

Canada and the Fight Against Slavery

by Tom Campbell

July 9th passed almost unnoticed again last year as it usually does. Yet on that date two hundred and twenty-three years ago, a significant event occurred at Niagara-on-the-Lake that deserves to be celebrated. On a warm July day in 1793, a small group of citizen settlers gathered in a rustic meeting room in the settlement where the Niagara River flows into Lake Ontario, thirteen miles downriver from the falls. On that day, the newly created parliament of the new colony of Upper Canada approved an “Act against Slavery.” It was the first such law passed by any legislature in the British Empire.

It would change the trajectory of history in Canada and its consequences would deeply affect the future relationship between Canada and the United States until the present day. Today Canadians continue to place a high national priority on traditions such as moderation, compassion and kindness and to vote accordingly. At least some of this can be traced to the history that began here in 1793. It was to be a long struggle.

The legislation had been encouraged by the new Lt. Governor, John Graves Simcoe. Simcoe had previously been a member of the British Parliament where he served with William Wilberforce and had been affected by the anti-slavery movement. While slavery within the confines of England had been prohibited by the courts there in 1772, there was no law to prevent slavery in the British Empire which spanned the globe and where it is estimated that there were over 800,000 slaves. Wilberforce had devoted his life and energy to the cause of the abolition of the slave trade and of ending slavery in the British Empire. The law passed on that day in this then remote corner of the British Empire gave encouragement to that campaign. The British Parliament would abolish the Atlantic slave trade in

1807 and forty-one years later, in 1834, would finally abolish all slavery in the balance of the Empire, a month after Wilberforce died.

The institutionalized evil of slavery was surprisingly common at that time. In the United States, it had already existed for well over a hundred years and was widespread and not con-

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CORNWELL & RUSSWURM,
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TO OUR PATRONS.

IN presenting our first number to our Patrons, we feel all the diffidence of persons entering upon a new and untried line of business. But a moment's reflection upon the noble objects, which we have in view by the publication of this Journal; the expediency of its appearance at this time, when so many schemes are in action concerning our people—encourage us to come boldly before an enlightened public. For we believe, that a paper devoted to the dissemination of useful knowledge among our brethren, and to their moral and religious improvement, must meet with the cordial approbation of every friend to humanity.

The peculiarities of this Journal, render it important that we should advertise to the public by which we are actuated,

works of trivial importance, we shall consider it a part of our duty to recommend to our young readers, such authors as will not only enlarge their stock of useful knowledge, but such as will also serve to stimulate them to higher attainments in science.

We trust also, that through the columns of the FREEDOM'S JOURNAL, many practical pieces, having for their bases, the improvement of our brethren, will be presented to them, from the pens of many of our respected friends, who have kindly promised their assistance.

It is our earnest wish to make our Journal a medium of intercourse between our brethren in the different states of this great confederacy: that through its columns an expression of our sentiments, on many interesting subjects which concern us, may be offered to the public: that plans which apparently are beneficial may be candidly discussed and weighed, if worthy.

narrative which they have published; the establishment of the republic of Haiti after years of sanguinary warfare; its subsequent progress in all the arts of civilization; and the advancement of liberal ideas in South America, where despotism has given place to free governments, and where many of our brethren now fill important civil and military stations, prove the contrary.

The interesting fact that there are FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND free persons of colour, one half of whom might peruse, and the whole be benefited by the publication of the Journal; that no publication, as yet, has been devoted exclusively to their improvement—that many selections from approved standard authors, which are within the reach of few, may occasionally be made—and more important still, that this large body of our citizens have no public channel—all serve to

of his countrymen he possessed a mind far superior to his condition; although he was diligent in the business of his master, and faithful to his interest, yet by great industry and economy he was enabled to purchase his personal liberty. At the time the remains of several Indian tribes, who originally possessed the right of soil, resided in Massachusetts. Cuffee became acquainted with a woman descended from one of those tribes, named Ruth Moses, and married her. He continued in habits of industry and frugality, and soon afterwards purchased a farm of 100 acres at the point in Massachusetts.

