

Benjamin Drew

A NORTH-SIDE VIEW
OF SLAVERY

THE REFUGEE

OR THE NARRATIVES OF
FUGITIVE SLAVES IN
CANADA. RELATED BY
THEMSELVES, WITH AN
ACCOUNT OF THE
HISTORY AND
CONDITION OF THE
COLORED POPULATION
OF UPPER CANADA

1856__EXCERPTS

Author's Preface¹

The colored population of Upper Canada was estimated, in the First Report of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada in 1852, at thirty thousand. Of this large number, nearly all the adults and many of the children have been fugitive slaves from the United States; it is therefore natural that the citizens of this Republic should feel an interest in their fate and fortunes. Many causes, however, have hitherto prevented the public generally from knowing their exact condition and circumstances. Their enemies, the supporters of slavery, have represented them as "indolent, vicious, and debased; suffering and starving, because they have no kind masters to do the thinking for them, and to urge them to the necessary labor which their own laziness and

want of forecast lead them to avoid." Some of their friends, anxious to obtain aid for the comparatively few in number (perhaps three thousand in all), who have actually stood in need of assistance, have not, in all cases, been sufficiently discriminating in their statements: old settlers and new, the rich and the poor, the good and the bad, have suffered alike from imputations of poverty and starvation — misfortunes, which, if resulting from idleness, are akin to crimes. . . .

Such being the state of the case, it may relieve some minds from doubt and perplexity, to hear from the refugees themselves their own opinions of their condition and their wants. . . .

- ST. CATHARINES -

REFUGE! Refuge for the oppressed! Refuge for Americans escaping from abuse and cruel bondage in their native land! Refuge for my countrymen from the lash of the overseer, from the hounds and guns of southern man-hunters, from the clutches of northern marshals and commissioners! Rest! Rest for the hunted slave! Rest for the travel-soiled and foot-sore fugitive.

Refuge and Rest! These are the first ideas which arise in my mind in connection with the town of St. Catharines.

I might mention here its pleasant situation, its commercial advantages, the Welland Canal [near Niagara Falls], its telegraphic wires, its railroads, its famous mineral springs, and other matters interesting to the tourist; but we will step aside from these and look at St. Catharines as the peaceful home of hundreds of the colored race.

National Humanities Center, 2007: nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/. Selections from Benjamin Drew, *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: Or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada, Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (Boston: J. P. Jewett & Co., 1856). Facsimile reprint by Negro Universities Press, 1968. Full text online in Documenting the American South (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library) at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/drew/menu.html. Images & bracketed comments added and some punctuation modernized by NHC. Complete image credits at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Drew, a white abolitionist and journalist from Boston, interviewed former enslaved black Americans in fourteen communities in Ontario in 1855.

Of the population of about six thousand, it is estimated that eight hundred are of African descent. Nearly all the adult colored people have at some time been slaves. . . .

The houses occupied by the colored people are neat and plain without; tidy and comfortable within. Through the kindness of Mr. Wilson [Rev. Hiram Wilson] and other friends, I was enabled to visit many families and was invariably received with courtesy and kindness. Such narratives and statements as I received in St. Catharines, it is now my purpose to spread before the reader. . . .

Harriet Tubman

I have seen hundreds of escaped slaves, but I never saw one who was willing to go back and be a slave. I have no opportunity to see my friends in my native land. We would rather stay in our native land if we could be as free there as we are here. I think slavery is the next thing to hell. If a person would send another into bondage, he would, it appears to me, be bad enough to send him into hell, if he could.

Rev. Alexander Hemsley

When I reached St. Catharines I was enfeebled in health. I had come to a small inferior place; there were pines growing all about here where you now see brick houses. I rented a house, and with another man took five acres of cleared land, and got along with it very well. We did not get enough from this to support us; but I got work at half a dollar or seventy-five cents a day and board myself. We were then making both ends meet. I then made up my mind that salt and potatoes in Canada, were better than pound-cake and chickens in a state of suspense and anxiety in the United States. Now I am a regular Britisher. My American blood has been scourged out of me; I have lost my American tastes; I am an enemy to tyranny.

