

Daddy Hall's Incredible Story Through the Years

Peter Meyler

Owen Sound's John Hall must have been an interesting character. One description of his life, which managed to denigrate both his mother's and father's heritage, included the following quote: "and quite unlike either Indian or negro, has always led an industrious life." With the nickname "Daddy", he was said to have had 6 wives and 21 children during his 118-year long life. How much of this is true, we really don't know. Like most of Ontario's black residents, only fragments of Hall's life managed to reach our times.

I first came across John Hall's story while doing research on Richard Pierpoint, one of Ontario's other early African-Canadian residents. One of the prime sources on African-Canadian history is the book *The Freedom Seekers*. I found a photograph and a short section regarding Hall among the people profiled in this book. The fact that he was of both First Nations and African heritage caught my attention, as well as the mention that he had died at the age of 118 years.

Later, I came across "Daddy" Hall in the book *Broken Shackles*. It contains the oldest-known references to the Owen Sound resident and is probably the closest source to first hand accounts of portions of his life. Most of the other records of his life are found in newspaper articles. The problem with using newspapers as a source for historical research is that they usually contain inaccuracies. The following articles illustrate some of the inconsistencies in the story of John Hall as it has been recorded over the years.¹ However, they also can be used to mine some of the truths of his life.

The oldest newspaper report that I have seen on John Hall is from the Tuesday, October 8, 1895 edition of Toronto's *Evening Star*.

JOHN HALL, AGED 112

AN OWEN SOUND NEGRO, WHO FOUGHT IN 1812, AND IN 1837—A SLAVE IN THE SOUTH

Owen Sound claims to have in "Daddy" John Hall, a man aged 100 to 112. He is colored, was born near Amherstburg and served in the war of 1812.

He was engaged, he says, in defending Sandwich and Amherstburg, when General Hull made a descent on those places from Detroit, fought also at Long Point and Kettle Creek, part of the time under Black Hawk and Tecumseh, the renowned Indian Chiefs who were then assisting the Government. He was afterwards engaged at the Niagara River and was in the battle at Stoney Creek.

In the county of Essex he was taken prisoner by the Americans, who took the prisoners to Grosse Isle, Fort Meiggs and Fort Niagara. They were afterwards taken to Buffalo and then to Maryland, where they heard

¹ Editors' note: the following excerpts contain some racist language.

that the City of Washington had been taken by the British, and saw the reflection of the burning of the capital.

Hall then became a slave, but after a dozen years or so escaped and got back to Canada. He also says that he served in the rebellion of 1837-38, under Captain Fuller, of London, previous to which he had removed to Newmarket, where his home was raided by the rebels.”

“Daddy” Hall’s renown also made its way to the United States. The following article appeared in the *Boston Post* of October 5th, 1897:

OLD “DADDY” HALL THREE CENTURY SPAN

One of Queen Victoria’s Subjects who was Fifty-four when she was Crowned and may yet Survive Her.

The British Sovereign, who lately celebrated with such eclat the completion of the sixtieth year of her reign, has herself enjoyed more than the allotted span of human life; but it is most interesting to find among her subjects a man still perfect in memory and in full possession of his mental powers who was fifty-four years of age when Queen Victoria ascended the throne. Such a person is old “Daddy” Hall, who lived in his little cabin in the [illegible] Park at Owen Sound, Canada.

Daddy Hall was born in the year 1783. He is a half-breed Indian and negro and in his youth lived with the Indians on the Walpole Island and the adjoining mainland. Although he mostly resembles the negro in features and hair, he is a thorough Indian in his habits and was known by the Indians of his tribe as “Sho-ho-ho-hone” or Big Smoke.

About the year 1800, the Canadian government, requiring an interpreter for the farm instructor of the Indians on the Credit River Reserve, appointed young Hall to that position. Accordingly he moved East with his squaw and remained in the government service until the War of 1812, when he was engaged as a scout doing good service until early in 1813, when he was captured by the American soldiers and taken a prisoner to Fort Meggs, from which he was released only when hostilities ceased.

After the close of the war he made his way to Toronto, squatting on the Humber River, where he farmed, fished, and made Indian bark wood for a living.

On the breaking out of the Upper Canada Rebellion he was taken a prisoner December 5th, 1837, and was compelled to act as a guide to MacKenzie and his band. He was captured at Well’s Hill on the Dovercourt Road near Toronto, and conveyed to Montgomery’s Tavern, on Yonge Street, whence he escaped by night. Such are the most important incidents of his career.

In the war of 1812 Daddy was pierced by a bayonet which left him lame on one leg, yet despite this he has been a most active man, and quite unlike either Indian or negro, has always led an industrious life. He has now his fourth wife and is the father of fourteen children, his eldest daughter being herself a great-great grandmother.

When about ninety-five years of age Daddy lost the last of his teeth, and at that time he had become quite bald. About ten years since nature supplied the old man with a new set of teeth, and a new head of hair, both of which he has today and in which he takes much pride.

Shakespeare divides life into seven ages, the last of which is second childhood. If second childhood is the mark of the last stage of human life, then the subject of this sketch, although one hundred and fourteen years of age, has not left the sixth rung of the ladder, and he may yet rival Jacob, who is said to have lived one hundred and forty-seven years. There is little reason to doubt that, after making the full span of the present century he will live to see the beginning of his third century.

H. G. Tucker

A number of newspapers published articles shortly after “Daddy” Hall’s death on April 9, 1900. The following article is part of the exhibition on Black history at the Grey Roots Museum and Archives. The copy on display was undated and unattributed, but has some items that are not found in any other sources.

