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Ferried to Freedom, Black History

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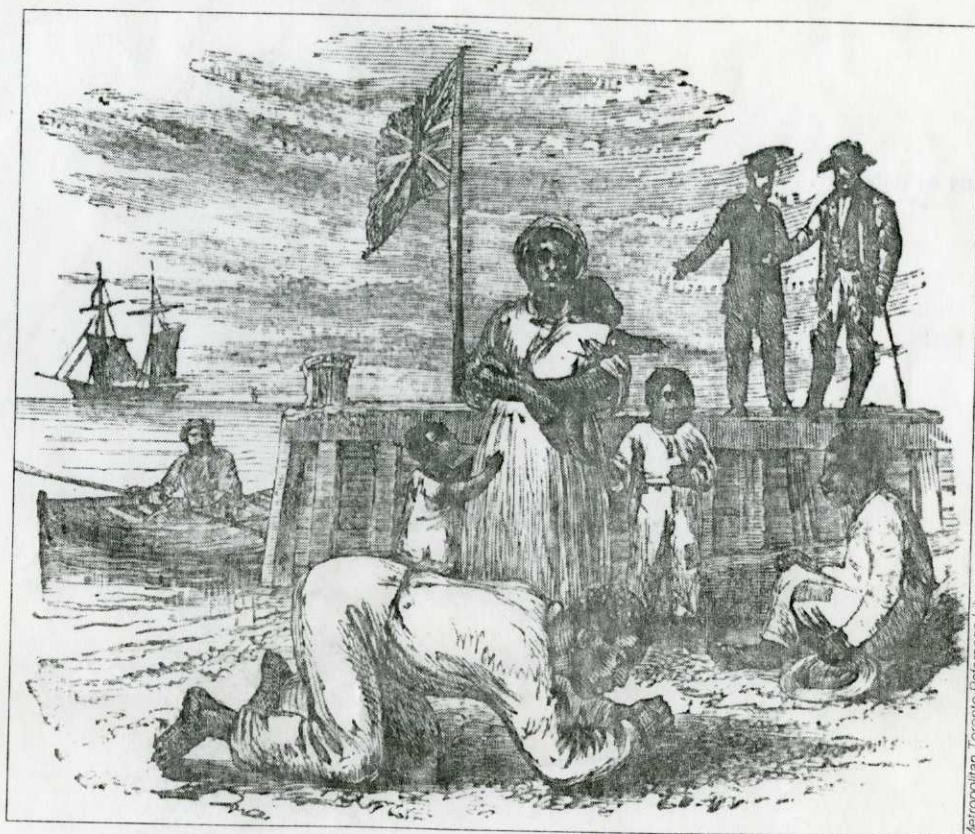
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Ferried to Freedom

Fugitive slaves escaped lives of oppression and cruelty by travelling the Underground Railroad across the Niagara River to Fort Erie. Some families settled here, supported by friendly and sympathetic strangers, to lay foundations of freedom.



Free at last. Illustration from Josiah Henson's autobiography. It depicts him and his family celebrating their freedom at Fort Erie's docks. The book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was patterned after Josiah Henson's life.

By Glenn Walker

The Underground Railroad

The proximity of Fort Erie to the American border made the area a major terminus of the Underground Railroad. Numerous accounts described the Niagara Frontier as one of the main routes for fugitive slaves to cross into Canada, and it is safe to assume that almost all crossings that refer to Buffalo or Black Rock would cross into Fort Erie.¹ This would tend to support the claim that thousands of slaves escaped

from bondage by way of Fort Erie.

Black Communities in Fort Erie

The rapid influx of escaped slaves resulted in the formation of several black communities in the mid-1800s. These communities were called Bertie Hill, Snake Hill and Little Africa. They gradually disappeared by the end of the 1800s.

Some who lived at Bertie Hill became known and respected. Perhaps the best known was Betsy Robinson, or "Aunt Betsy" who arrived in Fort Erie after escaping slavery in Virginia. John Bright was said to be the drummer boy at the Battle of Lundy's Lane.