Cuffee and Ruth had a family of ten children. The three eldest sons, David, Jonathan, and John, are farmers in the neighborhood of West Point; filling respectable situations in society, and endowed with good intellectual capacities. They are all married, and have families to whom they are giving good educations. Of six daughters four are respectably married, while two remain single. Paul was born on the Island of Catterhump, New York, in the year 1780.

Freedom's Journal, an early beacon of hope to newly freed US slaves

ined to the plantations of the south as is sometimes thought.

In the colonies which eventually formed Canada, there had been shameful episodes of slavery, as documented by the historian Marcel Trudel

and others. There had been slaves in New France and some had been owned by the Church. The majority of slaves in Quebec were from the First Nations, referred to as "Panis." There were also a number of slaves of African origin in English Canada, who had been brought by settlers from Europe and the United States. Because of the plentiful supply of free land in the New World, there was a perennial shortage of labour. This had been one of the reasons for the tragic growth of slavery all over the Americas. After the American Revolution, the Loyalists who came to Canada sometimes brought slaves with them and there was no law to stop it. It is estimated that there had been over four thousand slaves at various times in Canada. This surprises many Canadians.

The Act against Slavery in Upper Canada in 1793 was a significant first step in ending this abuse since it prohibited bringing slaves into the colony, released any that were brought in and provided for the gradual suppression and abolition of existing slavery. It was one reason that Canada was spared the inhuman scourge of slave ships. By 1800, courts in Canada further closed loopholes and finally, in 1818, the Attorney General of Upper Canada declared that by simply reaching Canadian territory, slaves were set free, no matter where they had escaped from. The Canadian courts were instructed to protect their freedom. These legal rulings and precedents gradually spread to the other colonies that later formed Canada.

In contrast, in the United States for another seventy-two years, from 1793 until President Lincoln emancipated the slaves in 1865, slavery

continued to expand until the numbers of slaves exceeded four million.

Two roads diverged

Thus was created, starting from 1793, a huge division between Canada and the United States on the issue of slavery. From then on the two nations were to follow increasingly different courses that would witness strife, bloodshed and death during the next century and more. The sharply diverging paths taken at that time led eventually to large differences in attitudes between the two countries that are obvious today, over two hundred years later.

As the word spread, Canada eventually became the Promised Land for escaped slaves. The legendary escape network called the Underground Railroad grew gradually over many years and in the end stretched from the American South to Canada. It involved great danger and suffering as well as heroism and liberation.

War and invasions

Tragically, only nineteen years later, in 1812, the United States declared war, with the avowed intent of annexing Canada. Britain had been locked in a struggle against Napoleon in Europe and its attempts at blockade by sea had led to friction with America. Unfortunately, Canada had become a target for American resentment and this gave rise to a militant expansionist movement in the US. Former President Thomas Jefferson claimed that "the acquisition of Canada will be a mere matter of marching."



Engraving depicting the invasion of the White House and Washington

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

gain their freedom by joining his forces. Women and children were offered safe conduct to freedom. According to Andrew Cockburn, a relative of Admiral Cockburn, and other sources, six thousand slaves answered the call and fought effectively for the duration of the war.

The runaway slaves showed up in rags but were retrained and clothed in the scarlet uniforms of the Colonial Marines. Apparently Cockburn was delighted with the spirit and bravery of his recruits and

Congressman Henry Clay boasted that “the militia of Kentucky are alone able to place Montreal and Upper Canada at your feet.” They were to be in for a surprise.

Since it was then part of the British Empire, Canada was defended by British troops, but a significant number of the British forces were Canadian volunteers, including many African Canadians, some of whom were escaped slaves who did not wish to be annexed by the United States. In addition, there was a formidable army of First Nations warriors under the great leader Tecumseh, as well as Métis in the west.

In Quebec, the French-Canadian Voltigeurs led by Charles de Salaberry, along with warriors from the First Nations, joined the English for the second time in repelling an American attempt to annex Canada, as their forces had done thirty-six years earlier during the American Revolution.