Mrs. Ellis

Rents and provisions are dear here, and it takes all I can earn to support myself and children. I could have one of my children well brought up and taken care of, by some friends in Massachusetts, which would much relieve me — but I cannot have my child go there on account of the laws, which would not protect her. This is a hardship: but had I to struggle much harder than at present, I would prefer it to being a slave. Now, I can lie down at night in peace — there I had no peace even at night, on account of my master's conduct.

William Grose

I have been through both Upper and Lower Canada, and I have found the colored people keeping stores, farming, etc., and doing well. I have made more money since I came here, than I made in the United States. I know several colored people who have become wealthy by industry — owning horses and carriages — one who was a fellow-servant of mine, now owns two span of horses, and two as fine carriages as there are on the bank. As a general thing, the colored people are more sober and industrious than in the States: there they feel when they have money, that they cannot make what use they would like of it, they are so kept down, so looked down upon. Here they have something to do with their money, and put it to a good purpose.

- TORONTO -

THE population of this wealthy, enterprising, and beautiful city is estimated at forty-seven thousand, of whom about one thousand are colored persons. Of these no separate count is made in taking the census. The greater part of the colored people reside in the north-western section of the city. . . .

Many of the colored people own the houses in which they dwell, and some have acquired valuable estates. No distinction exists in Toronto in regard to school privileges. One of the students in the Normal School was a fugitive slave, and colored youths are attending lectures in the University. There are three churches exclusively belonging to the colored people — a Baptist and two Methodist churches. They are excluded, however, from none of the churches, and in all of them a few of the African race may be found. . . .

William Howard

[After I escaped] I stopped a while in the free States, but came here on account of my friends being here. . . . Canada is the best place that ever I saw; I can make more money here than anywhere else I know of.

John A. Hunter

I feel more like a man — I feel that I am a man a great deal more than I did a year ago. A year ago I was in bondage. . . . A great many slaves know nothing of Canada — they don't know that there is such a country.

Robert Belt

I got work soon after my arrival here, which was quite recent; since I have been here, I have prospered well. My calculation is to own a house and a piece of land by and by.

- HAMILTON -

THIS thriving city, by actual count in 1854, contained two hundred and seventy-four colored persons, namely,

- St. Lawrence Ward 51
- St. George's " 37
- St. Patrick's " 12
- St. Mary's " 34
- St. Andrew's " 140
- Total 274

The public schools of Hamilton contain about one thousand seven hundred pupils, of whom twenty-five are colored. Eight hundred scholars attend the Central School; and on the 12th of June, 1855, when the writer visited it, there were present but seven colored children, six of whom were girls. . . .

Henry Williamson

Those who came out with me are scattered in various parts of Canada. I have heard from them and they are doing well. We came like terrapins — all we had on our backs. We took a house together when we came — the house was bare of furniture: there was nothing in it at all. We had neither money nor food. It was in the fall: we gathered chips and made a fire. That is the way the principal part of our people come: poor and destitute and ignorant, their minds uncultivated, and so they are not fitted for business. In the face of these drawbacks, they have to do the best they can. I went to work on a railroad — to which I was wholly unused, having been a waiter. I worked at it till I found something I could do better. I enjoy better health here than I ever did before in my life.

I heard when I was coming that Canada was a cold and dreary country; but it is as healthy a place as a man can find. The colored people tell me the climate agrees with them, and I do know it is so.

- CHATHAM -

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL



Former enslaved African Americans (fugitive slaves), Ontario, Canada, ca. 1850

“At Chatham,” said Mr. John Little², “the fugitives are as thick as blackbirds in a corn-field.” Here, indeed, more fully than anywhere else, the traveller realizes the extent of the American exodus. At every turn he meets members of the African race, single or in groups; he sees them building and painting houses, working in mills, engaged in every handicraft employment: here he notices a street occupied by colored shopkeepers and clerks: if he steps into the environs, he finds the blacks in every quarter, busy upon their gardens and farms.

The white population of Chatham is reckoned at four thousand: the number of colored persons in the town may be safely estimated at eight hundred. If to this estimate is added the number residing in the neighborhood, the total amount cannot be less than two thousand. A gentleman holding an office in the town and who, having been one of the earliest settlers, has seen the town grow up around him, remarked of the colored population, “They are as good a body of people as you can find anywhere:” and their general appearance and attention to business confirm his opinion. . . .

