

Land's Memory: Looking for Traces of the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Settlement

Naomi Norquay



On my office wall is a lovely painting by Jennifer Stenberg. It's one I commissioned. I had asked Jennifer to paint me a picture of the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Cemetery, but I didn't want a literal rendering of the cemetery's centrepiece (four gravestones under plexi-glass). I wanted Jennifer to paint something that would give the viewer a sense of the landscape in which the cemetery was situated.

And so, the view from the painting is at the edge of the cemetery, looking towards the gentle rolling hills beyond. Ironically, perhaps, the cemetery is the only marker of the once vibrant community that lived along the Durham Road.

This was where they buried their dead and left a record of a life lived, no matter how short or long. The painting often makes me wonder what it would have been like back in 1854 when

Chauncey and Mahatabele Simons came to the cemetery to bury their son, Christopher¹. I wonder if the cemetery was nestled amongst towering maples and elms, the dominant tree species at that time.² Or was it next to newly-cleared land still raw from having its age-old forest ripped out and its soil broken and turned over?

I wonder what it had been like for the Simons family to travel to the cemetery from their farm on Lot #7, Concession 1, S.D.R.³ along the track known then as “The Durham Road” - a journey that takes about 30 or 40 minutes by foot. Did they collect their neighbours along the way, so that by the time they reached the cemetery, there was a large gathering of mourners?



My interest in the Old Durham Road community is personal: my parents bought three 50 acre lots⁴ adjacent to the Simons’ acreage in 1966. At that time there was some oral history passed on to us by our neighbours about an early Black settler on our property. It seems that our land had once been owned by a Black preacher. Our neighbours seemed amused to learn that my father was also a preacher. He not only bought the land, he also decided to build the cottage on the same hill on which the Black preacher had built his home.

¹ Christopher’s headstone is one of the four preserved under plexi-glass at the cemetery. (*Broken Shackles* , Peter Meyler, editor, Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2001, p. 202)

² *A History of the County of Grey*, (E. L. Marsh et al., Owen Sound: Fleming Publishing Company Ltd., 1931, p.1)

³ The Durham Road was the road to which all concessions were referenced. “S.D.R.” means south of the Durham Road. The Simons lived on the south side of the Durham Road. “N.D.R.” means north of the Durham Road.

⁴ They purchased Lots #8, 9 and 10, Concession #1, S.D.R..

I spent my childhood summers searching for evidence of that early pioneer. Not surprisingly, the land held (and still holds) memories of that early settler. The property has some very old stone foundations which are visible only in the springtime before the grass grows. There are the tumble-down remains of cedar rail fencing, in the traditional “snake rail” pattern that still can be seen zigzagging along the lot lines. There are several piles of large rocks, suggesting the land was cleared for farming. The rotting remains of grand old apple trees and their many offspring dot the landscape and we still dig up little pieces of crockery, china and the odd hand-hewn nail when we turn the soil in the garden.

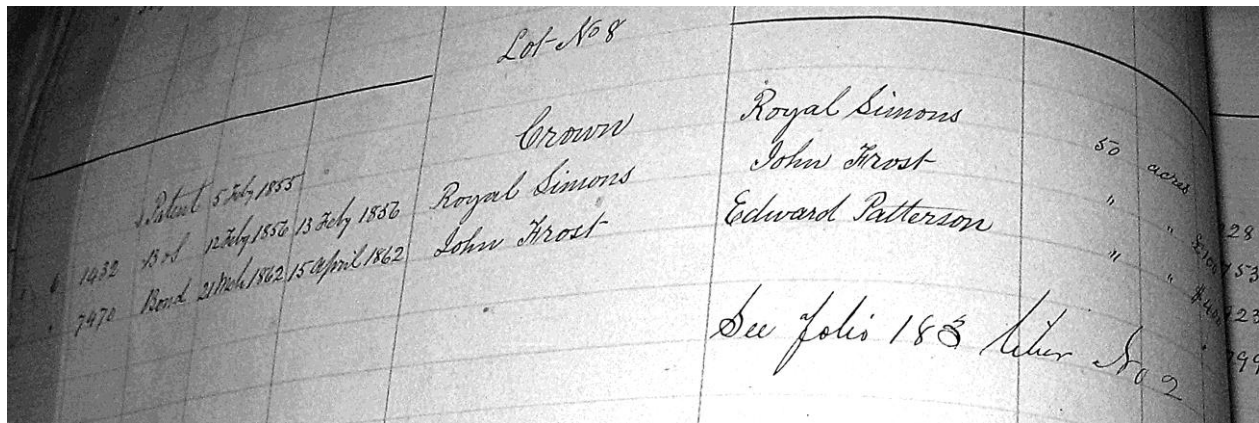
Using the hand-written census reports, land registries and other primary written sources it is possible to piece together some basic information about the first settlers along the Old Durham Road: their names, ages, marital status, number of children, and occupations. While there may be letters, diaries and other personal papers kept by their descendants, publicly owned documentation of this kind is virtually non-existent for this community.