In the course of the war, the Americans invaded Canada and sacked and burned Toronto, Niagara-on-the-Lake and Port Dover. Ten different American armies invaded Canada, but eventually they were all driven back across the border. In the end, the only Americans left in Canada were prisoners of war.

Fighting back: The invasion of Washington

In an effort to carry the fight to the enemy and help deter further invasions, British Admiral George Cockburn attacked in the Chesapeake Bay and the campaign lasted for two years. He issued a proclamation inviting slaves to

with their eagerness to go into action against their former masters. This may have had an unplanned humanitarian benefit. The appearance of the trained and disciplined Colonial Marines seems to have made such an impression on some of the defenders that in many instances they fled, thus reducing casualties on both sides. An American officer, Francis Scott Key, was one of those who put up little resistance when Admiral Cockburn’s forces approached Washington. This left Washington undefended and wide open for invasion. Not long after that, Key wrote the American anthem, the Star-Spangled Banner. That ex-slaves had become formidable soldiers clearly rankled Key, who in his third verse refers directly to them with marked animosity:

*“Their blood has washed out their foul
footsteps’ pollution!
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight or the gloom of
the grave:
And the Star-Spangled Banner in triumph
doth wave
O’er the land of the free and the home of
the brave.*

This verse remains part of the official anthem of the United States.

By the time Admiral Cockburn captured Washington and led a contingent of his men, including Colonial Marines, into the White House, President James Madison and his wife had fled with their retinue of personal slaves. Madison owned over one hundred slaves and apparently

was haunted all his life by his belief that owning slaves was immoral. Nevertheless, in their lifetimes neither James nor Dolly Madison ever freed any of their slaves.

In their rush to leave the White House, the first couple had left an elaborate feast of food and wines, with fine china and crystal for forty guests. Dolly Madison had ordered the dinner party to celebrate their victory. Cockburn and his men first satisfied their curiosity by touring the executive mansion and then in high good spirits enjoyed a leisurely feast, not sparing the fine wines on offer. When they had finished dining, they set fire to the building and a number of others in Washington, to avenge the burning of Toronto, Niagara-on-the-Lake and Port Dover. The White House would be restored within three years using slave labour, but it would be many years before other African Americans had the pleasure of participating in a sumptuous banquet in the White House, as Cockburn and his men had enjoyed that day.

This was to be the only time in history that Washington would be occupied by a foreign military power.

Truce

When a truce was finally called, the Americans had been driven out of Canada and parts of Maine and Michigan had been occupied by British and Canadian forces. Unfortunately, the battle of New Orleans was fought several weeks after the peace treaty was signed because neither side had received the message. The war was a tragedy that should never have happened. Fifteen thousand died on the American side and over eight thousand British and Canadians died on the Canadian side, plus thousands of First Nations warriors. Two great leaders on the Canadian side were killed in battle, Major-General Isaac Brock and the First Nations leader Tecumseh.

The peace treaty, signed in 1814, called for the restoration of borders and the return of property taken in the war. Slave owners vociferously demanded the return of slaves because they were considered to be property under American law. These demands were rejected and the freed

former slaves were resettled for the most part in Upper Canada and Nova Scotia.

A new crisis

After the war of 1812 preserved Canada as a safe haven for escaped slaves, a steady stream of refugees continued to cross the border. Then another disruptive event occurred which increased the refugee crisis. The United States passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. For a time there had been states in the north such as New York and Pennsylvania which had been declared Free States and where escaped slaves were relatively safe, although kidnappings still occurred. The new law made it legal for bounty hunters to seize escaped slaves in the Free States and return them to the South. This spurred greatly increased efforts by escaped slaves to make it to Canada, beyond the reach of American law. The influx of refugees led to the establishment in Canada of black newspapers devoted to the cause of emancipation and some leaders established trade schools to help former slaves learn new skills.