A MAN WITH A STRANGE HISTORY

Daddy Hall, who died a few days ago at Owen Sound, was probably the oldest man in the Dominion. The old colored man was not very [illegible] age, but the facts of his life, as he remembered them would show that he was in the neighborhood of one hundred and seventeen years old. The son of a negro mother and an Indian father, he was born [illegible] Essex county, and in early life lived amongst the Indians in that part of what is now Ontario. He served in the War of 1812 with a band of Indian scouts, and was taken prisoner [illegible] the United States forces in 1815. He claimed to have been [illegible] interpreter to Tecumseh and to have been present at the great chief’s death. After his capture he was sent to Virginia as a slave, remaining five years in that State, where he married the mulatto half-sister of a wealthy planter, Wm. Triplett. Though freed through the influence of this man, he and his wife were seized in Kentucky [illegible] again sold into slavery. After another five years of bondage they were discovered by Triplett, who took steps to have them set at liberty. Their master determined to take them to New Orleans and sell them, but Hall learned of his intention and escaped into Ohio on the eve of the departure. He was pursued by bloodhounds, but according to his story threw the dogs off the scent by rubbing onions on his feet. He had intended to earn enough money to purchase his wife’s freedom, but when he managed to reach his old Indian friends again in Essex county he forgot his good intentions and never heard of her again. He married a squaw and had one son, who is now an Indian preacher near Saginaw, Michigan.

Hall came later to Toronto, and was appointed interpreter to the farm instructor of the Indians on the Credit reserve. He had meanwhile deserted his squaw and now married the half-breed daughter of a sergeant in the British forces stationed here. On the breaking out of the rebellion in 1837, Hall was taken prisoner by a band of rebels and compelled to [illegible] as a guide. Shortly afterwards he went to Georgian [illegible] country and squatted on a piece of land in the village of Sydenham, now Owen Sound. A number of scars attested [illegible] truth of his statements about the engagements in which [illegible] fought in the War of 1812.

When about ninety-five years old, Daddy Hall lost [illegible].

More of his story was revealed on the front page of the Friday, April 13, 1900 edition of the *Owen Sound Advertiser*.

JOHN HALL DEAD OVER 100 YEARS OF AGE

In a low shanty on the pleasure grounds there passed away on Sunday morning in the person of John Hall, a man who had by several years passed the century mark. “Daddy” Hall as he was familiarly called has been a well-known figure around Owen Sound from the memory of the oldest inhabitants, and has born the same appearance of age for many years. His age has been variously estimated at from 102 to 117 years. The old man, who resided with his wife and two daughters, has been ailing since October last and had a cough, but was not thought to be at his end, either by himself or friends, until the day on which he died. On Sunday he said to one of his grandchildren: “I’m done”. He would not have any medical assistance, although some who interested themselves in looking after him proposed sending a doctor to see him. He died so quietly on Sunday evening that the event was unnoticed by his attendants and it was Simon Hunt, a Negro who had called to watch by his bedside, who first noticed that life had fled.

John Hall is supposed to have been born at Amherstburg, the date of his birth being uncertain. During the War of 1812-1814 he was old enough to be engaged scouting with the Indians under Tecumseh and skirmished all the way between the Detroit and Niagara Rivers. In an engagement at Stoney Creek he was

bayoneted in the leg, which wound troubled him considerably in after years. He and a number of others appear to have been made prisoners of the Americans and taken to Virginia, where they were kept prisoners until the end of the troubles between England and the United States in 1815. Then instead of being liberated or exchanged, they had been made slaves and Hall became the property of a very cruel master in Kentucky. After coming to Owen Sound he was never given to work as a labouring man, but found other easier means of earning his livelihood. For many years he was the town bell-man, and was a great favourite with the late George J. Gale, auctioneer, who often employed him to make announcements. Indeed he has acted in this capacity within the last few years. He obtained considerable property by holding an undisputed possession for the length of time the law demanded, and acquired the right to live on the pleasure grounds in the same way. When the town in 1882 made application for the pleasure grounds it was stated that there was no adverse possession, although Hall was living on it. The Government granted the license of occupation which the Town still holds. An effort was then made to dislodge the old man, but he wrote to the Governor-General concerning the matter, pleading that he was an old soldier and it was decided that he should be allowed to keep his place. This permit Hall was accustomed to refer to as a letter from the Queen, who he said had sent back word that "John Hall was to remain on the pleasure ground". Some years ago an effort was made by Mr. J.W. Frost and others to secure a pension for him on account of his service in the War of 1812, but their efforts were unsuccessful because of being engaged with the Indians his name was not to be found.

For some years past he has received assistance from the town benevolence committee, but never to any great extent. Since taking sick he had been paid \$1 per week. His wife, who survives, is very feeble. She is between 75 and 80 years."

An interview with John's last remaining child, his daughter Elizabeth, included her memories of her parents' lives. The April 2, 1949 *Owen Sound Daily Sun-Times* article entitled "*Former Slave's Daughter Elizabeth (Hall) Hornby, 96 Born in Owen Sound*" included the following passage:

SETTLES IN OWEN SOUND

Her father and mother first went to Toronto in search of employment and remained there for a short time. They then journeyed to a point near Durham where they spent several years before coming to Owen [illegible] and escape did not apparently have any adverse effect on John Hall for he lived to be well over 100 years old.² Well-known in Owen Sound, he will be remembered by old-timers as the "town crier." His Kentucky bride, however, died early in life, and was succeeded in the course of time by a series of four more wives. Elizabeth Hall was a child of his last wife.

The later articles on "Daddy" Hall, including the 1949 story, start to contain facts that are unsubstantiated, such as his mother's Zulu background (virtually impossible) or his father's Mohawk background (possible, not likely). However, there are enough names, dates and places that can be substantiated which will allow further research into one of Grey County's most well-known historical characters.

² Editors' note: see 1851 Glenelg Township Census.