Little Africa

Little Africa was located east of Stevensville, stretching from Ridgemount Road to the former Miller's Bay Shipyard (now the Niagara Parks Commission Marina).² It was spread out along the eastern part of the Sunset Indian Trail, which is now Curtis Road and Miller Avenue.³ "The place was quite prosperous and had its own neighbourhood stores and church." All that remains of Little Africa is the Coloured Cemetery on Curtis Road, just east of Ridgemount Road.⁴

In 1840, the population of the community was about 80, but before 1880 it peaked at about 200.⁵ These "early Black residents often worked at cutting logs to be rafted across the Niagara River for shipment to American centres."⁶ "At the time, the area was rich in black walnut, white oak, maple, ash and hickory."⁷ "In 1860, a railroad line (Erie and Niagara Railroad) was run from Fort Erie to Niagara-on-the-Lake, through the heart of 'Little Africa' where wood-choppers prepared fuel for the engines. Blacks cut wood for the Canada Southern Railway (which was built in 1873) and for the ferries which carried trains across the Niagara River at Fort Erie before the International Railway Bridge was built."⁸ Around 1880, the population of Little Africa began to scatter to other parts of the province because of the decreasing wood supply and an increased use of coal.⁹

Coloured Cemetery

The Coloured Cemetery is located in what was Little Africa on the north side of Curtis Road just east of Ridgemount Road. The exact number of blacks buried in the cemetery among the 46 headstones remains a mystery. Only the Russell family's four children and their mother are confirmed (by census records) to be black.¹⁰ Another suspected black family in the cemetery are two people with the name Bright. The Brights were a well-known black family in the community, and Charles Bright maintained that a lot of...[his] friends and relatives are buried... [in unmarked graves in the]... dirty corner."¹¹ Local historians believe that blacks may have been buried in this cemetery because they were not welcomed at the Ridgemount Church Cemetery located around the corner.¹²

Bertie Hill Settlement

The Bertie Hill Settlement was located in the Bertie Street area going up the hill between Niagara Boulevard and Central Avenue. It was often referred to as "Nigger Hill."¹³ The area was settled by escaped slaves, who likely landed at the foot of Bertie Street, adjacent to the Settlement, where the main ferry landing was located.

Some blacks who lived at Bertie Hill became known and respected. Perhaps the best known was Betsy Robinson, or "Aunt Betsy" who arrived in Fort Erie after escaping slavery in Virginia.¹⁴ John Taylor was one of the first settlers of Bertie Hill. He escaped at Miller's Bay shortly after May 1, 1850.¹⁵ The Bright family was also a well-known local family whose descendants still lived in the area after escaping slavery in the late 1850s.¹⁶ John Bright was said to be the drummer boy at the Battle of Lundy's Lane.

British Methodist Episcopal Church

The predecessor of the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church was the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. It had extended itself, as early as 1828, in four centres in Upper Canada including Niagara (on-the-Lake) and Fort Erie.¹⁷ The church for the BME congregation in Fort Erie was not built until the 1870s. It was located at 109 [now 106] Murray St. in Bertie Hill Settlement. Little is known of this early AME group in Fort Erie, except that at a General Conference meeting of the AME in the U.S. it was reported that there were 13 members in Fort Erie. The church served the black community for almost 100 years.

Snake Hill Settlement

"Snake Hill in the 1850s had a considerable Negro colony. One of the slaves to come to Snake Hill was Dan Banks, whose face now adorns the box of a well-known cooked breakfast cereal" [likely referring to Cream of Wheat]. Older residents recall the delicious fried chicken dinners prepared by Negro women in true Southern tradition. At one time colored camp meetings held in the old Snake Hill Grove attracted hundreds of

visitors from both sides of the border." Snake Hill later became the Erie Beach Amusement Park.¹⁸

Josiah Henson and Uncle Tom

The most famous slave to escape in Fort Erie was Josiah Henson. He was made famous by Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The author acknowledged that the life and autobiography of Josiah Henson was a primary source of the character of "Uncle Tom."¹⁹ In his autobiography, Henson provided a moving description of one escape to freedom:

