

# 155<sup>th</sup> Emancipation Festival

August 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Roxy Theatre, Harrison Park, Grey Roots Museum and Archives, Owen Sound

Brianne Lynn

## Emancipation Festival

Black history is a significant part of Owen Sound's narrative; thus, Black, white, and every colour in between gather together every year in Owen Sound to commemorate the struggles and victories of Owen Sound's Black community. Starting in 1862, the Owen Sound Emancipation Festival has striven to teach and celebrate Black history, as well as to commemorate both those who journeyed to Owen Sound via the Underground Railroad and those who put themselves at risk to help make that journey possible. This year, the Festival's events included the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Speaker's Forum at the Roxy Theatre, the Ancestor's Breakfast and Emancipation Picnic at Harrison Park, Gospel at Moreston Village and the opening of the North is Freedom photo exhibit at Grey Roots Museum & Archives.<sup>1</sup>

## 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Speaker's Forum

The first event of the Emancipation Festival this year was the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Speaker's Forum held at the Roxy Theatre on Friday night. Armand's Bar served drinks during the Meet and Greet in the lobby that preceded the evening's main events. Meanwhile, attendees lined up to buy books written by the keynote speaker of the evening, Lawrence Hill, then waited patiently in the long line for the author to sign their copies.

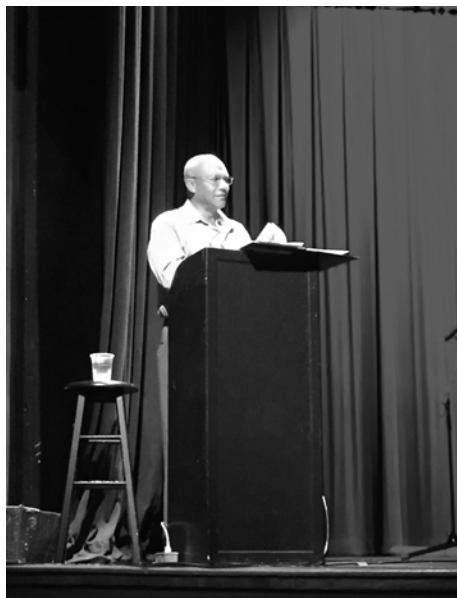
The lobby was full even before 6:30 p.m., when the event was set to begin – a testament to the popularity of both Lawrence Hill and the Emancipation Festival. By the time 6:30 p.m. rolled around, it had become difficult to make one's way from one corner of the lobby to the other. Friendly conversation flowed easily throughout the noisy room as friends and strangers alike chatted amongst themselves.



Book sale at Speaker's Forum, where Lawrence Hill signed copies of his books.

<sup>1</sup> Photos taken by Brianne Lynn, Summer Student Archives Assistant, Grey Roots Museum & Archives

Six musicians took the stage as people began to search for their seats in the auditorium. Bobby Dean Blackburn, of Bobby Dean Blackburn and Friends, sat at a keyboard and was accompanied by a bass guitarist, electric guitarist, tenor saxophonist, drummer, and a percussionist with hand-held instruments (his favourite of which seemed to be the tambourine). Blackburn is a Blues, R&B, and Rock 'n' Roll musician and a native of Owen Sound.<sup>2</sup> He made a name for himself playing music in Toronto for over 30 years.<sup>3</sup> The group entertained the audience with five songs — the first three of which were Blues, and the last two Rock 'n' Roll. Improvisation and instrument solos were abundant throughout the performance, keeping both the musicians and their audience on their toes. From the number of smiles, bopping heads, clapping hands, and tapping feet, it was clear that the audience thoroughly enjoyed the performance. At certain points the audience was even encouraged to sing along, which they did with enthusiasm. About halfway through the performance, Bobby Dean Blackburn took a moment to invite those in attendance to attend the Emancipation Picnic in Harrison Park, which was to take place the following day. He also encouraged people to come to the harbour on Sunday night, where the band would once again make an appearance. After this brief interlude, the band jumped into their Rock 'n' Roll portion of the evening, performing the popular songs "Lucille" and "Route 66." During "Route 66", the tambourine player got off stage and wandered through the auditorium, spurring audience participation.



