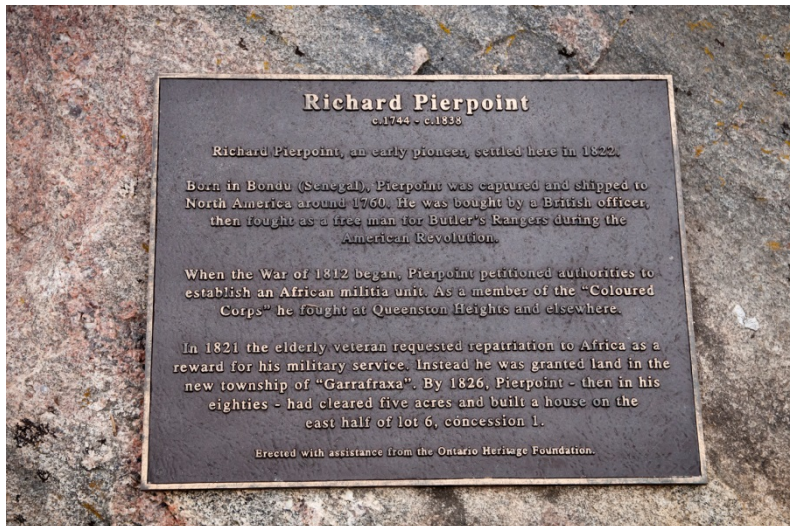


An Old Article Shines a New Light on the Mystery of Lemuel Brown by Peter Meyler

Hilary Dawson, a Toronto genealogist, came across an unusual magazine article entitled *Uncle Tom's Prototype*. Published in 1907, the subject of the article was a "well-dressed, intellectual-looking, white-headed coloured man of pleasing manners." However, it was the man's name that really caught Dawson's attention. It was Lemuel. She wondered if this could be Lemuel Brown?

Most people have not heard of Lemuel Brown, but they may have heard of Richard Pierpoint, one of Ontario's first African settlers. Pierpoint has been commemorated in a Heritage Minutes video, on two Ontario historic plaques, on a Federal government building, on a fly-fishing park and in two books. My brother David and I wrote one of those books, *A Stolen Life: Searching for Richard Pierpoint*. During our research we came across Pierpoint's 1828 will, which included the notation, "I have no heirs nor relations. I make Lemuel Brown my heir and Executor."



Richard Pierpoint is commemorated on this plaque in front of John Black Public School, 150 Lamond Street, Fergus. The school is situated in the middle of Pierpoint's Garafraxa property.¹

¹ All photographs by Laynna Meyler.

For further reading about the Lemuel and Phoebe Brown family, see Peter Meyler's "Lot 18 NDR: The Brown Family", followed by "Lot 19 NDR: The Workman Family" from page 12, Vol. 9/2012 of the *Northern Terminus Journal*; as well as "Champion Connections" beginning on page 21, Vol. 11/2014.

When *A Stolen Life* was published in 1999, we knew very little about Lemuel Brown. He was an African American who appeared in the 1828 census in the St. Catharines area in a household of 11 people. We knew that on September 27, 1838, he was in the Niagara courthouse with Pierpoint's will. Brown was left the east half of Lot 6, 1st Concession in Garafraxa Township, just east of Fergus.

This section of Pierpoint Park is along the neighbouring property which was the home of the farmer who bought Pierpoint's lot from the Browns in 1839.



Subsequent to the publishing of the book, new information had come to light. Lemuel seems to have had a first wife in the Niagara area. A notice appeared twice in editions of the *Niagara Gleaner* in 1830. It read, "Notice – Whereas my wife Rosanna has absconded – This is to all persons from harbouring or trusting her on my account. Lemuel Brown. Niagara, Aug. 7, 1830." By 1838, Phoebe Workman was his wife.