The next evening we reached Buffalo, but it was too late to cross the river that night. "You see those trees," said the noble-hearted captain, next morning, pointing to a group in the distance, "they grow on free soil, and as soon as your feet touch that, you're a man. I want to see you go and be a freeman. I'm poor myself, and have nothing to give you; I only sail the boat for wages; but I'll see you across. Here, Green," said he to a ferryman, "what will you take this man and his family over for?—he's got no money." "Three shillings." He then took a dollar out of his pocket and gave it to me. Never shall I forget the spirit in which he spoke. He put his hand on my head and said, "Be a good fellow, won't you?" I felt streams of emotion running down in electric courses from head to foot. "Yes," said I; "I'll use my freedom well; I'll give my soul to God." He stood waving his hat as we pushed off for the opposite shore. God bless him! God bless him eternally! Amen!

It was the 28th of October, 1830, in the morning, when my feet first touched the Canada shore. I threw myself on the ground, rolled in the sand, seized handfuls of it and kissed them, and danced round till, in the eyes of several who were present, I passed for a madman. "He's some crazy fellow," said a Colonel Warren [the Customs Inspector], who happened to be there. "O, no master! don't you know? I'm free!" He burst into a shout of laughter. Well, I never

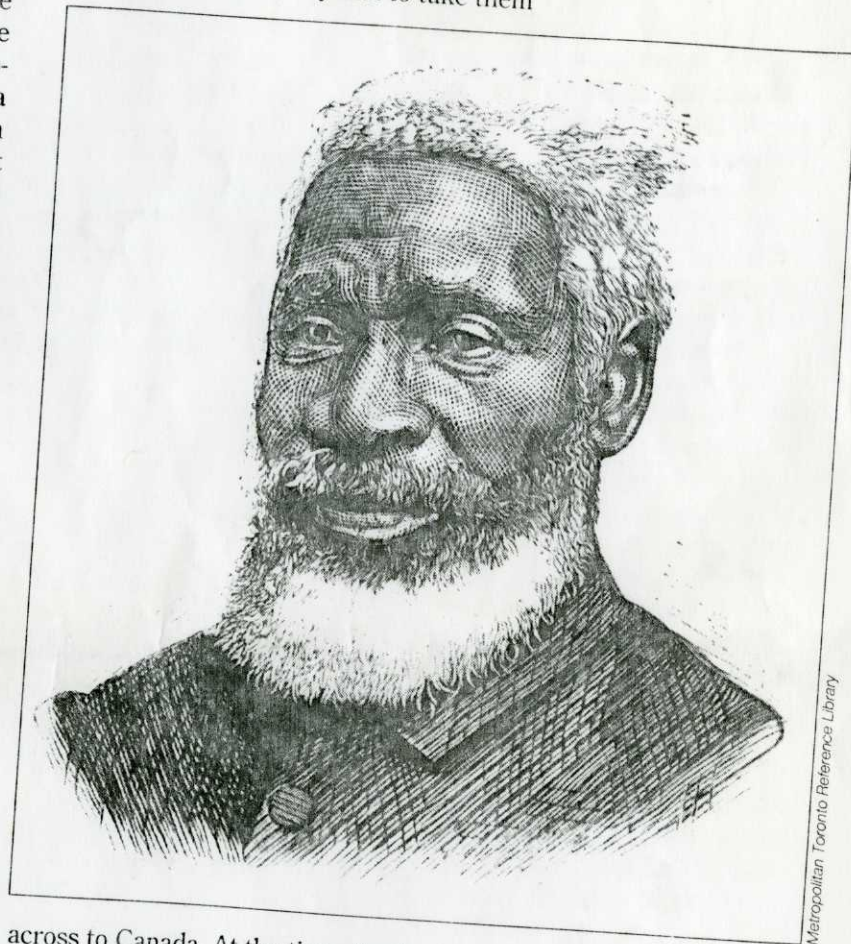
knew freedom make a man roll in the sand in such a fashion. Still I could not control myself. I hugged and kissed my wife and children, and, until the first exuberant burst of feeling was over, went on as before.²⁰

Josiah Henson's Landing Site

The most likely landing place of the Hensons was next to the Warren or "Old Ferry" wharf which was located on the Niagara River between Lavinia and Catherine Streets.