**Blaine Courtney welcomes attendees to the 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Speaker's Forum**

Following Bobby Dean Blackburn and Friends, Blaine Courtney, the Master of Ceremonies for the evening, took the podium. Courtney has been a member of the board for the Owen Sound Emancipation Festival for eleven years, and chairman of the board for the last seven. However, this year's festival was his last, as he plans to step down from the position. He welcomed those in attendance and then took the time to acknowledge the sponsors of the Emancipation Festival. Two representatives of the sponsors — Lee Baulch, representing TD Bank, and Scott Greig, representing the Community Foundation Grey and Bruce - took the podium to express their well wishes for the festival. Afterwards, Blaine Courtney once again took the stage to recognize individual organization members whose efforts had made the Emancipation Festival possible. A new program was then introduced that had been launched this year called "Emancipation Reads." It is "a virtual book club to share books that may broaden our perspectives of the

<sup>2</sup> "Bobby Dean Blackburn," *Summerfolk*, accessed August 9, 2017, <http://summerfolk.org/performers/bobby-dean-blackburn/>.

<sup>3</sup> Erin McCallum, "Blackburn: Biography Interview," *Blackburn*, accessed August 9, 2017, <http://www.blackburnbrothersmusic.com/biography.html>.

multicultural experience in Canada, and beyond.”<sup>4</sup> Festival attendees were encouraged to share book recommendations at a booth that was present at most of the weekend’s events. This list of recommendations was then to be dispersed to interested parties. Finally, Courtney introduced Barry Penhale, who would in turn introduce the keynote speaker of the evening, Lawrence Hill.

Barry Penhale – a journalist, publisher, and former broadcaster – is passionate about social justice and has been an active supporter of the Owen Sound Emancipation Festival for many years.<sup>5</sup> Upon taking the microphone, Penhale took the time to recognize those whose efforts had produced the weekend’s events. He also gave a brief tribute to Les Mackinnon, after whom the Les Mackinnon Memorial Presentation program is named. Lawrence Hill is to be the third annual speaker to present under this program title. Finally, Penhale introduced Lawrence Hill.

Hill is the author of ten books, both fiction and non-fiction. He has won numerous honours and awards for his work, including being inducted into Canada’s Walk of Fame. In 2013, Hill received the honour of being the keynote speaker for the esteemed Massey Lectures. He also co-wrote a television mini-series adaptation of his popular book, *Book of Negroes*. The mini-series won several awards, including eleven Canadian Screen Awards. Besides spending his time writing, Hill volunteers for Crossroads International, with whom he has travelled to Niger, Cameroon, and Mali. He also teaches creative writing at the University of Guelph.<sup>6</sup>

Hill began his presentation with a very significant date: August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1834, the day slavery was abolished in the British Empire. He then launched into a personal introduction. Hill is the son of American immigrants who moved to Toronto — a characteristic that has significantly impacted the man he is today. He noted that having immigrants as parents came with intense parental pressure to choose a “professional” career, rather than that of a writer or a musician as Hill and his brother had respectively chosen. Hill joked that his father’s poor decision to require Hill, at the age of 6, to write letters defending why he should have his way only served to push Hill towards the objectionable career of being a writer.



**Lawrence Hill giving the keynote address at the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Speaker’s Forum**

---

<sup>4</sup> 155<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Owen Sound Emancipation Festival: Lawrence Hill (Owen Sound Emancipation Festival, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> "The Ontario Black History Society's (OBHS) Annual Black History Month Kick-off Brunch was a Huge Success," *The Ontario Historical Society*, accessed August 9, 2017, <https://www.ontariohistoricalsociety.ca/index.php/2014-03-04-21-07-46/news-archives/430-jane-gibson-barry-penhale-receive-prestigious-harriet-tubman-award>.

<sup>6</sup> "About the Author," *Lawrence Hill*, accessed August 9, 2017, <https://www.lawrencehill.com/the-author/>.

Up until this point, the author's presentation was filled with amusing quips that had the audience laughing, which was an effective method of breaking the ice and grasping the audience's attention. Hill then launched into a more serious discussion of his development as an author. Knowing he would need time and financial stability before his writing career would take off, Hill worked as a journalist as long as possible, until he could no longer stand to do so. He then quit his job, moved to Spain, and spent a year and a half writing. During his time abroad, he proved to himself how much he truly wanted to be an author.

