

Black History Month Storyboards

About Black History Month

On December 14, 1995, Jean Augustine, the first Black Canadian woman elected to Parliament and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Prime Minister, requested and received the unanimous agreement of the House of Commons on her motion to declare February Black History Month in Canada.

Black History Month is a time to honour the important contributions made by the Black community in the settlement, growth and development of all aspects of society.

We invite you to take a journey back in time to discover some of the rich Black history of Collingwood. The storyboard project was made possible through the contributions of the Sheffield Park Black History & Cultural Museum, the Collingwood Museum and members of the community. To share the histories/stories of Collingwood's early Black settlers, please contact:

museum@collingwood.ca or sheffieldblackhistory@gmail.com.

A Stop on the Underground Railroad and Northern Destination

Over 185 years ago, those escaping slavery and persecution in the Southern United States made their way to Collingwood through a series of secret routes and safe houses in the United States and Canada known as the Underground Railroad. In 1834, the British Slavery Abolition Act came into effect, beginning the liberation of enslaved peoples throughout the British Empire. In response, freedom seekers saw Canada as a possible destination point with many making the perilous journey north.

Some freedom seekers entered Canada by the Underground Railroad on foot or by wagons, using various disguises or stowed away, on ships whose ports of call included the northern terminals in Collingwood and Owen Sound. Other freedom seekers reached northern destinations independently through their own initiative and perseverance. The hope of employment opportunities and property ownership made Collingwood a desirable stop on the Underground Railroad. Oro Medonte received the first government-issued land grants to Black Loyalists who fought in the War of 1812.

Despite their hopes and dreams, early Black settlers continued to face hardships and discrimination in Collingwood and surrounding towns. A lack of acceptance, low paying and dangerous jobs, and violence pushed many to establish rural Black settlements in Grey and Simcoe Counties, including Wilberforce Settlement, Negro Creek, and Priceville. In the 1840s, government surveys of the Queen's Bush between Waterloo County and Lake Huron priced land out of reach of most Black settlers, forcing many to abandon these early communities and move to larger towns.

Collingwood's Early Black Settlements

It wasn't easy for early Black settlers in Collingwood in the 1860s. Faced with limited employment opportunities, discrimination, and loneliness several families created a settlement in Collingwood's Town Park where Central Park and the YMCA are located today. This early settlement, which provided security, comfort, and a sense of community, was forced to relocate in later years.

In 1871 the first British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church in Collingwood opened its doors for worship on Seventh Street. The Little Chapel, as it was known, was built through the fundraising efforts of the local neighbourhood which included White and Black families. The Little Chapel became the literal centre of the neighbourhood.

Several families purchased land and built homes between Sixth and Eighth Streets, Oak and Cedar Streets. In the late 1800s this area would have been on the outskirts of town, far away from the downtown business district. It was here that Collingwood's early Black residents created a community of shared culture, support, and inclusion that continues to exist and thrive today.

Elijah Piecraft: Collingwood's First Town Crier

Elijah Piecraft was one of Collingwood's early Black settlers. He was born in the early 1800s in the United States and escaped slavery through the Underground Railroad in the early 19th Century. Collingwood was one of the last stops on the Underground Railroad and it was here that Elijah eventually arrived and settled. Married with children, Elijah was a noted fiddler and often played on sailing excursions around Georgian Bay aboard the steamships Ploughboy and Frances Smith. He is also remembered as a

member of the early Church of England, first located on Cedar Street and later moving to its present location on Elgin Street.

The 1866-1867 Gazetteer and Directory for the County of Simcoe lists Elijah as living on Cedar Street and employed as a bellringer. This paid occupation reveals that Elijah was Collingwood's first Town Crier. Elijah was well known in the community for his strong voice and he walked the streets of Collingwood, ringing a hand bell and loudly proclaiming town events, store sales and promotions. This early tradition of bellringing continues in Collingwood today.

In 2003 The Ontario Guild of Town Criers and the Ontario Heritage Society recognized Elijah Piecraft's important contributions as one of three Black Canadian town criers. The event was held at the Sheffield Park Black History and Cultural Museum.

