

Snake Rail Fence

Naomi Norquay



Fence line: Lots 181 and 182, S.W. Toronto Sydenham Road, former Artemesia Township

I have spent the last several years researching the historic remnants of the Black pioneer settlement on the Old Durham Road in Artemesia Township, Grey County, Ontario. To date, my research has engaged archival documents, such as the census, marriage, death and birth records, land registries and obituaries; oral history interviews with local people; and most recently, photography, wherein I am walking the land and taking photos of the remaining vestiges of this community. In all of these endeavours I feel as if I am documenting an absent presence, and I feel a certain kind of urgency to continue and to (one day) complete this work.

I do this research for several reasons. First and foremost, because there has been some silence and denial of the presence and significance of this Black pioneer community, it is important to uncover this history and re-insert it in the public record. Secondly, as the physical traces of this community are fast disappearing, it is important to make a record of what remains. Thirdly, this history is necessary in order to challenge the dominant Canadian narrative about who settled here and who was a pioneer.

In earlier iterations of this work, I have considered various ‘evidences’ of this community which I have interpreted through the lenses of history, archaeology, cultural studies, and education.¹ Wild apples trees, field stone foundations of buildings and fragments of domestic pottery, china

¹ Naomi Norquay, “An accidental archive of the Old Durham Road: Reclaiming a Black pioneer settlement”, *Archivaria*, Volume 81, Spring, 2016, pp.1-22

and glassware have all been documented and read through these lenses.² Here, I take a close look at the snake rail fence, a once ubiquitous (and disappearing) symbol of pioneer life.

A Brief History of the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Settlement

What became Artemesia Township in the County of Grey had been territory of the Chippewa Nation who ceded this portion to the British government in 1818, with adjacent areas being ceded in 1836.³ When the land survey was completed in 1849, 16 Black families arrived on the newly-surveyed Durham Road and applied for location tickets.⁴ When the 1851 census-taker came along, he found in Artemesia Township a well-established community of Black settlers. There were 118 residents in 20 households. Their 50-acre lots each had a log cabin, cleared land, crops and farm animals. All had been in Upper Canada for at least 8 years, some for as many as 20 and one family had been in Upper Canada for 30 years.⁵ A second wave of refugees from the United States found their way to the Old Durham Road in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Over time, the community's visible presence disappeared. Many left what had been very marginal farmland to find work in the urban centres of Owen Sound and Collingwood. Many intermarried with white settler families and gradually integrated into white society, as continuing racist practices and attitudes marginalized Blackness.

If you drive or walk along the Old Durham Road, between Grey County Roads 4 and 14, you will see evidence of these settlers. There are still a few old maple trees, planted by settlers to mark their properties along the road edge. Fields are still plowed and planted, although much planned and spontaneous reforestation has also taken place. The swamps, which plagued the settlers' attempts to clear the land and farm it, are still very much part of the landscape. Here, there are hills and hillocks, which are basically piles of glacial till left behind as the last ice age receded. Wild apple trees dot the landscape - descendants, no doubt, of the apple trees the settlers grew for cider and domestic comfort.⁶ There are a few fieldstone foundations of fallen-down barns and a handful of frame or brick farmhouses, still in use. Interspersed, here and there, are stretches of snake rail fencing in various stages of repair: some still standing and in use, and many fallen down, yet still 'snaking' their way through the tall grass. My family's property (lots 8, 9 and 10, S.D.R.⁷) contains one intact snake rail fence that still marks the

² For further reading, see Naomi Norquay, "Land's Memory: Looking for Traces of the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Settlement" in Vol. 7/2010 and "Finding Ned Patterson" in Vol. 8/2011, as well as Martha Griffith's "Grey-Blue Willow" in Vol. 12/2015 of the *Northern Terminus Journal*.

³ E. L. Marsh, *A History of the County of Grey*, Owen Sound: Fleming Publishing Company Ltd., 1931

⁴ "Report of Lands Located on the Durham Road" 1849, Crown Lands Administration Subject Files, R.G.1 - 9, Volume 12, Envelope 6, MS892, reel 7, Archives of Ontario

⁵ "Report of Lands Located on the Durham Road", 1851; Crown Lands Administration Subject Files, R.G.1-, 9 Volume 12, Envelope 7, MS892, reel 7, Archives of Ontario

⁶ Michael Polan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World*, New York: Random House, 2002

⁷ S.D.R. stands for "south [side] of the Durham Road". The Durham Road was the settlement road - the central road - the one off which all the concessions, south side and north side are referenced: S.D.R. and N.D.R.

boundary between our place and our neighbours on lot 7. There are several other fallen-down stretches of fencing; the zig-zag pattern still in place.