These are the points to consider:

—First, Henson refers to leaving Buffalo and getting a ferryman to take them



across to Canada. At the time, the ferries from the Buffalo area—that is, Buffalo and Black Rock Harbors—landed in Canada at one of the wharfs in Fort Erie or in Chippawa. This indicates that the crossing was made to the shores of the Niagara River in the Fort Erie area, because Henson implies they went towards the trees that were visible from Buffalo, rather than a longer route downstream to Chippawa.

"I'm free!"

A drawing of Josiah Henson in his later years.

Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library

—Second, Henson also mentions that after arriving, he “heard...of a Mr. Hibbard, who lived some six or seven miles off.” The Hibbard farm is roughly that distance from the foot of Catherine Street.

—Third, Henson mentions that a Col. Warren was on shore when he landed. Probably this man was Colonel John Warren, collector of customs at the port of “Fort Erie Passage since the death of his father, the first collector, in early September 1832.”²¹ In his capacity as collector of customs, Col. Warren attempted to be present at the landing of any craft in order to collect any duties payable, and he would have surely requested vessels arriving from the U.S. to come to his custom house. Thus, the most likely location of Henson’s landing was near the custom house.

—Fourth, Col. Warren’s custom house was located on what is known as the “Old Ferry” wharf, which was located on the Niagara River between Lavinia and Catherine Streets.

—Fifth, Col. Warren had also been granted the lease of the “Ferry below the Rapids at Fort Erie Passage,” which he held for seven-year terms from 1802 until his death in September 1832.²² He operated the ferry out of what became known

Henson had his first house as a free man on the Hibbard farm, an old two-storey of which pigs had broken and made it their resting place.

later as the “Old Ferry” wharf. This was the main ferry from the U.S. side to Fort Erie at the time Henson landed.

—Sixth, there was an illustration of Henson’s landing, often reprinted, which appeared originally in one of the versions of Henson’s autobiography, indicating that Henson landed next to a wharf. If this illustration is accurate, and the wharf illustrated is the Old Ferry wharf, then the landing would have been near the foot of Catherine Street.

Veteran of the siege of Fort Erie

John Baker, who was described as “the last survivor of those who had been slaves with the Loyalists of Upper Canada,”⁴¹ served in the 104th Regiment of Foot at the Siege of Fort Erie.⁴²

Josiah Henson at the Hibbard Farm

After they arrived Josiah began to look for employment, and he heard:

... in the course of the day, of a Mr. Hibbard, who lived some six or seven miles off, and who was a rich man, as riches were counted there, with a large farm, and several small tenements on it, which he was in the habit of letting to his laborers In the afternoon I found him, and soon struck a bargain with him for employment. I asked him if there was any house where he would let me live. He said “Yes”. . . .²³

Josiah Henson’s first home was on the Charles Hibbard farm which was located on the west side of Ridgemount Road just north of Bowen Road.²⁴ The St. John’s Anglican Church is located on a portion of the old farm. In some instances the Hibbard farm was said to be located in Ridgeway at the junction of Michener Road and Farr Avenue. That property, however, was owned by Charles Hill from 1805 to 1840 and was purchased by a Chancy Hibbard in 1857, according to Registry records (Instr. # 4753). This Hibbard was a native of Vermont who emigrated to Canada in November 1834, so Henson could not have worked on his farm. Henson and his family remained on the Hibbard farm from 1830 to 1833, then went to the Riselay farm.²⁵

Henson had his first house as a free man on the Hibbard farm. This house was:

... an old two-storey sort of shanty, into the lower storey of which pigs had broken, and had apparently made it their resting-place for some time. Still it was a house and I forthwith expelled the pigs, and set about cleaning it for occupancy The next day I brought the rest of the Hensons to “my house,” and though there was nothing there but bare walls and floors, we were all in a state of great delight, and my wife laughed and acknowledged that it was worth while, and that it was better than a log cabin with an earth-floor. I begged some straw of Mr. Hibbard, and confining it by logs in the corners of the room, I made beds