² Resident of London, Ontario, Canada. His narrative in *The Refugee* is excerpted in this National Humanities Center Toolbox at nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/enslavement/text8/text8read.htm.

It was in Chatham that the writer first heard of the Associations called True Bands. A True Band had just been formed here, enrolling at first three hundred and seventy-five members, and it was continually receiving accessions of numbers. On inquiry, the following was furnished as an answer to the question, what is meant by a True Band?

A True Band is composed of colored persons of both sexes associated for their own improvement. Its objects are manifold: mainly these: — the members are to take a general interest in each other's welfare; to pursue such plans and objects as may be for their mutual advantage; to improve all schools and to induce their race to send their children into the schools; to break down all prejudice; to bring all churches as far as possible into one body and not let minor differences divide them; to prevent litigation [lawsuits] by referring all disputes among themselves to a committee; to stop the begging system entirely (that is, going to the United States and there by representing that the fugitives are starving and suffering, raising large sums of money, of which the fugitives never receive the benefit — misrepresenting the character of the fugitives for industry, and underrating the advance of the country which supplies abundant work for all at fair wages); to raise such funds among themselves as may be necessary for the poor, the sick, and the destitute fugitive newly arrived; and to prepare themselves ultimately to bear their due weight of political power.

The first True Band was organized in Malden, in September, 1854. It consists of six hundred members. It is represented as having thus far fulfilled its objects admirably. Since its organization, no action at law has been brought by one member against another: their differences being arranged by a committee of arbitration. A small monthly payment is made by the members. The receipts have enabled them to meet all cases of destitution and leave a surplus in the treasury. In all other places where the bands have been organized, the same good results, as I was creditably informed, have followed as in Malden: thus showing that the colored population possess the means and the will, when acting in concert, to take care of themselves and of the strangers as they arrive. There are now fourteen True Bands organized in various sections of Canada West. . . .

J. C. Brown

Our children growing up in this country [Canada] and not having the fear of any white man, and being taught to read write, will grow up entirely different from their fathers — of more benefit to themselves, or more benefit to the government, and will be more able to set good examples to the rising generation.

Philip Younger

Before I came here, I resided in the free States. I came here in consequence of the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill. It was a hardship at first; but I feel better here — more like a man — I know I am — than in the States. I suffer from want of education. I manage by skill and experience and industry — but it s as if feeling my way in the dark.

- BUXTON -

THE ELGIN SETTLEMENT or, as it is more commonly called, KING'S SETTLEMENT, is in Buxton, in the township of Raleigh, county of Kent. The colored population of Buxton numbers eight hundred. Nearly all the adults have at some time been slaves, but many resided in the free States before entering Canada.

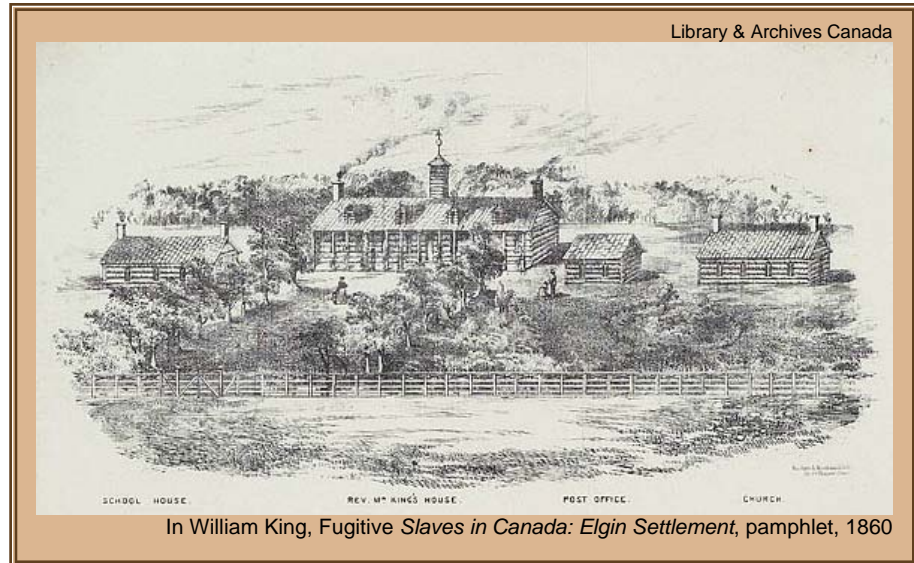
King's Settlement comprises nine thousand acres of land — a tract some six miles in length by three in breadth — and is situated between the Great Western Railway and Lake Erie: its boundary being about a mile and one fourth from the lake shore. A company has been chartered by the Provincial Legislature for the purpose of constructing a railroad to connect Niagara with Amherstburg. This road is to pass through the southern portion of the settlement, and will afford a ready market for all the firewood, of which there is abundance on the lands.