Hill then discussed one of his most popular works of fiction *Book of Negroes*, which won many awards including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Hill briefly reviewed his process of researching for the novel, joking that "researching is a great way to avoid the hard work of writing," because according to Hill "the material was there, but the story was unknown." Hill then provided a quick summary of the *Book of Negroes* and the history that had inspired it. Released in some countries as *Someone Knows My Name*, the novel follows the story of a young girl's struggle to regain her freedom and return to Africa after being sold into slavery in the United States.

During the Revolutionary War, the British promised freedom, jobs, land, and more to Blacks who were willing to side with and work for the British. With the British defeat, many of those promises went unfulfilled and many Blacks were recaptured into slavery in the wake of British retreat.<sup>7</sup> In New York, some Blacks who were able to prove that they had served the British for at least a year had their names recorded in the Book of Negroes, a passenger manifesto from 1783 of British ships leaving New York near the end of the Revolutionary War.<sup>8</sup> Black Loyalists searched for refuge throughout the British Empire.<sup>9</sup> Aminata Diallo, the main character of the novel, was able to register her name in the Book of Negroes. She moved to Nova Scotia with about 3,000 other Black Loyalists. However, many were disappointed when the British failed to uphold their promises of land. Ten years later, disillusioned, more than one third of these Black Loyalists chose to move to Sierra Leone where they established the colony of Freetown.<sup>10</sup>

Before reading a short excerpt from Aminata Diallo's story, Hill lamented that imagination, which he argues is the hardest work of a novelist, is often overlooked in the reader's curiosity to know the historical accuracy of the story. He proposed that a novelist's true work was to imagine, empathize, and love. He also explained that in his writing, he desires to give voice to a

---

<sup>7</sup> "Departure of Black Loyalists," *Historica Canada*, accessed August 9, 2017, <http://www.blackhistorycanada.ca/events.php?themeid=21&id=2>.

<sup>8</sup> "Objects: 1775-1800: Book of Negroes," *Nova Scotia Museum*, accessed August 9, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20071120053935/http://museum.gov.ns.ca/blackloyalists/17751800/Objects1775/booknegroes.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> "Departure of Black Loyalists."

<sup>10</sup> "Black Loyalists," *Historica Canada*, accessed August 9, 2017, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/black-loyalists-feature/>.

person who is yet unrecognized. The term ‘slavery,’ according to Hill, often elicits the image of a victim without a face. On account of this, Hill shared his longing to “help the reader bust out of that straight jacket.” His goal in telling Aminata’s story was to create a character with whom the audience could relate to on a personal level. He strived to give a face to a faceless individual whose story represents the experiences of thousands of Black slaves with stories that will never be told.

The next book Hill discussed was *The Illegal*, a fictional novel about an undocumented refugee who fled for his life into the country of Freedom State. Hill shared that though he himself was never a refugee, he had been aware of their plight since he was a young man working his first job at the airport welcoming new immigrants into Canada. Hill shared that he started work there only a year after people of Asian descent were forced to leave Uganda by the Ugandan President, Idi Amin. One could hear Hill’s passion for the issue as he described Canada’s checkered past with refugees. Emotion brimmed in his voice as he recounted how Canada turned away the MS St. Louis carrying 907 Jews seeking refuge during the Second World War — 254 of whom would later die in the Holocaust after the ship was forced to return to Belgium.<sup>11</sup> Canada did, however, welcome the people of Asian descent fleeing brutality in Uganda. Hill reminisced about seeing them waiting when he arrived at the airport in the morning, and still waiting when he left in the evening. Hill also shared that his sister had married a Sudanese refugee who had escaped to West Germany. He described how he had a chance to hear this man’s account of having fled for his life, as well as the stories of others like him. These experiences, said Hill, cultivated his interest in the implications of being an undocumented immigrant, which he explores in *The Illegal*. The main character, Keita Ali, is a professional runner — a characteristic influenced by Hill’s childhood dreams of becoming an Olympic runner. As an undocumented immigrant, Keita enters road races to win money in order to survive. The novel follows his experiences as he attempts to avoid the authorities and live undetected in Freedom State. According to Hill, the novel is meant to move quickly “like a race.”