Pleasant & Charles Duval: Collingwood's Early Barbers

Born in Louisiana, Pleasant Duval spent most of his youth sailing on the Mississippi and the Ohio Rivers. Arriving in Collingwood in 1855, Pleasant secured employment on several Great Lakes steamships. Soon after, he established one of Collingwood's first barbershops at the busy corner of Huron and Hurontario Streets. This popular business quickly grew and "Professor" Duval, as he was affectionately referred to, hired additional employees including White barbers and apprentices. Later he expanded his business to include an ice cream parlour. Well known in town, Mr. Duval had a poem written about him in the 1875 Poetical Directory of Collingwood. This small anthology of poems highlighted prominent business owners in Collingwood at that time.

Pleasant's son, Charles, also became a barber, learning the trade from his father when he was 13 years old. Charles took over the family barbershop shortly before Pleasant's death in 1893 and continued to operate the business for another 60 years. The Duval's barbershop was a respected destination in town for nearly a century making it one of Collingwood's earliest and longest running businesses.

Professor Duval

"Georgian Shaving Parlor,"
Hurontario Street

"Each bearded boy, who does employ
This skillful man, to dress
His knowledge box, and trim his locks,
Will find him right, I guess.
Sharp razor keeps, rich harvest reaps
From upper lip and chin,
Will leave moustache, a thin wag dash,
Till fashions change again.
Leaves kissing space in centre face –
Between the hairy toys,
While gay young girls perfume their curls.
As well as barded boys.
Not one like him, to scent or trim,
And do it so complete;
Give him a call both one and all,
He shaves and trims so neat."
-Poetical Directory of Collingwood, 1875-

Logging on the Nottawasaga

By Janie Cooper-Wilson

The Our Community public art installation located on the south side of the Eddie Bush Memorial Arena at 97 Hurontario Street represents the past, present and future of Collingwood.

One of the five large panels, entitled Logging on the Nottawasaga was painted by local artist Janie Cooper Wilson in 2001. In it, she depicts the region's black history through the lens of her family history. Black pioneers, the Coopers settled in the Collingwood area in 1854 and are descendants of colonial slaves in Virginia who self-emancipated around the time of the American Revolution. The small log cabin represents the homes of early Black settlers in the area. The face of the working man is that of her grandfather, Frederick Cooper and the man's hands were inspired by those of her father, JJ Cooper. The seven large evergreen trees in the background represent the 7 generations of the Cooper family in Simcoe County.

Janie's father, JJ Cooper, was born in Collingwood on February 8, 1911. He learned many trade skills from his family and was an entrepreneur and a lover of animals. He was known for breeding Aberdeen Angus cattle and working as a teamster with Mac, his beloved Belgian Stallion. In the early

1940's, Jozo Weider hired JJ to clear the first ski hill at what would become Blue Mountain.

Did you know that JJ Cooper's legacy is honoured at the original location of his farm? The JJ Cooper Park in the Creekside subdivision at Sixth and High Street is Collingwood's first natural playground and a popular outdoor recreational area for Collingwood residents to visit.

Joseph Quinn Thomas: Community Leader

Joseph Thomas was born in the Oro Settlement to parents, Charles Thomas and Jane Montgomery Bland. The Thomas family moved to Collingwood while Joe was still an infant. Their homestead was on the southwest side of the railroad tracks on Walnut Street in the vicinity of Eighth Street. When he was fourteen, Joe sought employment at the Collingwood Shipyards where he worked for some fifty years as a passer and later a heater.

The Thomas family attended and were members of the local British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church in Collingwood, located on Seventh Street. Joe had a love for music and soon became the church organist and choir director. He was also involved in Sunday School programs and the Young People's Society activities at the Church. Serving many times as a BME Conference delegate, Joe Thomas made connections and friendships with other BME Churches and Black communities, resulting in his elected position as President of the Sunday School and Young Peoples' Convention of the BME Churches of Canada.

The original church organ is on display at Sheffield Park Black History and Cultural Museum. The hand-carved pump organ that Joseph Thomas masterfully played is still standing proudly in the Heritage Community Church on Seventh Street.

Joseph Thomas gave a voice to Black communities through his music and his service to others demonstrating his love of family, church, and friends near and far.