The settlement at Buxton was first projected by the Rev. Wm. King in 1849. Mr. King was formerly a slaveholder in Louisiana; but not being "to the manner born," he manumitted [freed] his own slaves, about fourteen in number (for whom he had been offered nine thousand dollars) and brought them with him to Canada where he settled them on farms or on lands recently purchased of the government. From long acquaintance with the colored people in the South, and from their previous history, Mr. King was

satisfied that, when placed in favorable circumstances, they could support themselves as well as the emigrants from Europe and would be capable of making the same progress in education. The colored people and their friends owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. King, for having successfully conducted the experiment at Buxton. . . .

The land is divided into farms of fifty acres each, and so situated that a road

runs past each man's farm. The houses are set thirty-three feet from this road, facing streets, so that the whole settlement, when cleared up and opened, will present a uniform appearance. The land is sold to the settlers at \$2.50 per acre, the government price, and is paid in ten equal annual instalments, with interest at the rate of 6 per cent. But although ten years were allowed to the settlers to pay for their farms, a number have taken out their deeds already; and there is no doubt that before the ten years shall have expired, each settler will have his deed in possession: for which he will be indebted to his own exertions — since the settlers receive no money, no grants of land, no farming implements — nothing but protection and advice. Whatever they have is purchased by themselves and, as far as the supply of their physical wants is concerned, they are self-supporting. . . .



Isaac Riley

I escaped with my wife and child to Canada. Among the French near Windsor I got small wages . . . morning and night up to my knees in water — still I preferred this to abundance in slavery. I crossed over and got work and better pay in Michigan. They would have liked to have me remain, and offered to build a house for me. But I did not feel free in Michigan and did not remain. I went to St. Catharines and got fifty cents a day. By and by, I heard of Mr. King's settlement — I came here and have got along well. My children can get good learning here.

Mrs. Isaac Riley

We crossed over at Windsor and . . . stayed there a few months, and went to St. Catharines, where we did better. After a while, we heard that Mr. King was buying a place to settle the colored people. We came up here before it was surveyed, and Mr. Riley helped the surveyors. He took one hundred acres of land, and we are well contented. if I do not live to see it, perhaps my children will, that this will one day be a great place.

- WINDSOR -

WINDSOR, at the terminus of the Great Western Railway, is in the township of Sandwich [across from Detroit at the Detroit River]. It was incorporated January 1, 1854, with a population of 1000 souls. It is now estimated to contain one thousand four hundred inhabitants. There are settled in various parts of the village fifty families of colored people, some of whom entertain as boarders a number of fugitives from bondage. Assuming an average of five in a family, the colored population may be set down at two hundred and fifty. The general appearance of these is very much in their favor. There are many good mechanics among them: nearly all have comfortable homes, and some occupy very neat and handsome houses of their own. . . .

Archives of Ontario



University of North Carolina Library



Henry Bibb, fugitive slave from Kentucky, later an abolitionist spokesman in the North, and later a leader of services for fugitive slaves arriving in Canada; founder of the first black Canadian newspaper, *Voice of the Fugitive*

REFUGEES' HOME

At about nine miles from Windsor in the townships of Sandwich and Madison, the Refugees' Home Society have made a purchase of nearly two thousand acres of land, on which reside some twenty families, each on a farm of twenty-five acres. Forty 25 acre lots have been taken up. A school is maintained there three fourths of the year.

