

A Review of *Black Roots in Grey: A Story of Strength, Preservation, and Endurance*

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Black Roots in Grey, a Grey Roots exhibit which opened May 21, 2016 and will close September 17, 2017, tells the history of Grey County's Black community. Beginning with the history of slavery in Canada, the Underground Railroad and abolitionists, the exhibit also touches on the history of early Black communities, the history of discrimination, Blacks during wartime, in industry and in politics, as well as how Black history has been commemorated in Grey County. This exhibit is important to our understanding of the roots of Grey County's Black community and how its people were able to survive, and even thrive, during times of adversity and discrimination.



A view of part of the exhibit. At centre is the Freedom Quilt.

Black Roots in Grey begins with a more general history of slavery in North America. Although Canada did have slavery for more than 200 years, the French beginning the practice in 1608, Canada was never a major participant of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade like the United States was. When Britain abolished slavery under the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833, Canada, being a British colony, followed suit. With the passing of this act, Canada became a safe haven, and the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and safe houses used by refugees from slavery, became increasingly popular. The Railroad expanded and reached its height in the 1850s and 1860s after the Fugitive Slave Act was passed in 1850. This act facilitated the return of fugitive slaves who were caught to their owners. It was with the passing of this act, and the understandable fear of bounty hunters, that the Underground Railroad extended as far north as Sydenham, present day Owen Sound, the Railroad's most northern terminus.

Once the foundational history of slavery and the Underground Railroad story is set, the exhibit goes on to display information and photos about abolitionists – those who sympathized with, and aided escaping slaves. A few of the Grey County personalities who are listed include J.P. Coulson, John Frost and Captain Charles Stuart. Coulson, who owned Coulson's British Hotel, offered employment to Blacks upon their arrival to Owen Sound. John Frost, who was Mayor of

Owen Sound for a time, offered them shelter on his property. His son, who was also Mayor of Owen Sound, wrote the well-known book *Broken Shackles – Old Man Henson from Slavery to Freedom* (1889). Captain Stuart was active with the British Anti-Slavery Society and attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention held in London, England in 1840. In 1851, he was also involved in the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society before retiring to a farm near Thornbury, where he prided himself in refusing to allow anything that was produced by enslaved labour in his house.

The exhibit then discusses Black settlement in Grey County, focusing on Owen Sound and Priceville. It also illustrates what life in these communities was like. Blacks were in Owen Sound as early as 1843 and formed Black neighbourhoods throughout the town. By 1871, there were 690 Blacks living in Owen Sound, which constituted ten percent of the population. The Black population soon grew and, formally being established in 1856, the British Methodist Episcopal (B.M.E.) Church, or “Little Zion,” was built and became the focal point of the Black community. A Prince Hall Freemason Lodge was also organized in Owen Sound, since Blacks were not allowed to join white Masonic Lodges. Some of Owen Sound’s white community did offer a helping hand to the new settlers, however, which was especially significant given the fact that Blacks were often not afforded equal opportunity in the fields of business and commerce. The exhibit highlights multiple local businesses and industries that did support and hire Black employees. These included Russel Brothers, Empire Stove and Furnace Co., Canadian Malleable Iron Co., Wm. Kennedy and Sons, Noma Lites Co. Ltd., and Keenan’s Woodenware. Also listed are early Blacks who reached prominence in the business and industry fields, including Jeremiah Cousby (named the most popular merchant in 1907 for selling confectionery, ice cream, and the first in town to sell Coca Cola), Jerry Cousby Jr. (lawyer and co-owner of the Owen Sound Sun from 1897-1899), James Morton (cook on boats and later at the Paterson House Hotel), and William Henry Harrison (local quarryman who built many Owen Sound buildings and shipped stone from his quarry all over Canada).

Black Roots in Grey then highlights Grey County’s other major Black settlement, which was located along the Durham Road near Priceville (in the former Artemesa Township). Here, in the summer of 1849, sixteen Black families arrived and settled on twenty-five lots. They soon built a Wesleyan Methodist Church and a school, and already by 1851, there were 117 inhabitants in the settlement. Over time, the settlement was abandoned and all that was left was the community’s burial ground. Eventually, the farmer who owned the land removed the remaining tombstones and ploughed over it.