Windmill Point

Windmill Point is located at the end of Windmill Point Road on the shore of Lake Erie. It is believed that a farmer named Benjamin Baker brought escaped slaves across Lake Erie from Woodlawn Beach, N.Y. to Windmill Point when the lake was frozen. In winter, Benjamin Baker was noted for "filling sleighs with grain under which slaves were hidden and driving them across on the ice to the Woodlawn grist mill at Great Mill Point, Ontario." The peculiar thing about these trips is that he would come back with the grain not ground.⁴³

of it three feet thick, upon which we reposed luxuriously after our long fatigues. . . . We soon procured some of the comforts of life, while the necessities of food and fuel were abundant.²⁶

While on the farm Henson began to preach, after:

. . . one of my Maryland friends arrived in this neighbourhood, and hearing of my being here, inquired if I ever preached now, and spread the reputation I had acquired elsewhere for my gifts in the pulpit. . . . I was from this time frequently called upon, not by blacks alone, but by all classes in my vicinity—the comparatively educated, as well as the lamentably ignorant—to speak to them on their duty, responsibility, and immortality, on their obligations to themselves, their Saviour, and their Maker.²⁷

[Thus, it is probably not just a coincidence that only 3 years after Henson left the Hibbard farm, Hibbard set aside an acre of land to set up a church in the area (St. John's Anglican)].²⁸

Henson found it "strange . . . that a man so ignorant, unable to read, and having heard so little as I had of religion . . . should be able to preach acceptably to persons who had enjoyed greater advantages than myself." But this was about to change and evidently was one of the more important events in Henson's life. Henson was about to learn how to read because:

Mr. Hibbard was good enough to give my eldest boy, Tom, two quarters of schooling, to which the

going to preach; and I could easily commit to memory a few verses, or a chapter, from hearing him read it over . . . I began to take lessons of Tom . . . and followed it up every evening Weeks passed, and my progress was so slow that poor Tom was almost discouraged But Tom's perseverance and mine conquered at last, and in the course of the winter I did really learn to read a little.

It was, and has been ever since, a great comfort to me to have made this acquisition; though it has made me comprehend better the terrible abyss of ignorance in which I had been plunged all my previous life. It made me also feel more deeply and bitterly the oppression under which I had toiled and groaned; but the crushing and cruel nature of which I had not appreciated, till I found out, in some slight degree, from what I had been debarred. At the same time it made me more anxious than before to do something for the rescue and the elevation of those who were suffering the same evils I had endured, and who did not know how degraded and ignorant they really were.²⁹

Josiah Henson at the Riseley Farm

Josiah Henson also lived and worked at the farm of "Mr. Riseley" (Riselay). There were two Riseley Farms when Josiah Henson was in Fort Erie, and which farm he lived on is unclear.³⁰ One was located on the south side of Bowen Road between Thompson and Pettit Roads. The other was on the west side of Niagara Boulevard at Frenchman's Creek.

The Hensons were at the Riseley Farm until the spring of 1836. In Henson's words, he "set out accordingly [to search] in the autumn of 1834" . . . [and returned to his family; renewed his search when they] . . . sent me off again in the summer [Summer 1835;] . . . and some dozen or more of us settled upon those lands the following spring [Spring 1836]." Henson did not take his family on his searches but returned home to them each year; since Henson does not

"It made me more anxious than before to do something for the rescue and the elevation of those who were suffering the same evils I had endured, and who did not know how degraded and ignorant they really were."

schoolmaster added more, of his own kindness, so that my boy learned to read fluently and well. It was a great advantage, not only to him, but to me; for I used to get him to read much to me in the Bible, especially on Sunday mornings, when I was



An Erie Beach Hotel.
The first NAACP meeting was held in 1905 at an Erie Beach Hotel. Although no record was made of the name of the hotel, the Fort Erie Hotel at Erie Beach and the Lakeside Inn at Erie Beach both existed at that time. This photo is of the Lakeside Inn.