Hill, as he shared during the forum, is interested in telling the stories of Black history that are well-documented, but largely unknown. This is certainly true in relation to his current project. Before wrapping up, Hill provided the audience with a glimpse into this project, which, to some extent, was inspired by his father who served in WWII. The novel is about the African American soldiers who built the Alaska Highway in 1942-1943. This enormous engineering endeavour was inspired by fear of the Japanese attacking Alaska and subsequently invading the United States through Canada. The road, which stretches from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to Delta Junction, Alaska, was supposed to aid the United States in fighting off the expected invasion. According to Hill, 10,000 soldiers were sent north of the American-Canadian border to construct this 2,700 km highway, 5,000 of whom were African Americans. These Black soldiers

---

<sup>11</sup> "MS St. Louis," *Historica Canada*, accessed August 9, 2017, <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/ms-st-louis/>.

worked in sub-zero temperatures, under-clothed, under-supplied, and under-fed. They were segregated from their white fellow soldiers and were forbidden to go into towns or to interact with local residents. Instead, white American officers spread rumours about Black soldiers raping women and having tails. Hill talked about driving this highway for research, interviewing various individuals whose lives, or parents' lives, had been impacted by the installation of the road. This included many First Nations people for whom the invading highway caused great upheaval.

Hill then took some time to answer questions from the audience. He was asked to suggest a couple of books for the new Emancipation Reads program introduced earlier in the evening. He suggested *Brother* by David Chariandy, *Hunger* by Roxane Gay, and *American War* by Omar El Akkad. When asked about his own thoughts regarding the relationship between Canada and refugees, an extra measure of passion again returned to Hill's voice as he insisted that "today's refugee is tomorrow's engineer...cardiac surgeon... [or] award-winning novelist." He maintained that Canada needs to deal with the important issue of immigration if it is to move forward as a country. Hill also called attention to the fact that Canadians sometimes fall into the trap of thinking themselves more open-minded and accepting than they actually are, or traditionally have been. To support this claim, Hill recounted how slavery was firmly entrenched in Canadian society despite the fact that African-Americans were able to find freedom in Canada by journeying north on the Underground Railroad. Freed African-Americans arriving in Canada sometimes ended up living next door to African-Canadians born into, and still bound by, slavery's chains.

After Hill concluded his presentation, Blaine Courtney returned to the podium to introduce Carol Boucher. She subsequently presented Hill with the 2017 Molson Prize on behalf of the Canadian Council of Arts, a prize worth \$50,000 in recognition of Hill's contribution to Canadian heritage. After this, Blaine Courtney also presented Hill with some gifts from the Owen Sound Community: wine from a local winery and some books written by Owen Sound authors.

After the conclusion of the presentations, people again filled the lobby. The bar was reopened, and audience members once again filed into line to buy books and have their copies signed by Hill. The evening was a great success and set the record of attendance at the Roxy Theatre for an event in July or August.

### **Ancestors' Breakfast and Emancipation Picnic**

The Ancestors' Breakfast took place at the pavilion in Harrison Park, and was an opportunity for friends and family to visit together before the afternoon's picnic events. Following breakfast, everyone was invited to the Black History Cairn for a commemorative ceremony. After thanking everyone for coming, Blaine Courtney invited town crier Bruce Kruger to make a special presentation. Instead of giving a cry, Kruger sang an original song about those who had reached Owen Sound via the Underground Railroad. Afterwards, political VIPs took a few moments to praise the efforts of the Owen Sound Emancipation Committee in continuing the legacy of the longest-running Emancipation Festival in North America. Afterwards, Dorothy Abbott, a

member of the Ontario Black History Society, presented Lawrence Hill with the Dr. Anderson Abbott Award on behalf of the society. Along with the award, a book titled *Roll Call* was presented to Hill. In his acceptance speech, Hill shared that his time interviewing individuals and compiling oral histories for the Ontario Black History Society had inspired him to write his novel *Book of Negroes* in a style reminiscent of an oral history. Oral histories, which are generally recorded through interviews, are accounts given by individuals with personal knowledge of historical events. Likewise, the *Book of Negroes* is written in first person; Aminata Diallo tells her own story of her journey from slavery to freedom. Hill also briefly touched on the issue of refugees — a topic he delved into significantly during the Speaker’s Forum on Friday night. He insisted that caring for refugees is a “measure of our own humanity” and stressed the importance of continuing the fight against injustice “in our own time and in our own place.”