Discrimination

However, Canada's record on civil rights in this period was not above criticism. While slavery had been abolished and civil rights were mostly protected by law, racial prejudice certainly did occur in the nineteenth century and some continued into the twentieth century. The law had permitted separate schools for Catholics, which had been requested by that community. However that law was used in some places to establish separate schools for black children, which should not have happened, and the practice was continued for too long. On the plus side, Toronto was the largest city in Upper Canada and had the largest population of escaped slaves and its schools were always integrated.

The flood of new refugees includes some notable citizens

Harriet Tubman recently became the first woman in American history to be honoured by

having her picture appear on American currency. She was an escaped slave from Maryland who became a heroine of the Underground Railroad because, at great risk to herself, she made many trips back to the south to spirit groups of escapees north. At one point she had a bounty of \$40,000 on her head, at that time a fortune. Mrs. Tubman had located in Philadelphia but when the law permitting the return of fugitive slaves was passed, she moved her base of operation to St. Catharines, Ontario, where she continued her epic work. Many of her colleagues also moved to Canada at that time so they could continue their work.

Two other notable new citizens named Thornton Blackburn and his wife Lucie arrived at this time. Escaped slaves from Kentucky, they survived many harrowing events involving the Underground Railway escape network, disguises, escapes from prisons and riots before fleeing across the Detroit river to Upper Canada. Thornton was detained briefly on his arrival because the governor of Michigan had issued a warrant claiming that he was stolen property. The Lt.

Governor of Upper Canada, Sir John Colborne, famously retorted that under Canadian law “A person cannot steal himself!” This ruling established Toronto to be a safe terminus for the Underground Railway. Thornton, who was illiterate, saw the need in Toronto for a taxi service. He saved his wages from his job as a waiter at Osgoode Hall and had a horse-drawn cab built and painted red and yellow. He then established a successful and popular business, the first taxi service in Toronto. When the Toronto Transportation Commission was established later, it copied those popular colours for its

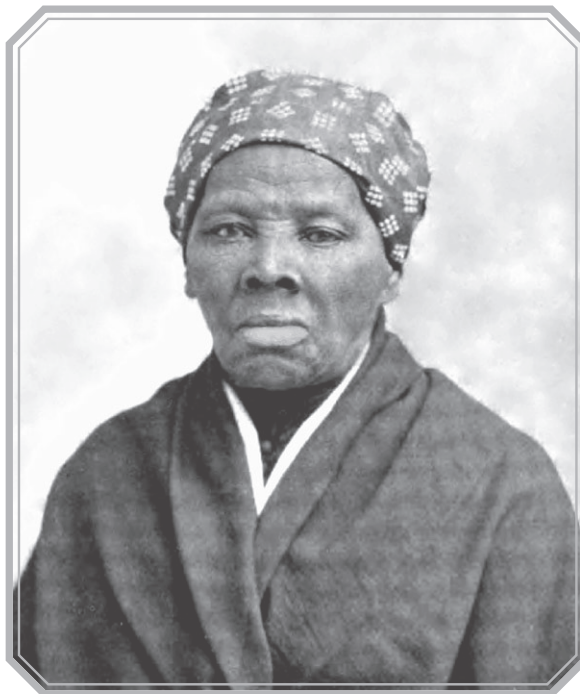
horse-drawn trams and the colours continue to be in use by the Toronto transit system today. In the next generation, the grandson of another escaped slave was to become the Chairman of the Toronto Transportation Commission.

During this period, another family of slaves named Hubbard escaped from a plantation in Virginia. The worst conditions usually existed on the plantations and the law forbade the education of slaves so they probably would not have been able to read or write. They were assisted by the Underground Railroad and finally reached Toronto. Their son, William Hubbard, was born

in Toronto in 1841 and received his education in the integrated Toronto Public School system. The son of former slaves then became a successful businessman and was elected alderman in Toronto. As vice-chairman of the board of control, he became the second most powerful member of council after the mayor and was at times appointed acting mayor. Hubbard was known as a progressive reformer and a great orator and was elected eight times. He successfully sponsored over ninety

council initiatives, many involving reform. When he died in 1935 at age 93 he was the oldest man in the city and was referred to in the press as The Grand Old Man of Toronto. Hubbard Park in Toronto is named after him. William’s son Frederick followed his father into public life and served as Chairman of the Toronto Transportation Commission. Descendants of the Hubbard family continue to reside in Toronto today.

