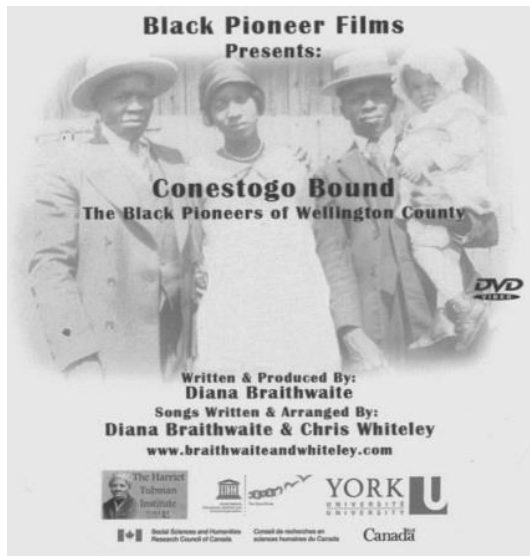


Conestogo Bound: The Black Pioneers of Wellington County

Produced, Written and Narrated by Diana Braithwaite
for the Harriet Tubman Institute, York University, 2012



It has been a long time since I have given much thought to what is known as the Underground Railroad (that network of people and places attached to the migration of Blacks escaping slavery in the southern U.S.A. to the northern states and Canada between the 1820s and the end of the Civil War), but my interest and curiosity were rekindled upon viewing this short film. So much so, that I have been avidly consuming everything I can read and view on the subject. The obvious question is - "why?" The reasons are many and varied: my interest in history generally, the fact that I live in a destination community for the Underground Railroad, and my admiration for the tenacity and bravery of those that

came before us, and so on. Arguably, a film that can inspire interest is worth viewing. Such, I think, is the case with *Conestogo Bound*.

Although we obviously have no video record of the times portrayed, we do have wonderful archival photographs from that era, and the film uses these effectively to give a sense of time and place, juxtaposing the images both with newspaper notices looking for human "property" having escaped from slavery, and warnings to free Blacks regarding who should not be trusted. The imagery is poignant and often heart-wrenching, leaving us with a sense of awe and bewilderment. We feel awe at the sheer strength, audacity and bravery of those involved, and bewilderment at our continuous capacity to treat others inhumanely.

The film briefly outlines the reasons for the establishment of the Underground Railroad, the central characters involved, and then brings us closer to home by describing the early Upper Canada (Ontario) settlements of Queen's Bush, Pierpont and Conestogo, amongst others, just north of Guelph and Waterloo, where many Black migrants settled. The hardships presented to travellers by the land, climate, economics and politics of the time are discussed. Often alone, they endured cold temperatures, fleeing across streams, fields and rivers, perhaps travelling 10-12 hours per night. Of particular interest is how the changing laws of the time affected the initial movement and subsequent migration patterns, resulting in Ontario becoming a major terminus for the railroad. Also of interest is how the influx of Europeans to Ontario affected the

land rights of the Black immigrants. Using false information and desiring to create as many lots for settlement as possible, unscrupulous land surveyors and agents convinced Black settlers to leave the land, although some Black pioneers did stay and were able to purchase their land outright.

It is easy to sometimes forget how closely tied we are to our neighbours to the south. After all, it is another country. Yes, we share a border, similar lifestyles, and so on, but we also share the culture and history of those brave people who risked everything for justice and a chance to be free. This film shares part of their story. Many of their ancestors now call themselves Canadian.

Although the film is only 30 minutes in length, it packs quite a bit in. It is nicely highlighted by appropriate music, composed and arranged by Diana Braithwaite and Chris Whitely, along with archival photographs.

Suitable for school-aged children and adults.

Time: 29 minutes: 49 seconds



Mike MacLean