Black Men in Business & Service

In the early years, as Collingwood grew, there were opportunities for business ventures or community service. Many Black men found employment on the Great Lakes as cooks, deck hands or dock workers. Others were hired by railroad companies as porters, cooks, boxcar loaders

and machine oilers. Travelling by water or rail, Black communities were linked with one another when ships docked in ports such as Owen Sound, Sarnia, Sault Ste. Marie or when trains stopped at stations like Barrie, Toronto, London or St. Catharines. For workers and travellers, stops in unfamiliar places necessitated the need to find somewhere that was safe and welcoming. Stranded ship or rail workers sought assistance and camaraderie from the local Black community. New friendships reached far and wide, linking families and communities for generations.

The Collingwood Shipyards and the railway were essential to the Town's employment, and some local Black families saw the opportunities in these for their own enterprises. The Coopers were teamsters, using their skills with horses to load freight or carry passengers. They also cut ice blocks out of the harbour to sell to local businesses and homes. In addition, the Coopers owned a cork manufacturing business. Russell Sheffield operated a small hotel on Huron Street near the harbourfront. Pleasant Duval and his son, Charles, had several employees in their barbershop and ice cream parlour at the corner of Huron and Hurontario Streets. As a certified engineer, Norman Sheffield maintained the boiler system for the Smart's Canning Factory. The Davenport men were in demand for their contracting skills, building hotels and other large structures as well as transporting goods between Collingwood and the Toronto harbour. Other local Black men worked as blacksmiths, tanners, machinists, carpenters and more.

Using their skills, Black men were found to be competent and qualified workers in many fields of employment. They also had the ability to look beyond and see the possibilities of what they could achieve on their own. These men of ambition helped to lay the foundations of Black-owned businesses through independence and achievement.

Black Women in Business & Service

The Black community in Collingwood was well-known and, for the most part, accepted; however, inclusion, hospitality and services were sometimes lacking when it came to the needs and comfort of local Black women. Husbands and other male family members were more readily employed in the labour and service industries, but women had to find the means to support themselves and improve their neighbourhoods. They also ensured the well-being of their children, introducing them to music and educating them in their own homes.

Women of colour were self-sufficient and experienced in various trades as hairdressers, dressmakers, milliners and cooks in hotels and on Great Lakes ships. Many Black women secured positions in the more affluent homes of White society as housekeepers, cooks, nannies and caregivers. Others used their talents to set-up their own businesses by obtaining a small shop or working out of their homes. Known for her cooking skills, Caroline "Auntie" Piecraft, set-up a culinary service, employing relatives, selling her baked goods throughout the community. Emma Green-Lewis successfully manufactured dolls and doll accessories. Susan Brown-LeBurtis developed an interest in herbs and was often called on to treat health issues. She went on to open her own herbalist business in Woodstock, successfully winning several court cases where White doctors objected to her methods.

Black women had to balance two worlds. While they had to co-exist within the realm of White society, they also stayed mindful of the needs and identity of the Black community. Gleaning what they could from the outside, these enterprising women became leaders, mentors and role-models for the Black community, raising awareness, opportunities and encouragement.

Early Beginnings of Heritage Community Church

The Church has always been the heart of the Black community. It was the gathering place, a place for worship, unity, strength and identity. Predominately Baptist, Anglican, Pentecostal or Methodist, the Church was something tangible that the Black community could call its own.

As soon as communities were settled in Canada, churches were erected and it was common for American ministers to cross the border to preach to local congregations. Several of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church ministers and lay preachers began a frequent circuit throughout Canada, from the east coast of Nova Scotia across to Winnipeg and beyond. Canadian AME Churches are still active today. The AME Church in Oro-Medonte was built in 1849 by Black Loyalists and has been deemed a National Historic Site.

With the passing of the American Fugitive Slave Act, 19 AME churches in Ontario petitioned King George V in 1856 to receive a charter to have their chapters/congregations placed under the governance of British authority. The title of British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church of Canada was subsequently authorized. The local Collingwood community was included in this petition but had not yet erected a church building. By 1870, land was purchased on Lot 29, located on the south side of Seventh Street, and a

church named "Little Chapel" was erected. The first church was destroyed by fire; however, by 1900 a second church was built on the same spot and was referred to as the BME Church in Collingwood. In 1976 this building was torn down and replaced with a new church which became independent in 1986 and was renamed Heritage Community Church of Collingwood, Inc.