One of Hubbard’s closest friends was Dr. Anderson Abbot, who was the first Canadian-born black physician. His parents had been free citizens and store owners in Alabama but had



Harriet Tubman

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

come to Canada for their own safety when their store was ransacked by a mob. Dr. Anderson volunteered as a doctor on the union side in the American civil war. By coincidence, he was one of those who attended President Abraham Lincoln as he lay dying on the night he was assassinated. In gratitude, President Lincoln's widow presented him with a scarf that had been worn by the President at his inauguration.

Another contemporary was Elijah McCoy, who was born in Canada to a family of escaped slaves from Kentucky. He trained as an

engineer, was an inventor and became famous for a lubrication device that was eventually used on most locomotives and steamships in the world. The product gave rise to the engineering expression "The Real McCoy." While most refugees and their children did not have the opportunities for such dramatic achievements, these pioneers were significant because they symbolized that there were no limits to achievement when free people had access to opportunities and education.

There are estimates that between thirty and seventy thousand escaped slaves came to Canada via the Underground Railroad. Some estimates are higher but written records were scarce because of the need for secrecy at the time. These totals are in addition to the six thousand slaves that were freed during the War of 1812, most of whom settled in Canada. Relative to the population of Canada then and now, this would have been the equivalent of Canada receiving many hundreds of thousands of refugees today.

1865 and afterwards: "Emancipation" but not civil rights

The fight against slavery continued until President Abraham Lincoln finally succeeded in ending slavery in 1865, after the Civil War

There are estimates that between thirty and seventy thousand escaped slaves came to Canada via the Underground Railroad.

had left a recently estimated seven hundred and fifty thousand soldiers dead on all sides. But sadly, after emancipation many aspects of slavery were continued by other means. Shadows of slavery survived in the abusive practices of sharecropping, debt slavery, penal labour which was rented out, segregation and the forcible denial of civil rights, including voting rights. Some of these issues would continue to haunt America for another hundred years and some civil rights issues, such as bar-

riers to voter registration, have still not been fully resolved.

The cost in lives

During the American Civil War, approximately fifty thousand Canadians volunteered to fight for the northern side in the war against slavery. Of those volunteers, approximately ten thousand died in the war. Twenty-nine Canadians were awarded the highest US honour for bravery, the Congressional Medal of Honor. Earlier in the century, the War of 1812 had also been partly about slavery. In that war, the safe haven in Canada for escaped slaves had been preserved and over six thousand slaves had been liberated and resettled in Canada. In that conflict, another ten thousand Canadian, British and First Nations allies had died. In the two struggles, the long fight against slavery had directly and indirectly cost Canadians and their British and First Nations allies over twenty thousand lives.

Our new nation

In Canada, there was concern after the American Civil War that the growing military power of the United States might lead to

another attempt at annexation. Canadians remembered that their country was saved from being conquered and absorbed by the United States in two previous wars, the War of 1812 and the American Revolutionary War, because French Canada, the First Nations and English Canada had made common cause. This is part of the shared history that has made Canada different. Stemming from this, the growing sense of community of purpose

and shared values eventually led to confederation of the provinces in 1867, which created the Canadian nation.

The community values that had gradually developed in Canada eventually led to the adoption of policies such as equalization through which more affluent regions help others with the goal of ensuring that people anywhere in Canada have similar access to essentials such as education and health care. While far from perfect in implementation, these measures have led to Canadians enjoying three years longer life expectancy than Americans, to cite one example. Provincial governments also strive to support less affluent communities by providing equalization-type education grants. As a result of a fairly and decently funded education system, Canada is an egalitarian place for children to live and grow up. Universal access to good quality education has led to social cohesion and solidarity. One concrete result is the crime statistics which show that violent crime in Canada is only a small fraction of that which exists in the United States. These outcomes did not happen by accident or because we were merely lucky. They happened because many years ago we embarked upon a different trajectory and began to pursue policies based on community values and respect.