Similarly, while descendants and other “old-timers” may know stories about the community, to date, there is little oral history available to the public. While I have ambitions in this direction for future research, I have decided to take Karolyn Smardz Frost’s advice (see interview in this Journal) and begin my exploration on the land itself.

So, on a blustery, grey day last November (2009), I made the journey on foot, from the Simons’ 50 acre lot to the cemetery, and along the way looked for evidence of that long ago community.

Chauncey Simons received the deed for his land in February 1855. He was farming it well before that. The family is listed in the 1851 census at that location and they had the sad occasion to bury their son in 1854.

The first owner of our land (at first only Lot #8) was Royal Simons who received the deed for the 50 acre lot in July 1855. The 1851 census lists Royal as a son of Chauncey and Mahatabele. At that time, he was 16 years old. I conjecture that when he reached age of majority (he may have turned 21 in 1855) he was eligible to claim a 50 acre lot. The one beside his parents’ would have been a logical choice. The 1861 census lists him as a farmer, but living in the same residence as his parents and siblings. This suggests that he may have cleared and farmed Lot #8, but he didn’t actually live there.



Royal Simons either sold (or possibly mortgaged) Lot #8 to a John Frost in 1856. (Could this be the same John Frost who penned *Broken Shackles*?)⁵ In 1862 it was sold to Edward (or “Ned”) Patterson. This was the Black preacher our neighbours knew stories about.

Ned Patterson is described in documents at the archives as a “lay preacher” and as the teamster who drove a stage coach between Meaford and Owen Sound. Local oral history tells of this man as having a gift for horses. Apparently he could get a lying horse up standing again.

Ned Patterson purchased Lot #9 in 1868. He sold or mortgaged both lots to Robert Grierson in 1876. While this might suggest this is when he made his move to Owen Sound, it seems that he owned the two lots again from 1881 to 1889. Indeed, in the 1886-87 Farmers’ Directory, he is listed as a farmer living on Concession #1, S.D.R.⁶ Perhaps it was in the “between” years (1876 - 1881) that he worked as a teamster out of Owen Sound. As mentioned, the local oral history claims that he had a house on the same hill on which my parents built the cottage. There is a stone foundation that supports that claim⁷.

The Simons’ neighbours included Gabriel Black, James Jackson, James Handy, Henry Washington, William Shackelford, John Johnston, Levi Johnston and others⁸. According to the 1851 census, Chauncey and Mahatabele had three other children besides their sons Christopher and Royal. They were Charles, Benjamin and Rosannah.

Some of their children may have attended the first school in the district, which was located on Lot #11, Concession 1, N.D.R. - just down the road from the Simons’ place⁹. Current accounts

⁵ “Broken Shackles - A legacy of the Frost family of Owen Sound”, by Ruth Cathcart, *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal*, Volume 5, 2008, pp. 7 -13

⁶ *Markdale and Flesherton, a Written Heritage*, Grey County Historical Society, (no date), p.123

⁷ There is still mortar between the stones. According to heritage architect, Daniel B. McNeil, this mortar is typical of pioneer stone foundations. It is homemade from local limestone that has been fired and mixed with river sand.

⁸ These names, to date, are the only ones I can verify were black settlers.

⁹ *Priceville and its Roots / Routes*, (Priceville and Area Historical Society, Owen Sound: Stan Brown Printers Ltd. , 1992, p. 75)

suggest that this particular school, School Section #7, opened its doors in 1856. John McKechnie of Priceville was the first teacher¹⁰. In 1866, Gabriel Black donated an acre of land, across the road from the cemetery (Lot #21, Concession 1, S.D.R.) for a school. The initial school property was sold in 1867¹¹. Just why this occurred is not known. I wonder if it was because, by 1866, there were more children living further down the road?