Fence line: Lots 7 and 8, S.D.R., former Artemesia Township

The snake rail fence has long intrigued me, partly because it has always seemed to me to have been an oddly extravagant use of both cedar rails and human labour. For quite some time, I have noted that the use of old split rails in the decorative fences, which often mark a driveway or front lawn, suggests something of their by-gone importance and place in our rural heritage. This re-use also points to the demise of snake rail fencing in its original locations. For example, my father stockpiled rails from some of the fallen-down fences and used them for shoring and other (usually temporary) purposes. Like much else from my childhood spent roaming the land, the snake rail fences were simply a part of the landscape. I did not think about their origins or why the settlers chose this kind of fencing.

In what follows, I examine the snake rail fence through four lenses: the historical, the cultural, the ideological and the imaginative.

The historical:

In an 1888 American text, *Fences, Gates and Bridges: A Practical Guide*, the first chapter on “Rail and other primitive wood fences” begins with a description of a “Virginia rail fence”:

The zigzag fence was almost universally adopted by the settlers in the heavily timbered portions of the country, and countless thousands of miles of it still exist, though the increasing scarcity of timber has brought other styles of fencing largely into use. Properly built of good material, on a clear, solid bed, kept free from bushes and other growth to shade it and cause rot, the rail fence is as cheap as any, and as effective and durable as can reasonably be desired. Good chestnut, oak, cedar, or juniper rails, or original growth heart pine, will last fifty to a hundred years, so that material of this sort, once in hand, will serve one or two generations.⁸

⁸ George E. Martin (editor), *Fences, Gates and Bridges*, New York: O Judd Co., 1888, p. 7.

When settlers in Canada and the United States needed to set their property lines, keep their animals in and fulfill the requirements of the land grant system, they cut down trees and built simple and quick, self-supporting fences. The zig-zag pattern allowed for the fence rails to be self-supporting, with little or no need for posts. In Artemesia Township, Grey County, most of these fences were made out of split cedar logs, ensuring their longevity if left undisturbed. White cedar was, and is, still plentiful in the area, thriving around the area's many wetlands and drawing sustenance from the limestone-based glacial till. It is ideal for fencing because it is highly rot-resistant. While most of the snake rail fencing has long been replaced, there are still many property lines with snake rail fences intact and in use. They herald its long history in the region.

The cultural:

In researching data bases for information about snake rail fencing, I was surprised to find many titles and references to it in Canadian literature. It is referenced in fiction, poetry and memoir. For example, in *Along a Snake Fence Riding: A Poem*, Canadian poet W.H. New prefaces his book with a quote from the writing of Canadian artist, Emily Carr, who writes:

Just one of Father's fields was left Canadian. It was a piece of land which he bought later ..., and at the end of fifty years we still called that piece of ground 'the new field'. The New Field had a snake fence around it, ... a zigzag fence made of split cedar logs or of young sapling trees laid crisscross, their own weight holding them in place so that they required no nails. Snake fences were extravagant in land and in wood, but wood and land were cheaper in Canada in early days than were nails and hinges.⁹



Self-supporting cedar rails: Lots 7 and 8, S.D.R.

⁹ W.H. New, *Along a snake fence riding: A poem*, British Columbia: Oolichan Books, 2007, p. 7. (The quotation is from Emily Carr, *The book of small*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1942)

Meg Trebett's novella, *North of the Snakerail [sic] Fence*,¹⁰ recounts a fictional version of her family's pioneering days in the small community of Beaver Creek, in the Alberni Valley, British Columbia. The reference to a snake rail fence in the book's title supports the notion that the snake rail fence is a marker of pioneer life in regions of Canada with substantial forest. In Artemesia Township, the snake rail fence is long associated with the area's pioneering narrative. For example, the township's local history, published in 1986, is entitled: *Split Rail Country: A History of Artemesia*. The village of Flesherton began its annual Split Rail Festival in 1973. Held in September every year until 2008, the Split Rail Festival was the fall fair - a common event in many rural communities in Canada. Community meals, musical performances, square dancing and competitions of various kinds filled the weekend-long event. At the mid-way mark on the Saturday, there was a demonstration of the festival's main theme: rail splitting. When the festival closed its doors in 2008 (officially due to a "lack of volunteers"¹¹), the board of directors voted to "keep the name for possible future use."¹² This suggests that the community recognized the cachet the festival name had: split cedar rails continue to be acknowledged as a marker of pioneer heritage.

The ideological:

As I learn more about the origins of the snake rail fence, I am interested that it is known as the "Virginia rail fence" and is thought to have originated in the state of Virginia, U.S.A.¹³. This kind of fencing requires an enormous amount of wood. It would not have been a style of fencing brought to North America by the Scottish and Irish settlers, who would have been more familiar with hedgerow and stone fencing. Therefore, there is a possibility that it may have come to Grey County via the refugees from the American slave states. While this is speculation on my part, I do not think it is too much to assume that Blacks coming to Grey County from the United States, or other settled parts of Upper Canada, would have been more familiar with snake rail fencing than the area's more recent immigrants from the British Isles. One elderly community member recently suggested to me that the Black settlers were known for their rail-splitting skills.

