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Preserving the Heritage: Museums and Historic Sites Preserve Southwestern Ontario's Almost 200 Years of Black Heritage

Convention and Visitors Bureau of Windsor, Essex County, and Pelee Island

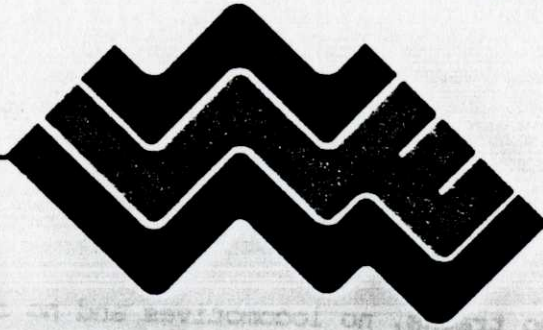
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PRESERVING THE HERITAGE

Museums and historic sites preserve Southwestern
Ontario's almost two hundred years of Black heritage

(Special) -- The saga of Black settlement in southwestern Ontario is a long and illustrious one dating back to the era of slavery in the United States.

In 1793, when the British colony of Upper Canada under Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe freed the children of slaves living in Canada when they reached the age of 25, escaped slaves began to make their way to freedom in what they called "the promised land". In 1808, the legal importation of slaves into Upper Canada was ended, and in 1833 slavery was abandoned throughout the British Empire.

By the time of the U.S. Civil War in the 1860's, thousands of Blacks had made their way into the colony and made substantial contributions to what became the province of Ontario. Many Blacks who live today in the province can trace their ancestry back to these escaped slaves who travelled to freedom on the invisible rails of "the Underground Railway".

This railway had no tracks, no locomotives and no rolling stock. But it had engineers and conductors both Black and White, sympathizers and abolitionists, who helped the passengers to make their way to freedom in the Detroit River community of Amherstburg in Essex County, in Chatham and Blenheim north of Lake Erie in Kent County, and in Owen Sound on Georgian Bay in Grey County.

Between 1800 and 1860, an estimated 50,000 Black men, women, and children made their way into this promised land of sanctuary. In the almost two hundred years since the exodus began, Black citizens have contributed their own unique threads to the Canadian mosaic in agriculture, business, industry, the clergy, and through creativity and invention.

This saga of Black society and achievement is commemorated today in the North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre located in the historic Essex County town of Amherstburg, where the Detroit River empties into Lake Erie. The town is located 18 miles downriver from the city of Windsor. Here the visitor will discover the rich legacy that was left to the descendents of the newcomers and the accomplishments of Black Canadians through succeeding generations.

The Historical Museum and Cultural Centre contains numerous exhibits, artwork, sculptures, and photographs, and arranges special displays and

presentations that depict and illustrate the life of Blacks in southwestern Ontario since the early days. A permanent exhibit relates to the miracle of the "underground railway" of the 1800's. The Museum also contains a small gift shop where books, souvenirs, and other mementoes can be purchased, the proceeds going to support the development of the Museum. There is a small admission charge to the Museum ranging from .50 cents for senior citizens and children under the age of 14, to \$1.00 for adults.

The North American Black Historical Museum and Cultural Centre is open daily between early April and December 1st. August 2-4, the annual Emancipation celebrations will be held, marking the anniversaries of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833 and President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

There are two other historic sites in the area that are of interest to students of Black history and visitors in general. In Maidstone Township, about eight miles (12 km.) east of the Detroit-Windsor Tunnel or one mile (1.6 km.) north of the 401 expressway on the Puce Road is the John Freeman Walls Historic Site, another terminal on the famous underground railroad.

Its focal point is a log cabin built on the property in 1846 by John F. Walls, a North Carolina slave, and his white wife Jane King Walls. The cabin stands on land purchased by John Walls from the abolitionist publisher Henry Bibb (*The Voice of the Fugitive*) and the Reverend Josiah Henson who Harriet Beecher Stowe immortalized in her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Henson's cabin is located at Dresden in the neighbouring County of Kent.

The Wall site is open daily between July 1st and Labour Day. Besides the Walls cabin, it features a museum dedicated to the Underground Railway, housed appropriately in a former railroad caboose, and another log building dedicated to Governor John Graves Simcoe, who many Blacks and others regard as the Abraham Lincoln of Upper Canada.

In the Sandwich neighbourhood of the city of Windsor, there stands on Peter Street, historic First Baptist Church. This structure was built in 1851 by members of the Black community with hand-made bricks fired from the clay of the nearby Detroit River shoreline. The church is still active and is in process of being re-furbished by members of the entire community.

For further information about these unique attractions, contact the Convention & Visitors Bureau of Windsor, Essex County and Pelee Island, Suite 103, City Centre, 333 Riverside Drive West, Windsor, Ontario, Canada N9A 5K4. Telephone (519) 255-6530.

The address of the North American Black Historical Museum is 277 King Street, PO Box 12, Amherstburg, Ontario N9V 2C7. Telephone (519) 736-5433. For the John Freeman Walls Historic Site, write Proverbs Heritage Organization, 1307 Pelissier Street, Windsor, Ontario N8X 1M4. Telephone (519) 977-1588.

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EDITORS: This article was prepared by staff writer Geoff Nightingale. If article published, a newspaper tearsheet or copy of magazine would be appreciated.

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