In 1834, *the Emancipation Act* became effective, abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire. In 1833, Upper Canada had already set a precedent in refusing to extradite fugitive slaves. In 1850, thanks to the passing of the second Fugitive Slave Act in the United States, not only slaves, but many freed Blacks as well began to flood into Canada. Interestingly, when the American Civil War began, Blacks returned in large numbers to join the Union Army.

Getting into Canada was only part of the struggle ahead for those who made it. For many, the land and some of the people proved inhospitable. Hardship, poverty and discrimination followed the emigrants to the new land. Strangers still, but now able to grasp their futures in their own hands, these people progressed as best they could.

Many of the names in Bryan Prince's book are not unknown to us today. Faith in themselves, faith in the new country, faith in God, and even just the knowledge that someone cared enough to help, shines from the pages of this book.



**Bonna Rouse**