The Niagara Movement, predecessor of the NAACP, demanded freedom of speech, an unfettered and unsubsidized press, manhood suffrage, and universal common school education.

mention that his family moved, one can assume that his family remained at the Riseley farm until the spring of 1836.³¹

While living on the Riseley farm, Henson "began to reflect, more and more upon the circumstances of the blacks, who were already somewhat numerous in this region."³² Mr. Riseley allowed Henson to:

... call meetings at his house of those who were known to be among the most intelligent and successful of our class. At these meetings we considered and discussed the subject ... that we would invest our earnings in land, and undertake the task ... of settling upon wild lands which we could call our own.³³

This concept later became the "Dawn Settlement" in Dresden, Ontario. Evidently these events in Fort Erie and Dresden led to the publishing of Henson's autobiography and indirectly *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which had a strong influence on the abolition of slavery and the Civil War in the U.S.

An Erie Beach Hotel and the NAACP

An Erie Beach hotel was the site of the first meeting of the "Niagara Movement," a predecessor of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). On July 5, 1905, W.E.B. Du Bois invited a "few selected persons" to the secret sessions of the Niagara Move-

ment.³⁴ The meeting was held at an Erie Beach hotel because none of the hotels in Buffalo would accept them.³⁵ "Twenty-nine members of the 'Talented Tenth' participated Many more were expected, but according to rumour, they declined at the last minute after being pressured by white friends of Du Bois' opponent, Booker Washington."³⁶ In this meeting, the Niagara Movement demanded freedom of speech, an unfettered and unsubsidized press, manhood suffrage, and universal common school education.³⁷

"The Niagara men lay[ed] the foundation of the NAACP [and] served as its earliest leaders and staunchest supporters."³⁸ The NAACP formed only five years after the meeting in Fort Erie. Du Bois later became recognized by many people as the founder of Negro sociology and the representative "of the Race's aspiration."³⁹

A hotel at Erie Beach was built before the turn of the century and was located on what is today Waverly Beach.⁴⁰ The Bell telephone directory lists two hotels at Erie Beach in 1906 — the Fort Erie Hotel and the Lakeside Inn.