When the sale of the Garafraxa land was registered on July 9, 1839, the Browns were in Guelph Township. Lemuel's naturalization record notes him in St. Catharines, Ontario in 1841. When this document was signed by Lemuel in 1849, he was living in Wellesley Township as part of the Queen's Bush settlement. This was the largest African Canadian settlement in the province at that time.



Lakeside Park, in the Port Dalhousie ward of St. Catharines, is found at the mouth of Twelve Mile Creek as it enters Lake Ontario. Both Pierpoint's and Brown's properties were close by this picturesque location. The park was home to many Emancipation Day celebrations over the years.

We next find the Brown family in Artemesia Township. They were part of the migration from the Queen's Bush to Grey County. In the spring of 1852, the census taker recorded Lemuel, Phoebe and their seven children, Benjamin, Mary, Charlotte, Hannah, Susannah, William and

Louisa. Lemuel was noted as 60 years old, Phoebe as 48, while the children ranged in age from one to 18 years of age.

The Browns farmed on Lot 18 on the north side of the Durham Road. They grew wheat, oats, potatoes and turnips on the five cultivated acres. An ox provided power, while a cow provided for the family's dairy products. Phoebe's brother, Philemon Workman, and his family lived on the adjacent farm. The Browns never received title to their property, so by 1871 they had moved to Collingwood. The 1881 census lists Phoebe, still living in Collingwood, as a widow. Descendants of Lemuel and Phoebe still live in the Collingwood area, but they have no knowledge of Lemuel's origins. The article, *Uncle Tom's Prototype*, finally solves this mystery.

The writer of the article, William Harrison, was taking a well-filled open stage from Osprey Township to Collingwood on a beautiful summer day. Lemuel Brown was one of the passengers. He "entertained the company by his sage and oftentimes witty remarks," according to Harrison. Another passenger encouraged the old Black man to tell them about his life.

Lemuel began, "I was born in the State of Vermont. I did not know my parents. My earliest recollections are of a family of the name of Page, who took care of me and treated me kindly. My guardian was a rigid Presbyterian and was, I believe, a good man." It is unusual that Lemuel was an African American slave in Vermont. He would have been born around 1800 and according to Vermont's 1777 constitution "all men" have "certain natural, inherent and unalienable Rights," and that no adult without consent "ought to be holden by law to serve any person as a Servant, slave or apprentice." However, a loophole in the law allowed children to be held in slavery.



A section of Pierpoint's land was donated to the local municipality. Pierpoint Park offers river access for fishing, views of the Grand River, along with a small trail network among the trees for hikers to explore.

A man named Gould, from New York State, was a routine visitor at the Page home. As part of his regular duties, Lemuel would wait on him. Gould ran a hotel out of his home and asked Lemuel to come and live with his family. He eventually agreed to this. Lemuel recalled that Gould "used me very kindly for several days" and that "I generally contrived those on whom I

waited, and grew rather fond of the landlord." On a visit from Page, Gould asked him to turn Lemuel over to him permanently. Page would only allow this if the boy agreed. After much coaxing, Lemuel agreed and "The writings were drawn up and signed. In other words, I was sold."

After becoming the property of Gould, his attitude changed considerably, according to Lemuel. "From that day, to me Gould was an entirely different man. He did not abuse me, but I had to put up with much hardships from my master's family. He set the example of ill treatment and they followed it."

Gould had several children, some young, an adult son and an adopted son, Lyman Holly. Lyman had been involved with a group of smugglers, likely in the Lake Champlain area. While being pursued by the law, a tollgate keeper was shot and killed. With his dying breath, he was said to have uttered the name "Lyman Holly."

After the murder of the toll keeper, Lyman Holly hid out from the authorities. Part of Lemuel's duties at the hotel was to help out the other staff members. One day, one of the girls asked him to get preserves from the closet. Lemuel related that, "While I was in the closet, it being dark, I noticed a crack between two of the panels through which a light shone. I had the curiosity to climb up and look through. In the middle of a small room sat a man. On his moving a little the light shone on his face. It was Lyman Holly." This knowledge was instrumental in the next phase of his life.