After Hill’s acceptance speech, Blaine Courtney introduced a woman who had just finished cycling 2,000 miles following the Underground Railroad, from Mobile, Alabama, to Owen Sound.<sup>12</sup> She shared a brief summary of her journey and its significance. Afterwards, Owen Sound Poet Laureates, Larry Jensen and Rob Rolfe, performed their original piece, *Emancipation Suite*. This performance included a lamenting poem about the stories of Black history that have been silenced in the course of time, as well as a song about growing up in Mudtown. Mudtown was the northeast section of Owen Sound that historically had higher rates of poverty. The name was inspired by how exceptionally muddy the streets became when it rained.



**Owen Sound Poet Laureates, Larry Jensen and Rob Rolfe perform their original work of poetry and song, titled *Emancipation Suite*.**

The final presentation of the ceremony was titled *I Am Your Ancestor*, an original piece written by Blaine Courtney and the Owen Sound Emancipation Committee. It was stylistically reminiscent of an oral history, as various men and women throughout the audience read from scripts and personified Black individuals telling their stories; from those who were first stolen from their homes in Africa to those starting new lives as free people in Owen Sound. The emotional presentation was a beautiful tribute to Black History, compelling those in attendance to empathize with the struggles and triumphs of the Black community. In conclusion, Blaine Courtney gave some closing remarks before encouraging the audience to participate in the

---

<sup>12</sup> To view the Underground Railroad Bicycle Route see <https://www.adventurecycling.org/routes-and-maps/adventure-cycling-route-network/underground-railroad-ugrr/>

picnic events following the ceremony.

Several tents were erected in Harrison Park for the picnic with vendors selling books, food, and more. The park became busy as children played and adults shopped, socialized, and ate. There was also a tent where several musical groups entertained picnic-goers while they visited with one another. It wasn't long before a crowd filled the pavilion drawn by the promise of music, food, and friends.

### **Gospel at Moreston Village**

On Sunday, the last day of the Emancipation Festival, Grey Roots Museum & Archives hosted Gospel at Moreston Village, which included three performances of gospel music. After an introduction by Blaine Courtney and Petal Furness, the Manager of the Grey Roots Museum & Archives, Rev. Thérèse Samuel from Thornbury gave a moving address in honour of the Black community, whose history and culture were celebrated through music that morning. David Sereda, a local musician, singer, pianist, composer, actor, and playwright, first led the audience in a few songs before handing the stage over to members of the Miller family.<sup>13</sup> The Millers have deep roots in Owen Sound and are descendants of Thomas Henry Miller, who was the preacher of the first British Methodist Episcopal Church in Owen Sound.<sup>14</sup> The Millers performed an oral presentation of their family history, along with a couple well-known spirituals, including *Steal Away to Jesus*. The last performance of the morning was Michael Dunston and his band. Dunston is an R&B artist from North Carolina who has been attending the Owen Sound Emancipation Festival for decades.<sup>15</sup> Near the end of his performance, he invited the Miller family back on stage and the two groups' rendition of *Wade in the Water* had the audience on their feet and clapping in time with the music. At the end of the program, the audience was invited to enjoy some light refreshments before attending the final event of the Emancipation Festival Weekend: the opening of the *North is Freedom* photo exhibit by Yuri Dojc displayed in the lobby of the Grey County Museum & Archives.



**The Millers joined Michael Dunston on stage for the last song, *Wade in the Water*.**

The Owen Sound Emancipation Festival is a powerful tribute to the experience of

<sup>13</sup> "David Sereda," Ontario Association of Art Galleries, accessed August 9, 2017, <https://curatingpostempire.com/presenters/david-sereda/>.

<sup>14</sup> "Recognizing Thomas Henry Miller," *Emancipation Festival*, accessed August 17, 2017, <http://www.emancipation.ca/recognising-thomas-henry-miller/>

<sup>15</sup> "About," *Michael Dunston*, accessed August 9, 2017, [http://michaeldunston.com/?page\\_id=2](http://michaeldunston.com/?page_id=2).



Black individuals who sought refuge from oppression by moving to Owen Sound, a northern terminus of the Underground Railroad. It carries their legacies forward, ensuring their stories continue to be told. Nevertheless, as much as the Festival focuses on the past, speaker after speaker throughout the weekend reminded attendees of the work still to be done. The task is not yet complete. Still today, social injustice abounds and racism continues to plague our communities. Many of the weekend's speakers challenged the audience in the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who said "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." The Festival serves as a poignant reminder that we all have a responsibility, regardless of the colour of our skin, to fight against social injustice so that we all can live together in peace.