

150th Emancipation Celebration Festival

August 3 – 5, 2012

**Grey Roots Museum & Archives, Georgian Bluffs;
Harrison Park and Kelso Beach Park, Owen Sound**

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From the Emancipation Celebration Festival website, www.emancipation.ca:

Join us in celebrating the journey of our ancestors at the Underground Railroad's most northerly terminus, Owen Sound, Ontario, Canada. Every Civic Holiday Weekend since 1862, the festival brings individuals together to celebrate: cultural history, art, and music; community collaboration and integration; [as well as] multiculturalism and heritage. Bring your family and friends for a weekend of music, art and cultural exhibits, keynote speakers, storyboards, crafts, children's games, education and genealogical forums and exuberant ambience.

THE SEVENTH ANNUAL SPEAKERS FORUM

The seventh annual speaker's forum began the festival at Grey Roots Museum & Archives on Friday evening. Guests began arriving at 6 p.m. in anticipation of the Forum's start at 7:30. In the interim they were greeted with the smooth jazz tones of Bobby Dean Blackburn and his group. Selections included *Georgia on My Mind* and other favourites. Participants sat at tables in the foyer lit by the mellow light of the evening sun streaming through the museum's windows, sipping beverages and enjoying cheese, fruit and little quiches.

Guests browsed the Marketplace before and after the evening's main presentation to view a selection of books and crafts by local and visiting authors and artisans. Barry Penhale, Publisher Emeritus of Dundurn Press, displayed various titles including this night's special speaker Bryan Prince's novel *One More River to Cross*. Interested persons were able to purchase books through the Grey Roots Gift Shop. Dundurn Press's selections would also be on sale at the Emancipation Picnic at Kelso Beach.

Mike Todd, General Manager of Coffin Ridge Boutique Winery, offered award winning tastings replete with wry titles such as *Into the Light White*, *Back From the Dead Red* and *Forbidden Fruit Hard Cider*. A donated basket of wine and chocolate was raffled off later in the evening. One was also able to buy raffle tickets for a beautiful engraved sterling silver cuff bracelet designed by Bev Metzger, of Metzger Studios in Barrie.



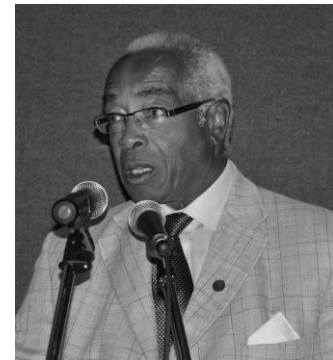
Larry Miller, MP & Senator Donald Oliver

At 7:30 the crowd moved into the auditorium. *O Canada* was sung to open the Forum. Blaine Courtney, Emancipation Festival Committee Chair and M.C., warmly welcomed and thanked the crowd for joining him and participating in the first event of the 150th Emancipation Celebration. Larry Miller, MP then spoke and said that it is important to celebrate the beginning of freedom and how all are proud of our heritage. Arlene Wright, on behalf of Grey County Warden, Duncan McKinlay, remarked that although our “County is such an infant” relatively speaking, its “incredible history is something to be very proud of.” A video appearance by Mayor Haswell followed, where she echoed the sentiments of previous speakers, remarking that “Owen Sound is so proud of this event.” Haswell also gave congratulations to Blaine Courtney on a “job well done.”

SENATOR DONALD OLIVER

The evening continued with Dorothy Abbott introducing the first speaker, Senator Donald Oliver of Nova Scotia. The Senator had the distinction of being the first Black man to serve in the upper house. A quote from the evening's program succinctly describes the Senator's contributions:

“A barrister, teacher, advocate and statesman,.. Senator Donald H. Oliver has served the peoples of Nova Scotia and Canada with honour, distinction and achievement for more than 40 years.” After his introduction, The Senator spoke of the history of slavery in Canada and it being a “most painful period of mankind.”



Senator Donald Oliver

Senator Oliver also talked about his family. He said that his grandfather, American-born Canadian missionary, William Andrew White, was the only Black chaplain in the entire British Army in World War I. He preached “hope, unity and equality.” His Aunt Portia White was a “world-renowned opera star who captivated audiences with her contra-alto voice.” Uncle Bill White was the first Black Canadian to be a candidate in a federal election in 1949. He was only 21 years old. On his paternal side, Senator Oliver said there was always an “emphasis on higher education.” Members of his family were instrumental in letting Black women go to nursing school in the province.

The senator also spoke about the “tragic story of Africville” in Nova Scotia and the “dire consequences of relocation.” In spite of its history, he remarked that it “galvanized the community into action.” Senator Oliver also stated that we are able to be “positive agents of change, create hope and instill in our people a sense of pride, confidence and self-respect.” He ended his speech with the statement: “Diversity, it can be achieved.”