In the context of dismissal in which the Black settlement is usually referenced, the remaining snake rail fencing along the Old Durham Road disrupts the dominance and exclusionary nature of this ubiquitous marker of white pioneer experience. Like their white neighbours, these pioneers needed to build fences in order to maintain their property lines and keep farm animals in or out. By acknowledging and recording the presence of this fencing, we can place the Black

¹⁰ Meg Trebett, *North of the Snakerail Fence*, British Columbia: Vancouver Desktop Publishing Centre, 1999

¹¹ Don Crosby, "Plug pulled on Split Rail Fest", *Owen Sound Sun Times*, November 28, 2008

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Eugene Fytche, "The evolution of log fences", *S&W Report: The quarterly newsletter of the Ontario Woodlot Association*, Kemptville, Ontario: The Ontario Woodlot Association, Winter / Spring 2017, Volume 86, p.p. 20-23

settlers back into the historical narrative, as we reimagine the remaining snake rail fences as markers of their community as well.

The imaginative:

In 2013, I was invited to Macphail Memorial Elementary School in Flesherton by the music teacher who was concerned that the area's Black history was not being taught at the school and that few of the students knew this history. In the month of February some teachers acknowledge Black History Month with the well-worn stories of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. The music teacher invited three colleagues and their students to join me in the music room, one day, where I shared stories, artefacts and photographs from my research about Edward Patterson, one of the Black settlers on the Old Durham Road.¹⁴ In terms of the photographs I shared, the students were very familiar with the old stone foundations of barns and the rock piles one still finds in farmers' fields. They recognized the wild apple trees and the snake rail fencing, and they acknowledged that all of these artefacts were a part of their own pioneering heritage. Only a couple of students had known that there had been a Black pioneer settlement just a few kilometres from their school. Although many regularly travelled along the Old Durham Road, they were not aware of the reclaimed cemetery that is one of the few markers of the Black settlement. However, upon learning this information, they were eager to engage, imagine and create.

The Grade 5/6 class, under the guidance of the music teacher, composed a short suite of instrumental music they called "The Underground Railroad Suite," which consisted of four short pieces. They invited me to a rehearsal, as they were taking their composition to the regional music competition. I admit to being a bit disappointed with the title they had chosen, as I had tried to emphasize that the Black pioneers were also settlers and not only fugitives. The Underground Railroad narrative that is usually taught in schools focuses on the arrival of Blacks as refugees from slavery, and rarely includes anything about how they settled and contributed to the building of our nation.

I was pleasantly surprised by the four pieces. The first piece, "Nighttime Pursuit," was a slow, quiet and somewhat ominous piece of music. The students explained that what they had wanted to convey in the music was a refugee from slavery hiding in a tree and watching his pursuers hunt in vain for him in the woods below. The slow pace of the music did not portray someone being chased. It did not suggest someone on the run, but rather someone who had stopped running. As I listened, I conjured up the image of someone who had found a place of safety, a place to call home. The second piece was called "Snake Rail Fence." True to its name, the jaunty little piece developed around a melody that zig-zagged back and forth, up and down,

¹⁴ Naomi Norquay, "Finding Ned Patterson", *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal*, Volume 8, 2011, pp. 13-24; Naomi Norquay, "Land's Memory: Looking for traces of the Old Durham Road Black Pioneer Settlement", *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal*, Volume 7, 2010, pp. 14-21

just the way the snake rail fences do in the vicinity of the school. While the students were unfamiliar with the Black history at their doorstep, they were all very familiar with snake rail fencing - enough to create a piece of music that mimicked it! The third piece, "Cuckoo Valley," was a very animated and complex piece of music. It included the recitation of an excerpt from *Broken Shackles* wherein an Old Durham Road settler, Chauncey Simons, expounds on the virtues of settling in Artemesia Township¹⁵. Over this spoken soliloquy, individual instruments played phrases that imitated the sounds of animals, babbling brooks and a waterfall that are described in the text. Cuckoo Valley is the historic name for present-day Beaver Valley, which lies just northeast of the village of Flesherton. The last piece, "The Arrival," was very joyous! It conjured up the image of the refugee becoming a settler who had finally found home. The students took their composition to the regional music competition where they won first prize in the original composition category. Besides creating a winning composition, the students were able to imagine the ubiquitous snake rail fence as not only belonging to their own heritage, but also to the heritage of the Black pioneers.

Fences, as the saying goes, make good neighbours! I now see the snake rail fence differently. As it continues to mark the dominant presence of the white pioneer narrative, it also marks the absent presence of the silenced and denied Black pioneer narrative. Perhaps, over time, with more community engagement with this long-absent history, the snake rail fences will be seen by many to stand in for both communities and for the pioneering experiences they undoubtedly shared.



Fence line: Baseline, S.D. R. Glenelg Township

¹⁵ Peter Meyler (ed.), *Broken Shackles: Old Man Henson from Slavery to Freedom*, Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2001, p. 190