It was found at one time that the jars in the closet were lighter than they should have been. Gould suspected theft of his goods. He brought everyone forward for inquiry, including Lemuel. "I was charged with the theft. Gould looked at me and began to prepare the whip. I told him I did not take it. He thought that I was adding falsehood to the crime, and laid hold of me to apply the lash," explained Lemuel. Now was the time for Lemuel to play his trump card. He told his owner, "If you whip me, I will tell where Lyman Holly is." This stopped Gould in a moment. He began to question his children and realized that Lemuel was innocent. However, he did threaten that Lemuel would never be seen again if he mentioned the whereabouts of Lyman.

Sometime later, Gould asked Lemuel to hitch up two bay horses and drive him and a Mr. Jones to Lake Champlain. At the lake, Lemuel met Gould's eldest son, and his friend Captain Ross. The two young men invited Lemuel to tour Ross's sloop that had just been loaded with cargo. The men were "very kindly and seemed to take a great interest" in the boy. After walking about on the deck, Ross took Lemuel down into the cabin to continue the tour. When they reappeared on deck, the sloop was sailing far from shore.

Lemuel began to cry and implored them to bring him back. He recalled his twelve or thirteen year-old-self dreading an unknown future among strangers. He explained that, "My grief was so violent that Ross pitied me, and by way of consolation told me that he was not taking me for

himself, but for one Colonel Bissell in the army, and that I would have a good time. When we landed I was handed over to Colonel Bissell.”

Daniel Bissell is a well-known figure in American history. He enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1788 in Connecticut. With the onset of the War of 1812, he was promoted to a full colonel. By this time he had moved to St. Louis County, Missouri where his home is currently an historic site. When Bissell received his orders to report to the Canadian front on June 13, 1813, he was looking forward to real military action and a chance for promotion. He arrived at the recently-captured Fort George in September. In October, he was ordered to march his men to Sacket’s Harbor, New York, for a planned attack on Montreal. From there, he was to join the rest of the army at Grenadier Island, which is in the St. Lawrence River about 55 km from Kingston. Bissell took part in the Battle of Crysler’s Farm. After the American retreat, Bissell and his men overwintered at Plattsburg, New York.

It is likely that Lemuel was sold to the American officer during his time along the St. Lawrence River. He learned that Bissell was a “large slaveholder and speculator in slaves.” He recounted his own experience to his fellow travellers, “His treatment of recent purchases was oftentimes harsh and cruel. Though I tried to do the best of my ability, many failures brought many whippings and my lacerated back and shoulders caused me many a sleepless night.”

In the spring of 1814, Daniel Bissell was promoted to Major General. He then moved west and was stationed in Buffalo, New York. Here Lemuel was to take care of the Colonel’s marquee or tent, a job he found easy to do. Bissell crossed the Niagara River and took part in the Battle of Cook’s Mills, near Chippawa, Ontario. Here he had his greatest success as he destroyed the wheat stored at the mills after the retreat of British and Canadian forces.

One of Bissell’s friends, while in Buffalo, was Captain John G. Camp. Camp was a quartermaster, and later would become the first sheriff of Erie County. The two officers regularly spent evenings together. During a night of gambling, Lemuel became part of the stakes wagered. Bissell lost the bet and Camp became the new owner of the teenaged slave.

Lemuel moved into the Captain’s house in Buffalo. He had two fellow enslaved servants as company, a man named Sam, and a fellow fourteen year-old known as Bob. Bob regularly would try to escape, so talk about freedom would arise. Lemuel told Bob about Canada and that he would be free there. Bob, however, had heard from his master that Canadians would kill him. Lemuel also recounted that “we were always taught that the Canadians and the Indians were equally blood-thirsty and that they tomahawked and scalped without mercy every black man.” However, Bob tried again as Lemuel told those on the stage, “A night or two after Bob’s back had healed he was missing.” The search parties did not find him and Camp was of the mind that he had died.