Situated on the original site, Heritage Community Church is to be deemed a heritage site of historic significance by the Town of Collingwood

Wilfred & Ildia Sheffield: Cedar Inn Restaurant

For more than 35 years, Collingwood residents Wilfred and Ildia Sheffield worked as cooks on several Great Lakes ships. During the early 1900s, shipping was an important economic industry for Collingwood and provided employment opportunities for Black residents and a means of travel and connection to other communities along Georgian Bay. Upon learning that one of the ships they were aboard was being scrapped, the Sheffields purchased the very large cook stove and brought it to Collingwood.

When the Collingwood couple finished sailing in 1945, they took over the family business with their children working alongside them. The Sheffield's Cedar Inn Restaurant was a popular dining destination for town residents until 1971 and was located on Hwy 26 in the present-day location of Admiral's Gate Condominiums. The Cedar Inn held special significance to visiting tourists. During a time of racial segregation in both the United States and Canada, the Sheffields were instrumental in providing a safe and welcoming location for African American tourists visiting the area. The Sheffields re-assured these visitors that while Black families were safe to dine in local establishments and enjoy the area's recreational amenities, they could still experience isolated incidents of guarded hospitality and negative attitudes. However, in general, most Collingwood businesses and citizens were quite friendly and receptive to all visitors.

The restaurant thrived until road construction on Highway 26 destroyed the Cedar Inn's well and the Sheffields were forced to permanently close their business in 1971. Visit the Sheffield Park Black History and Cultural Museum to see several artifacts from the Cedar Inn Restaurant on display sheffieldparkblackhistory.com

J.J. Cooper Park

Brenda Miller, 2019

There's this Park, between Chamberlain and Davis, just off High St. where J.J. Cooper's trail begins and wild woods hug the meadow.

A slice of oasis where parents meet, and children don't have to wipe their feet.

Curiously, alongside this Parks' pristine neighbourhood of pavement and brick, you will find a sidewalk that leads you nowhere; it's quite a clever trick.

I know it sounds strange, but I swear, it's true.

J.J. Cooper, was once the master of this land; his namesake plaque, is now all that remains, time and civilized suburbia have turned the page on this Ancestral ground.

A child's playground now, seems appropriate somehow; respectful of this gentle Negro man.

Strong Hands the size of saucers, yet his voice always soft and low - they just didn't match. In years past, Jim's Black Angus, GNE winners all, were raised on this patch.

Psst ... At his home, he kept some monkeys, and he had Peacocks proud but loud!

Standing tall amid brambles and bushes, one magnificent tree of old, prevails, perhaps it's a Symbol of this gentle Negro man, still lordling over his land?

There's wide-open space, for playing catch, and a hill, and a knoll ... come on, let's go roll!

A picnic table for crafts, puzzles and games has seating for ten or more. Springs grasses of lush Irish green invite dandelions galore.

Rules say to keep Doggies on a leash ... but hey, the Do-Do bags are free!

Oh look, that giant slice of stone has sparkles! Maybe it's a magical mountain. There's five Swings, "let's get on and fly." Three slides, and one is a double! "Oh my."

This tree with soft little cones it makes me laugh, they're lots of fun if you like to craft.

“Mommy ... Mommy, I’m bored” it’s a repetitive summer lament,
Just come to Cooper’s park, there’s lots here to keep them content.
I just found a peek-a -boo place, Come seeTag! You’re it!

Emancipation Day Celebrations

On August 1, 1834, the British Slavery Abolition Act came into effect, officially ending slavery throughout Britain and the British colonies including Canada. Since this time, August 1 has become an annual celebration of freedom known as Emancipation Day.

In the mid-1800s and for nearly a century, the Collingwood Black community held annual Emancipation Day picnics with the Owen Sound church community. The celebration, held over two days, was attended by local residents, extended family members, and guests from neighbouring settlements. The interracial celebrations would include a parade through town, mayoral speeches, church services, picnics at Sunset Point Park and music.

By the 1950s, Collingwood festivities grew smaller and since Owen Sound was rapidly growing the festival moved to Harrison Park. Today, Owen Sound holds the region’s largest Emancipation Day Festival which honours the contributions, perseverance, and strength of Black communities.