NOTES

- ¹These accounts are listed in the sources recommended by the author as Further Reading.
- ²Louis McDermott, "Bertie Hall—Built by William Forsyth," n.p., n.d., p. 12, in FEHM reference files.
- ³Earl Plato, "The Legend of Split Rock—The Indian Trail," *Fort Erie Times-Review*, November 12, 1988, p. 18.
- ⁴Denise d'Entremont, "Coloured Cemetery Gets Plaque," *Fort Erie Times-Review*, June 27, 1992, p. 5; Charles Davies, "Town a Logical Entry Point For Freed Slaves," *Fort Erie Extra*, November 21, 1989.
- ⁵Daniel Hill, *The Freedom Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (The Book Society of Canada, Agincourt, 1981), pp. 50-51.
- ⁶*Ibid.*, p. 177.
- ⁷d'Entremont, 1992.
- ⁸Hill, *Freedom Seekers*, p. 177.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ¹⁰Thomas B. Wilson, "Inscriptions From 'The Little Cemetery Around The Corner' In Bertie Township, Welland County," *Ontario Register*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1971, pp. 148-51.
- ¹¹Louise Miller, "Grandson of Slave Recalls His Life," *Fort Erie Times-Review*, October 18, 1978, p. 9.
- ¹²Gord Howard, "Cemetery Board Tries to Document Naming of Curtis Rd. Graveyard," *Fort Erie Review*, August 30, 1991; "Puzzle Surrounds Origin of Cemetery's Name," *Fort Erie Review Weekly*, September 10, 1991, p. 2; Michael Kompf, "Cemetery's Name an Embarrassment That Must Change," *Fort Erie Times-Review*, letter to the editor, June 25, 1991, p. 6; and d'Entremont, 1992.
- ¹³According to Lezie Harper (a descendant of the Chandlers and the Brights, who were among the original descendants of the area), her family and most of the community referred to the settlement as "Nigger Hill."
- ¹⁴Frank Severance, *Old Trails on the Niagara Frontier* (Complete Art - Printing Works, Buffalo, [1899], 1903), pp. 196-97.
- ¹⁵Buffalo Historical Society vertical files, article from *The Buffalo News*.
- ¹⁶Louise Miller, "Grandson of a Slave Recalls His Life," *Fort Erie Times-Review*, October 18, 1978, p. 9.
- ¹⁷Daniel Payne, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Nashville, 1891; reprinted in The Basic Afro-American Reprint Library, 1968), p. 57; Donald Simpson, "Negroes in Ontario from Early Times to 1870," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Western Ontario, 1970, p. 93.
- ¹⁸Peter C. Andrews, *Adventures in Western New York History—The Canadian Shore* (Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society), vol. xiv, pp. 15-17.
- ¹⁹Harriet Beecher Stowe, "The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin," in *The Writings of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, vol. 2 (AMS Press Inc., New York, 1967), pp. 265-66, 273-76.
- ²⁰Josiah Henson, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (Metro Books, Inc., Illinois), pp. 126-127; Josiah Henson, *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life* (Frank Cass & Co., London, 1971), pp. 94-95; and Josiah Henson, *An Autobiography of the Reverend Josiah Henson in Four Fugitive Slave Narratives* (Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Don Mills, Ont., 1969), pp. 69-70.
- ²¹E.A. Cruikshank, *A Memoir of Colonel, The Honourable James Kerby*, Welland County Historical Society Papers & Records vol. IV (Welland County Historical Society, Welland, 1931), pp. 100-101.
- ²²E.A. Cruikshank, "The Settlement of the Township of Fort Erie, Now Known as the Township of Bertie," *Welland County Historical Society Papers and Records*, vol. V (Welland County Historical Society, Welland, 1938), pp. 82-83.
- ²³Henson, *An Autobiography*, p. 71.
- ²⁴The Registry records and Copy Books chronicling Charles Hibbard's land purchases are found in the Black History files at the FEHM.
- ²⁵Henson, *An Autobiography*, pp. 72, 76.
- ²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 71.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 72.
- ²⁸According to Registry records, on July 13, 1836, Instr. # 11478, Hibbard sold half an acre of Lot 9 to the Church of England (St. John's Anglican Church).
- ²⁹Henson, *An Autobiography*, pp. 73-75.
- ³⁰Information on the spelling variation of the Riseley name is found in the FEHM Black History files.
- ³¹*Father Henson's Story*, pp. 141-42.
- ³²*Ibid.*, p. 138.
- ³³*Ibid.*, p. 139.
- ³⁴Elliott M. Rudwick, "The Niagara Movement," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 42, 1957, p. 177.
- ³⁵Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada—A History* (McGill - Queen's University Press, Montreal; Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1971), p. 418; Mary Law Chaffee, "Du Bois' Concept of the Racial Problem in the U.S.," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. 41, 1956, p. 245.
- ³⁶Rudwick, p. 177.
- ³⁷*Ibid.*
- ³⁸*Ibid.*
- ³⁹*Ibid.*, referring to J. Max Barber, "Niagara Movement," *Voice of the Negro*, vol. II, 1905, p. 617; Jesse Fauset's letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, in Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (Citadel Press, New York, 1951), p. 900.
- ⁴⁰Peter C. Andrews, *Adventures in Western New York History—The Canadian Shore* (Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society), vol. xiv, pp. 16-17.
- ⁴¹Roy F. Fleming, "Negro Slaves With The United Empire Loyalists in Upper Canada," *Ontario History*, vol. 45, no. 1, Winter 1953, p. 28, referring to Wm. Renwick Riddell, "Official Record of Slavery in Upper Canada."
- ⁴²David Owen, "Runchey's Company of Men: The Black as a Soldier," *Fort Erie Times-Review*, August 4, 1990, pp. 20-21. Confirmation of dates and other information was found in Ernest Green, "Upper Canada's Black Defenders," *Ontario Historical Society Papers & Records*, vol. 27, pp. 368-70.
- ⁴³Arch Merrill, *The Underground, Freedom's Road and Other Upstate Tales* (American Book - Stratford Press, New York, 1963), p. 106.

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The author recommends the following sources for further information:

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