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In 2017, Canada celebrates one hundred and fifty years, with a storied history going back much farther. The last time we held this kind of celebration occurred in 1967 when Canada celebrated its first hundred years.

In November of that Centennial year, 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visited Canada as an honoured guest. At that point, his historic civil rights campaign of non-violence had made substantial progress but was experi-

encing increasing resistance. In a broadcast, Dr. King delivered a message thanking Canadians for the support and encouragement that we had given to his people since 1793. Four months later, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would die by assassination.

Dr. King's last message to Canada:

Over and above any kinship of US citizens and Canadians as North Americans, there is a singular historical relationship between American Negroes and Canadians. Canada is not merely a neighbor to Negroes. Deep in our history of struggle for freedom Canada was the North Star. The Negro slave, denied education, de-humanized, imprisoned on cruel plantations, knew that far to the north a land existed where a fugitive slave if he survived the horrors of the journey could find freedom. The legendary Underground Railroad started in the south and ended in Canada. The freedom road links us together. Our spirituals, now so widely admired around the world, were often codes. We sang of "heaven" that awaited us and the slave masters listened in innocence, not realizing that we were not speaking of the hereafter. Heaven was the word for Canada and the Negro sang of the hope that his escape on the Underground Railroad would carry him there. One of our spirituals, "Follow the Drinking Gourd" in its disguised lyrics contained



directions for escape. The gourd was the big dipper and the North Star to which it pointed gave the celestial map that directed the flight to the Canadian border.

So standing today in Canada I am linked with the history of my people and its unity with your past.

The Underground Railroad could not bring freedom to

many Negroes. Heroic though it was, even the most careful research cannot reveal how many thousands it liberated. Yet it did something far greater. It symbolized hope when freedom was almost an impossible dream. Our spirit never died even though the weight of centuries was a crushing burden.

Today when progress is abruptly stalled and hope within under bitter backlashing, Negroes can remember incomparably worse. By ones and twos more than a century ago Negroes groped to freedom, and its attainment by a pitiful few sustained hundreds of thousands as the word spread through the plantations that someone had been reborn far to the north. ●

Tower of Freedom Memorial to the Underground Railroad, at WINDSOR, Ontario



This Canadian story began on July 9th, 1793 when a group of citizen representatives, encouraged by an idealist, made a decision based on principal rather than economic advantage.

Today, Niagara-On-The-Lake is a charming historic town with wonderful live theatres and fine dining surrounded by beautiful vineyards. Because of its beauty and many attractions it is a busy destination for visitors from Canada, the United States and around the world. Yet few visitors are aware of the significant events that began in this small town two hundred and twenty-three years ago and that had such far-reaching consequences. In a profound way, what happened here a long time ago helped shape both Canadian history and its national character. The tradition of humanitarianism that began here deserves to be better known. An interpretive centre would be a welcome addition and could play a helpful role in telling the story. Future generations of young people, not only from Canada, would benefit from being better informed about what happened here and what it meant, so they in turn might be encouraged to create their own achievements of kindness and humanity in their own times and lives.

We still have many issues in Canada that are greatly in need of improvement and that will require all our attention. An example of one would be the need for greater fairness in the recognition of the great debt we still owe to our First Nations. Much has been done but more needs to be done. For encouragement, we could do worse than to reflect on some issues from our past which we mostly got right and in which we can take pride. Our role in the defeat of slavery is one of those.

Tom Campbell is a writer and former science teacher who has worked in the public sector in the areas of health, finance, energy, education, and northern development. He also worked as a consultant in the private sector. In 2016, Tom and his wife Mary Mogford established the Mogford Campbell Family Chair in Paediatric Clinical Neuroscience at the Hospital for Sick Children, a research and teaching children's hospital affiliated with the University of Toronto.

Photos above, and left: Wikimedia Commons