Shortly thereafter, Camp and his regiment were ordered to become part of an invasion into Canada with Lemuel accompanying him. His impression of Camp was that, "His idea of military tactics was self-preservation." He also remembered his old master Bissell as "a brave man who made an attack with about a thousand men on an attachment of over a thousand soldiers under the Marquis of Tweeddale." This was the Battle of Chippawa, fought on July 5, 1814.

Lemuel entered the fray around this time. He reported, "During this skirmish Gen. McClure, who rode a beautiful animal, was unhorsed, a cannon ball cutting off both forelegs of the mare. I was ordered to go for the saddle and bridle. As I went, the bullets were flying in all directions. I had unbuckled the saddle and bridle, but while loosing the martingale a rifle ball struck me in the calf of my leg. I dropped the articles and ran, but soon fainted from loss of blood. When I opened my eyes again, I found myself in the hospital with the dead and dying. Fortunately the ball was a spent one, so that its effects were not so serious. After it was cut out I soon regained strength."

Camp was a cruel master. Lemuel told that, "Shortly after I resumed duty, I offended Camp by a trifling neglect. He seized the whip and came at me in a perfect fury. ... My clothes were stripped off, I was tied up by my thumbs to a tree, so that my toes just touched the ground. Camp himself laid on the lash until he wore it up, then he got a waggon whip and laid on until the blood ran down into my boots. I was ready to quit long before he was. As he continued to flog I lost all feeling, each blow seeming like a little stream of warm water poured down my back. This was the hardest beating I ever had, and as the regiment had to remove to another station, I had to ride over rough roads for two weeks, my raw back putting me in continued torment; there was agony in every jolt."

Janie Cooper-Wilson is a great great-granddaughter of Lemuel Brown. She continues as an advocate for African Ontario history as a director of the Ontario Historical Society.



During the telling of his story, Lemuel showed his fellow passengers that he was missing a tooth. He told them that the loss of the tooth had saved him from being hanged for murder. Lemuel had taken a pair of pistols from the armoury with the intention of using them on Camp. When an occasion arose, he pointed a pistol at Camp ready to fire. Sam saw what was about to happen, struck the pistol, and gave the boy such a blow in the mouth that he tumbled to the

floor and lost a tooth. Camp turned to see what caused the noise. Sam explained that Lemuel had tripped over his foot. From that point, Lemuel decided that he had to get to Canada.

On the night of the escape, Camp came into Lemuel's room around 11 p.m. Lemuel feigned sleep and then, when Camp's bedroom was dark, left the house. With only a spare shirt, he headed to a place on the Niagara River where an old log boat was kept. Lemuel quietly paddled the boat to a canoe that he had often used to go between gunboats. He drifted away from shore, into the darkness. Not being able to see where he was, he put his hand in the water and realized that he was moving down river with the current. Turning the canoe, he paddled until he hit a rock, nearly capsized and took on a lot of water. He bailed out the water and eventually reached the Canadian shore. "As soon as I landed, I felt that I was a free man," Lemuel related. But he was very frightened because of the "bloodthirsty Canadians or other savages."

Lemuel slowly found his way along shore when he saw a man on horseback. He began to run, but was soon overtaken. The horseman asked why he was running. Lemuel pleaded for his life and said that he did not want to be "tomahawked or scalped." The man laughed and then took Lemuel to his home, where he cared for him until he got something to do. It may be at this time that Brown became acquainted with Pierpoint and other members of Niagara's African Canadian community. We may never know since the stage's journey must have ended at this point of the old man's storytelling.

Lemuel concluded saying, "On a farm in the township of Artemesia I have lived, raised my family and prospered." This would indicate that the story was told sometime before 1871. It is fortuitous that the article was eventually published in 1907. William Harrison was burning old papers when he came across the manuscript of Lemuel's story. He spared it "for a longer lease of life." We are lucky that he did, for now we have a fuller understanding of the life of an African Canadian well before the existence of the Underground Railroad.