Mr. Henry Bibb, who was himself a fugitive from the house of bondage, originated the idea of establishing a society which should "aim to purchase thirty thousand acres of government land somewhere in the most suitable sections of Canada where it can be obtained for the homeless refugees from American slavery to settle upon." This was soon after the passage of the fugitive slave bill [1850].

The society was organized and a constitution adopted in August, 1852. The object of the society is declared to be "to assist the refugees from American slavery to obtain permanent homes and to promote their social, moral, physical, and intellectual elevation." The society propose to purchase of the Canadian government fifty thousand acres of land at a cost of one hundred thousand dollars. Money for the purchase is obtained in part by contributions; and one half the moneys received for the sale of lands is devoted to the purchase of other lands. The other moiety [half] of moneys received is to be devoted to the support of schools.

By the constitution adopted in 1852, it appears that each family of actual settlers receives twenty-five acres of land, five of which they receive free of cost, provided they shall, within three years from the time of occupancy, clear and cultivate the same. "For the remaining twenty acres, they shall pay the primary cost in nine equal annual payments, free of use, for which they shall receive deeds." This article may be varied to favor the aged, etc. "This Society shall give deeds to none but

landless refugees from American slavery." "No person receiving land by gift or purchase from the Society shall have power to transfer the same under fifteen years from the time of the purchase or gift." "All lands becoming vacated by the removal or extinction of families, shall revert to the Executive Committee."

Here, too, as in Buxton, the claims of temperance are kept fully in view. A by-law provides that "No house shall be used for manufacturing or vending intoxicating liquors on any lot received from this Society." . . .

A True Band has been organized by the residents of the Home, and other persons in the vicinity.

Ben Blackburn

I got here last Tuesday evening and spent the Fourth of July [1855] in Canada. I felt as big and free as any man could feel, and I worked part of the day for my own benefit: I guess my master's time is out.

Leonard Harrod

A man can get more information in Canada about slavery than he can in the South. There I would have told you to ask master because I would have been afraid to trust a white man: I would have been afraid that you would tell my master. Many a time my master has told me things to try me. Among others, he said he thought of moving up to Cincinnati [Ohio] and asked me if I did not want to go. I would tell him, "No! I don't want to go to none of your *free* countries!" Then he'd laugh — but I did want to come — surely I did. A colored man tell the truth here — there he is afraid to.

- COLCHESTER -

This beautiful farming town on the northern shore of Lake Erie contains a population not far from 1,500, of whom about 450 are colored persons. . . .

. . . Colored people have penetrated further into the woods than any of the whites: they are scattered all through the township up to the sixth concession. They are settled both north and south of the old Malden road: none would have ventured there but them: they are all anxious to own land: they go in anywhere they can make a claim and clear up a patch. But their ignorance stands most woefully, and in some cases insurmountably, in their way. Instances of this sort are said to have occurred: a settler for instance takes a farm of 100 acres, appraised value \$200, with ten years to pay for it in. He pays \$12 a year *interest* for ten years, supposing meanwhile that he is paying up the principal. *He don't understand it* — and when the ten years have come round, he has not got the \$200 and must leave his clearing. . . .

Robert Nelson

There is a settlement here called New Canaan where was a large body of wild land. Colored people went in and took it up at one hundred acres apiece. I guess there may be now forty families. [In 1852, there were twenty families.] They paid the first instalment and had ten years to pay in. But three quarters of them have already paid the whole price and got the deeds and are making good improvements on their lands, making enough to support their families. The preaching of the gospel is regularly kept up.

My wish to the people of the States is, to give no more money to the begging agencies. If they wish to give money to the fugitives and the sick, it should be given to the True Band societies, who can disburse it as it is wanted. The Band will attend to the fugitives.

Howard University



Elijah McCoy, born ca. 1843 in Colchester, Ontario, Canada; son of fugitive slaves from Kentucky

Archives of Ontario



Park House, in Colchester, Ontario, Canada; a refuge for fugitive slaves arriving from eastern Michigan near Detroit (photograph, ca. 1950, detail)