

# Heritage Pathways Bus Tour of Historic Sites

**Guided by Les MacKinnon**

Sunday June 29, 2003

On Sunday June 29, after the inaugural meeting of the new Heritage Pathways organization, about twenty interested conference attendees (at the Second Annual Grey County Black History Event) boarded a yellow school bus and embarked on a guided tour of the original Durham Road. The road was originally a survey line, so it was perfectly straight: east from Durham, following a trajectory to a point east and south of Priceville. What made the tour interesting was the fact that most of it is still a road, while some of it is mere hints of a road, or simply a trace of the original survey line. Les MacKinnon guided the tour, providing fascinating information and anecdotes about the road, its history, and its significance: past and present.

The tour started in Durham at the junction of the Garafraxa Trail and western terminus of the Durham Road. At Concession #2 we stopped at the bridge over the Saugeen River, where in the 1830s a surveyor by the name of Charles Rankin had crossed the river during his survey of the Durham Road. Les pointed out that the bridge marked a traditional fording place - used first by the Native people and later by the first settlers. Just over the bridge is still known as "Darkies' Corners", a term that refers to the first settlers on the Durham Road, African-American refugees from the slave holdings in the United States.

The next stop was in "The Glen", which lies to the south of Grey County Road #4. Here in a protected vale are a few farms dating from that early settlement. Interestingly, the buildings actually mark the "back end" of the original properties that would have fronted on the original Durham Road, which was at that point steep hills, unsuited for travel with teams of horses. The Glen Road, built as a way around the hills, is a protected area, full of springs, providing the farms with a small microcosm of slightly milder weather and less harsh conditions.

The next point of interest was a small enclosure in the corner of a field, known as "Smellie's Cemetery", which was the final resting place of some of the first settlers of African-American descent. Reclamation of this cemetery is an example of the kind of work that needs to be done to recover the history of the area's first non-Native settlers.

All along the way we noted where old lilac bushes marked where former homesteads had been: nature's way of holding the past in memory. As we got close to Priceville, the old road appeared as a trail, running alongside Grey County Road #4. In Priceville we stopped at the original bridge site, which is just downstream from where the present bridge crosses the Saugeen River on #4. It too had been a traditional fording place, used first by the Native people, and then by the African-American settlers.

Up the hill, east of Priceville, we stopped at the point where the old Durham Road crosses #4. The road was officially closed in 1971, when the highway was widened. Although the road is still visible, the gravel has given way to grass and underbrush, and it is fast being overtaken by nature, reminding us that nature also erases memory.

The next stop was where the unused portion of the old Durham Road meets the current day Durham Road. Les noted that all along the road at this point there had been African-American settlers. We stopped at the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer

Cemetery, where a cedar hedge marks the place where the four reconstructed tombstones are displayed under a plexiglass cover.

The last stop was where the road takes a sharp bend to the south. Les explained that the original Durham Road survey ended abruptly when it met up with the Toronto - Sydenham survey. Apparently, it was illegal for one survey to cross another, so the Durham Road ended in the middle of nowhere; an odd end to a road with so much fascinating history.

The bus tour then turned towards Ceylon and Flesherton and made its way north of Kimberley along the Duncan Road (Concession #14) to the former Martin-Halstead Farm, where the current owner unearthed two tombstones belonging to the original homesteaders. Already at the site, Ken Turner and Yvonne Harrison, president and member respectively of the Essex County Historical Cemeteries Preservation Society, had painstakingly restored the stones. We stopped there long enough to stretch our legs, chat and enjoy the lovely day. Special guests included Karin Foster, Archivist at the Grey County Archives, and Robert Leverty, representative of the Ontario Historical Society.

The next time I drive to Durham along Grey County Road #4, I will be cognizant of a whole new layer of history. The original survey line - along the original Durham Road - remains as a marker and remnant of the earliest settlement in the area by non-Natives. It will be a key factor in future endeavours to recover the history of Grey County's earliest settlers. On both sides of it are rolling hills and farmers' fields with stories to tell. And, there is at least one busload of interested people, anxious to learn more.



**Naomi Norquay**