Even though the Black population was growing and thriving in Owen Sound, they also faced many hardships. Although slavery had been abolished in Canada since 1833, discrimination was still a major issue in Grey County for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although much more prevalent and violent in the United States, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) was active for a time in Grey County, although they performed no reported violence. Several burning crosses

were seen in Owen Sound and Leith, and at a meeting in the fall of 1926 in Owen Sound, 350 people attended. Discrimination also took other forms, including the segregation of Black soldiers in the First World War. Marisse Scott, a graduate from O.S.C.V.I., was refused admission into the nursing school at Owen Sound's General and Marine Hospital because she was "coloured." Despite this, in 1950, she became one of the first Black nursing graduates in Canada when she graduated at the top of her class at St. Joseph's Hospital in Guelph.

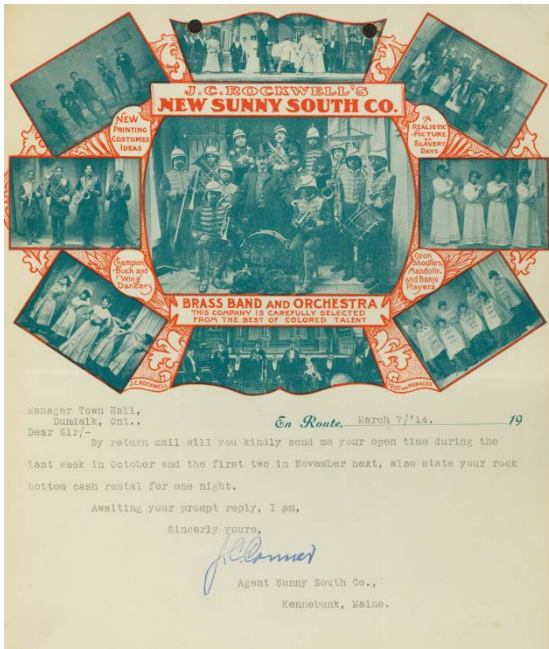
The final part of the exhibit includes how Grey County has commemorated Black citizens and Black history. The exhibit discusses the construction of the Harrison Park Memorial Cairn, the preservation and re-dedication of the pioneer cemetery at Priceville, as well as the history of Owen Sound's annual Emancipation Festival - North America's longest continuously running emancipation event. The exhibit also features some of the most prominent Blacks who left their mark in Grey County, including the earliest settler and Town Crier, John "Daddy" Hall (1783-1900), trumpet player and actor Tommy Earlls - who played with Oscar Peterson and Louis Armstrong, opera singer Wilson Woodbeck, and former Owen Sound Mayor and Member of Parliament for Bruce-Grey Owen Sound, Ovid Jackson.

Interspersed throughout the exhibit are also a number of artefacts, including the quarry tools of William Henry Henson, an original 1889 edition of *Broken Shackles*, an 1858 Bible which belonged to Edward "Ned" Patterson (lay preacher for the B.M.E. Church), sad irons, horse bells, clothing, an enamel basin, and two metal and wooden toy trucks that were made by George W. Molock (c. 1920s) out of recycled materials for his children.



Circa 1920s Wooden Toy Truck, built by George W. Molock. Donated by Lisa McAllister.

The *Black Roots in Grey* Exhibit at Grey Roots is full of information, visuals, and artefacts pertaining to an important cultural and social group in Grey County's history. It tells the story of a people who were running from the bondage of slavery and who settled in Grey County to find peace, safety, and prosperity. It tells the story of the discrimination and segregation Blacks often faced, even in Grey County, but it also tells the story of how, with determination and courage, they were able to achieve prosperity in the face of injustice and inequality. This exhibit is important for understanding our county, our country, and our world. It illustrates that history does in fact help to explain the present and has an important role in shaping the future.



J.C. Rockwell's New Sunny South Co. Brass Band and Orchestra preformed at the Dundalk Hall in 1914. "This company," the above correspondence reads, "is carefully selected from the best of colored talent." On loan from Norm Player.



Taken by George Holmes Photography Studio of Owen Sound, this photo depicts an unidentified woman driver on a small horse-drawn rig while an unidentified Black man wearing a suit and a Derby hat, stands in front of the rig steadying the horse. Recently acquired by the Archives PF536S7F311