

New Black History Program at Grey Roots

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Last year Grey Roots Museum and Archives launched *Hopes for Freedom: Black History in Canada*, a new educational program for grades K-8. Available to school groups from February 1-26, 2010, it was offered in two formats (tailored for grades K-3 and 4-8) and designed to:

give students a clearer understanding of the early role Canada played in the enslavement of Black people and how the introduction of the British Emancipation Act changed Canada into a place of hope and freedom for escaping slaves.

The program complemented other events at Grey Roots during Black History Month and included a tour of *From Slavery to Freedom: African Canadians in Grey County*, an extensive gallery exhibit featuring the stories of local Black settlers.



Although he didn't travel as far north as Canada, the true story of Henry "Box" Brown was central to the presentation for the junior grades. Henry was a slave from Virginia who, in 1849, mailed himself to abolitionists in Philadelphia. After a brief introduction to the topic of slavery in Canada, Stephanie McMullen, Heritage Interpretation Coordinator at Grey Roots, read *Henry's Freedom Box* (Ellen Levine, Orchard Books, 2007) aloud.

Students were then guided through activities that invited them to imagine Henry's journey and those of other fugitives from slavery. A highlight was the opportunity to step into a replica of the box Henry used in his escape. The children discussed what they would take with them today for such a journey, and the importance of freedom.

For senior grades, the program was designed with a broader focus. An activity card game introduced students to the types of work slaves were expected to perform, and a gallery-based scavenger hunt encouraged them to discover information about the various occupations available to Black settlers in Grey County. Through playing the *Hopes for Freedom Underground Railway Game* students learned more about the challenges and risks faced by those who fled slavery, the object of the game of course being to make it safely to freedom. Their visit to Grey Roots culminated with a screening of *Voice of the Fugitive* (National Film Board of Canada, 1978), a film about a group of escaped slaves making their way from the US to Canada.

Invited to observe the initial run of this program and document it for *Northern Terminus*, I tagged along with some of the school groups as they participated in the educational activities on offer. It was clear that the story of Henry Brown held particular appeal for the children; those in the older grades were just as excited as the young ones to see the replica of Henry's shipping crate and discuss the story of his escape. Several students were already familiar with aspects of local Black history, whether through previous visits to Grey Roots, classroom studies or personal experience, and enjoyed sharing their knowledge during group discussions and games.



The hands-on nature of many of the activities fostered experiential learning in a fun and memorable way, something appreciated by participating teachers. Knowledgeable program guides encouraged questions and group interaction, and kept the pace of activities going at age-appropriate speeds. *Hopes for Freedom: Black History in Canada* is an excellent new addition to the educational programs offered at Grey Roots, and certainly meets its goal of giving students a clearer understanding of the history of slavery and emancipation in Canada. Details about the program, including contact information for booking a school group, can be found online at greyroots.com.



Editor's note: the Hopes for Freedom program is being offered for grades 2, 3, 7, 8, 11 and 12 in February 2011.