In any case, there was a big enough community to merit a larger school. It was a community vibrant enough to accrue oral history passed down over the generations. This does not sound to me like a community which somehow “disappeared” or “moved away” without a trace. It is this hunch that inspired my contemplative walk along the Old Durham Road to the cemetery. What might the land tell me about what life was like for those first non-native settlers?

My journey started on part of the Old Durham Road that runs off Grey County Road #4. This section of the road was closed off in 1971. It runs the length of lots 7 through 11, where it joins up with the current Durham Road.¹² This portion is growing in with cedar trees, although the original road bed is still discernable. Along Lot #8, the road seems sliced into a ridge. There is a steep hill to the north and a steep decline to the south.



I try to imagine a horse and cart making their way off the property and onto the road: it would have taken strenuous effort. What was open meadow when I was a child is now covered with tall white pine, an effort in reforestation that my parents undertook in the 1970's. It was hard to believe that anyone farmed the land. It slopes toward the Saugeen River which cuts through all three of our lots. It is full of springs, cedar swamp and of course the “soil” is mostly sand and

¹⁰ *Split Rail Country: A History of Artemesia Township*, (The Historical Society of Artemesia Township, Owen Sound: Stan Brown Printers Ltd., 1986, p. 313)

¹¹ Land Registry, Grey County Archives

¹² At some point in time the road took a jog to the north, meeting up with Grey County Road #4 further to the east. This meant that the portion of road along lots 7 through 11 was no longer in use.

gravel. It would have been hard-scrabble farming at best. It isn't any wonder that these lots changed hands many times over the years and that when my parents bought them they had been abandoned as pasture: the thorn trees and choke cherry bushes fast growing in.

Further along, a stream runs under the road (which now has a metal culvert). Here there is marsh on either side. It is quite obvious that the land is full of water. Perhaps the original settlers learned the hard way that swamps are the hardest land to clear¹³. At the edge of this wetland is the stone foundation of a building that appears to have a stream running right through it. I conjecture that this might have been a dairy shed, designed so that the stream would keep the milk cool¹⁴. Near this foundation are the remains of an old apple tree, suggesting the common practice throughout North America of settlers growing apples for cider¹⁵. The Durham Road is lined with the offspring of these original plantations.

A short distance off the road, the beaver have taken advantage of where two streams meet at the bottom of a hill. For the second time in 30 years, they have built a huge dam creating a sizeable beaver pond and cutting off a traditional pathway to the Saugeen River. When this last happened, our neighbour drained the pond with a stick of dynamite, after the beaver had moved on. The force of water gushing through the gap pulled up soil and revealed the remains of a simple wooden culvert or bridge made of cedar. This suggests that the early settlers had to find solutions to make the wet land fordable.

A large esker cuts across the junction Old Durham Road and the current Durham Road. The hill to the south is enormously high. Windswept and bare, it is hard to imagine it was once covered in towering trees. Since settlers received their deeds on the condition that they cleared the land, this hill became unlikely pasture, only fit for sure-footed sheep or goats. The presence of old stone piles on the slopes of the hill suggests to me that it may also have been ploughed and planted.

From the top of the hill I looked back at the whole 50 acre lot and was relieved to note that the steep hill did eventually give way to land with gentler slopes. There are many other hills and swamps along the Durham Road. The settlers had their work cut out for them: clearing steep hills, fording swamplands, and planting in glacial till - the ubiquitous "sand and gravel" of Grey County. All along the road there are out-croppings of this "rugged shale"¹⁶, a current day reminder of the last ice age.

Like my parents, many non-farmers have purchased the lots along the road. There are considerably more homes along the Durham Road now than there were 20 years ago, but it doesn't appear that many people are farming the land. Apart from the odd field here and there, most of the land has returned to bush. The odd field here and there has the look of farmed land,

¹³ *The History of the County of Grey*, p.187

¹⁴ *Barn Plans and Outbuildings*, (Byron D. Halsted, New York: Orange Judd Company, 1889 / Re-printed, Ottawa: Algrove Publishing Ltd., 1999, pp. 170-171)

¹⁵ *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*, (Michael Pollan, New York: Random House, 2002)

¹⁶ *The History of the County of Grey*, p. 187

but for the most part the land has been kept clear for other purposes. In the entire stretch of road, there are only two brick farmhouses - both of them on lands that appear to be the most flat and possibly the best drained.