After Senator Oliver's presentation, Lauren Dart of the Federal Department of Canadian Heritage was acknowledged. A thank you was also expressed for the government's support in the amount of \$7,600 to the Festival. Gratitude was also given for the generous support of personal and business donations, and to Grey Roots Museum & Archives.

AUTHOR BRYAN PRINCE - ONE RIVER TO CROSS



Bryan Prince

Mr. Prince remarked that there is “nothing like focusing on a particular family and getting to know them.” This was the case with the story of Isaac Brown. Prince became interested in Brown's history thinking that he might be a relative. As it turned out, Mr. Brown was not related, but the author still pursued the story because it was “so damn interesting.” *One More River to Cross* is the result of this great interest. Mr. Prince says he tells “stories that are so fascinating (that) I want to share them with people who want to know about them.”

Blaine Courtney ended the evening by thanking the speakers and asked the audience to “share their stories with others” and encouraged us to also “share new stories” in the days to come: a fitting start to the weekend.

THE BREAKFAST

Blaine Courtney opened the breakfast which preceded the Cairn Dedication Ceremony. The re-dedication was a celebration of the installation of several new stone donations as well as a salute to the Harrison Park 100th Anniversary. An opening prayer was followed by a moment of silence.

With initial hydro difficulties out of the way, volunteers flipped pancakes and browned sausages under a very warm sun. Participants gathered under the welcome shade of the picnic shelter close to the banks of the Sydenham River and eagerly anticipated the breakfast to come. Stories were exchanged, and new connections and friends were made. Senator Oliver and his wife were in attendance.

Igniting interest was a school project on Black History. Thirteen-year-old Hillcrest Elementary School student Damian McMillan was asked to attend the festival by Blaine Courtney, who was impressed by his work at the Grey Roots Annual Regional Heritage Fair. He presented his research, answered questions and exchanged his views on Black history with aplomb and candor. Little did McMillan know that he was about to become a Keynote Speaker at the Cairn presentation as well as, regrettably, Bonita de Matteis was unable to attend. About Black history, Damian asserted that “we don't learn nearly enough. I wanted to help spread awareness...”

As attendees enjoyed their breakfasts, the reunions and conversations continued. During the meal, Bruce C. Kruger, the Town Crier from Bracebridge, chatted to attendees and posed for photographs in his colourful period costume. Kruger then advised the crowd, in a commanding voice, that the Cairn ceremony was about to begin in ten minutes.

THE CAIRN CEREMONY

Participants began to walk over to the cairn in anticipation for the dedication. Mr. Kruger opened

the ceremony. He said that we will never forget the time of a disgraceful past and that the Cairn was erected to honour slaves. About the Cairn, he said freedom is the essence of this foundation, never to be forgotten, with the windows representing opportunities of the future.

Blaine Courtney then introduced Peter Lemon, Deputy Mayor of Owen Sound. Mr. Lemon stated that “the Cairn is a physical reminder of how important Black Heritage is in this community.” It is to celebrate “history and heritage,” and to “tell the tale so it is not lost in time.”

The ceremony ended before noon and attendees prepared to congregate again at Kelso Beach Park for the Picnic. The morning was a fulfilling start to what promised to be an exciting and invigorating afternoon and evening ahead.

THE PICNIC

Picnic registration opened at 1 p.m. with the official start at 2 p.m. People came from all over, including Toronto and neighbouring communities, as well as other parts of Ontario, and beyond. There were even regards from Kenya. Participants sported the official bright yellow ribbons. Kisses and handshakes, nods and smiles were exchanged with old and new friends and relatives. Children played and cooled down in the nearby Good Cheer Splash Pad. Tents were set above and at the base of the amphitheatre, providing welcome shade from the very hot temperatures. People dipped their toes into the bay at the beach, while others went for a swim. Many brought coolers filled with food and drink for the Picnic. Some donned t-shirts with photos of family members from generations past. A selection of food vendors was also available. Having travelled from the Stayner area, Angie's Place offered jerk chicken, oxtail and curried goat on their menu. There was a lemonade stand where one could quench a thirst with a fresh-squeezed glass. The Prancing Pachyderms offered their original kettle corn confections.

Family trees and histories were on display. Down from the concessions, further along the pathway near the harbour, one could browse and purchase unique goods and crafts from independent merchants and artisans. One was able to acquire a glass etched with the Running Man logo from Scrimshaw, handmade earrings, and books. Official Emancipation gear with the new logo designed by John Witkowski was also available.