Brick houses represent farm prosperity and longevity, as they were generally built to replace the initial log cabins only when the settlers were well-established¹⁷. A handful of aged clapboard farmhouses remain. There are now only a couple of barns, although I know of two that have disintegrated since my childhood.

As I walked along, my quiet reverie was interrupted by the loud honking of a flock of Canada geese making their way southward. Their ruckus seemed to echo through time and I wondered how many settlers had looked skyward to watch a skein of geese hold formation in a similar grey sky.

These days, wildlife is bountiful. Our own property seems to be teeming with deer, wild turkey, rabbit, grouse, geese, duck, beaver, fox, groundhog, coyote, porcupine, and other species. This increase is partly due to the planned forest reclamation work that has gone on in the area and partly due to the way in which unattended fields revert to their natural habitat.

Hawthorn, ash, cherry, maple and even the odd struggling elm have made their way back into the landscape. The swamp cedar, the source of all those miles of split rails, continues to thrive along the road's edge and in the wetlands. There are even a few old maple trees, massive in circumference with barbed wire running right through them. They may have been saplings when settlement began.

Wild mint, watercress, cattails, wild leeks, wild ginger and other edible and medicinal plants abound in the wetlands and forests. Settlers would have learned their uses from the Native people who still hunted and fished in the area.¹⁸ I was surprised at the number of stretches of



¹⁷ *Houses in South East Grey: A Study of History and Architecture*, (Jean Brownridge, Tim Nicholas, Oliver Schroer, Margaret Turner, Carolyn Ries, 1974 p. 24 - no publishing details)

¹⁸ In the 1970s, an elderly neighbour on the Durham Road reported that her grandmother recalled seeing Native people camping on one of the many hills in the area when she was a little girl.

cedar rail fencing. Most of it was moss-covered and fallen down, but the zigzag pattern of the “snake rail” design was still visible. Although barbed wire predominates wherever a fence is currently needed, in some cases cedar rails are all that mark the boundary between the road and acreages. In his book about lost places in Canada, Norman Ravvin observes that “the Canadian past is too often made to go away quietly without a struggle.”¹⁹

The Old Durham Road Black pioneers were one such community. There are many reasons for this. Marginal land ceases to be farmed. Many of the original settlers moved elsewhere for work. Historical record tells us that both Chauncey Simons and Ned Patterson moved (at least temporarily) to Owen Sound in search of employment.²⁰

Many of the Black settlers married white settlers and, by choice or circumstance, were folded into the latter community. Racist beliefs and practices silenced many stories and many remnants of the Black settlers. For example, gravestones were used to pave farm sheds or were buried under raised road beds. The settlers’ presence has also been vanquished by an over-emphasis on the history of pioneers from Great Britain and Ireland. Intermarriage was ignored by a racist “common sense” that claimed the Black settlers couldn’t take the cold or the back-breaking work, so they all left for Owen Sound or Collingwood, or died off in various epidemics that passed through the area.²¹ Settlers like Ned Patterson are elevated to “character” status by their special skills or personalities, but we know so little about the lives of the majority of the amazing people who resided in the community who have been lost to the annals of time.

Perhaps this is why the Old Durham Road holds so much fascination for me. It holds traces of the community in a fence line, in a pile of moss-covered rocks, in the tangled branches of an old apple tree, and in the slightest indentation that betrays a sunken stone foundation. The nature of the land itself, with its hills and swamps and gravel, says something about the kinds of challenges those first settlers faced.

Having such gifts of memory in the land is both an inspiration and a call of duty. When the geese fly overhead, as surely they have done since time immemorial, I am reminded that it is the present which makes the past possible. We, today, must be the keepers of the stories and the finders of the physical traces. It is our interests and investments in our history that will keep it alive for generations to come.

"I wish to thank Kevin Budd for his help with choosing, editing and placing the photographs." – Naomi Norquay

¹⁹ *Hidden Canada: An Intimate Travelogue*, (Norman Ravvin, Calgary, AB: Red Deer Press, 2001, p. 17)

²⁰ As already mentioned, Ned Patterson worked as a teamster. Chauncey Simons is mentioned in *Broken Shackles* as accompanying Old Man Henson to Owen Sound, in search of lodgings and work. (*Broken Shackles* (ibid), p. 193)

²¹ I have heard these comments time and time again from various individuals when asked to explain the “disappearance” of the Black community.