Owen Sound and Grey County Tourism provided information about the region. Grey Roots Archivist Karin Noble sold copies, from recent and past years of the *Northern Terminus Journal*. Picnickers could also view an intriguing presentation about Black History in Oxford County replete with specific resources pertaining to its history.

OFFICIAL OPENING

At centre stage of the amphitheatre, resplendent town crier Bruce Kruger once again asked people to gather, to open the picnic in celebration of the 150 years. Kruger, present at the event for eleven years, told the tale of the “topsy-turvy doll”, with one side decorated as a Black child and the other as a white child. He used this doll as an illustration “reflecting the cultural tensions of the powerful and the powerless” and the “topsy-turvy” conditions in which they co-existed. The picnic is where “escaped slaves celebrate their freedom” as “we all do.” He wished a “great

blessing upon this great nation of Canada.”

Blaine Courtney welcomed all and Kruger. He then proceeded to introduce Peter Lemon. A beautiful wooden bowl handmade by Don May from a 150 year old silver maple was presented to Mr. Courtney. Symbolically, the tree from which the bowl was created began to grow around the time of the first Emancipation Picnic.

Mr. Courtney remarked that the previous evening's event was the most successful Speaker's Forum the Festival has ever had. Courtney also noted that the new breakfast event, introduced this year, will be continued. Over 125 people attended. He laid out the schedule for the afternoon, with David Sereda's Gospel Fest Workshop at the gazebo at 3:15 p.m., the Courtney family picture at 3:45, kid's races at 4:15, and music starting at 5:00. Throughout the day there would be face painting and colouring activities at the Kidz Zone.

GOSPEL WORKSHOP WITH DAVID SEREDA

Under the gazebo, participants gathered for David Sereda's Gospelfest Workshop. He invited the audience to offer ideas about the meaning of the words to the hymn *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*. One respondent thought that the “chariot was going to come no matter how low you go” and “it will carry you home”: a hymn full of faith in very difficult times. It was also discussed that the word “chariot” was code for the Underground Railroad. Mr. Sereda taught the melody of the hymn to the group resulting in a beautiful harmony. He preceded this joyful action with a brief discussion on the vocabulary of the Underground Railroad.

“Conductor, cargo, trains and stations” were examples of words put forth by participants. Mr. Sereda spoke of Harriet Tubman, known as “Moses” and how, as a conductor, she made 19 trips and “never lost a passenger”. This was an apt introduction into the next workshop piece: running. He instructed the group line by line. Feet were tapping, and bodies were moving as people sang, “You’re on a train and this train’s a’runnin’, runnin’ ‘til you reach that northern line.” At the end of all the verses, people were up and dancing.

EVENING MUSIC PROGRAM

The evening began with the Blackburn Brothers, their cool grooves intermingled with the warm breezes coming off the harbour. One of their selections was the classic song *Fever*. The brothers slowed it down and funkied it up. The line *Fever All Through the Night* certainly was a promise for the showcase which lay ahead that sultry evening. Liberty Silver with Eddie Bullen followed. She sang with such energy. Then came Mike Dunston and Soul Stew, exciting the crowd with such songs as *Give Me the Night* and *Come and Get Your Love*.

BME CHURCH CEREMONY SUNDAY MORNING

It was a humid morning, just after a downpour. The church was filled with good spirit and everyone was met with an exceptionally warm and heartfelt welcome. Newcomers felt like old friends. The Rt. Reverend Dr. Chester A. Searles who is the General Superintendent of the British Episcopal Church of Canada and Pastor at Christ Church - St. James British Episcopal

Church in Toronto, was introduced to give the service.

There were smiles all around and the service was highlighted with beautiful music. People hugged and shook hands at the Peace and Love portion of the service. The reading was Romans 8:1-5. The Reverend said we are “nothing without the Church and nothing without the Gospel.” He said that “Unless you have the love of God in your heart, we cannot have the act of slavery removed” and we must “ask God’s forgiveness.” He stated, “Embrace God and you will be free.” Then David Sereda, in his inimitable style led a rousing rendition of “Amazing Grace.” People moved and swayed while singing the rejoicing melody.

After the service, attendees were invited to a hearty chili lunch hosted by Reverend Al and Mrs. Flo Tobey. Along with the chili were plates of Mr. Tobey's dried Angus beef, buns, and fruit. Lunch was followed by an assortment of homemade pies and tarts and coffee or tea. Photos of past congregants were displayed in albums and hung on the walls of the church. Stories and histories were exchanged.

People walked away from the service inspired and ready to share with others at the final part of the celebration, the Gospelfest at Kelso Beach.

THE GOSPELFEST AT KELSO BEACH - SUNDAY

David Sereda again performed his uplifting gospel. Featured performers were Brian Hamilton with Divine Worship. The weekend ended on a joyous note.