

Shannon Prince, curator of Ontario's Buxton National Historic Site and Museum, displays shackles once used to bind slaves.



ALAN G. LUKE

## Road to freedom

A journey of discovery along southwestern Ontario's Black Heritage Route. by Alan G. Luke

Shannon Prince stood surrounded by a class of attentive elementary school children. "Hold your hands out please," she told the group. Anticipating a treat, they eagerly obliged. Prince, a descendant of escaped slaves, carefully lowered hefty chains and shackles across their upturned palms.

"Do you think you could run and play wearing these?" she asked them. The children gazed at one another in bewilderment.

"Wow, kids put these on?" exclaimed one girl who stood with her mouth agape, feeling the burden of the weight. Yes, said Prince, explaining that slavery had affected all ages.

Prince is the curator of the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum, located in Buxton, about 125 kilometres southwest of London, Ontario. Originally named Elgin and established in 1849, the commu-

nity was the last stop on the Underground Railroad for hundreds of fugitive slaves.

As a sixth generation descendant of slaves, Prince displays a genuine passion for the community's founder, Reverend William King. The Irish-born King came to America in 1833 and married into a slave-owning family in Louisiana. He established the community after inheriting fifteen slaves and moving them to Canada so that they could be free.

Buxton remains one of the few African-Canadian settlements from the pre-Civil War era still in existence. The schoolhouse, an 1852 cabin, two churches, a cemetery, a barn, and museum are part of the historic site.

The museum includes a printing press used by Mary Ann Shadd (1823–93), the first black woman known to have edited a North American newspaper. The eldest

of thirteen children, Shadd became a lawyer and anti-slavery crusader. Her father, Abraham Doras Shadd, was a conductor on the Underground Railroad and one of the first black Canadians elected to political office.

Buxton is a key stopping point on what is known as southwestern Ontario's Black Heritage Route. The route celebrates the history of the Underground Railroad, which was an informal network of secret routes and safe houses used to help as many as 100,000 Blacks escape slavery and oppression in the southern United States in the nineteenth century. About 30,000 came to Canada.

The route starts at Amherstburg, south of Windsor, where many Blacks crossed the Detroit River into Canada. Some even swam across the river with all their worldly possessions.

Amherstburg is home to the North American Black Historical Museum. The museum complex includes a cultural centre, artifacts, research materials, and historic structures, such as the Nazrey African Methodist Episcopal Church, designated as a National Historic Site.

Annual homecoming celebrations — to be held on August 11–12 this summer — feature a parade, events, exhibits, an historical re-enactment, and a genealogy conference. There will also be a War of 1812 bicentennial event August 3–5.

Just less than one hundred kilometres northeast of Amherstburg is Chatham, another major stop on the Black Heritage Trail. Chatham is where major league pitcher Ferguson Jenkins, a Black-Canadian, was born in 1942. Jenkins became the first Canadian to be inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1991. Ferguson Jenkins Field in Chatham's Rotary Park is named after him.

First Baptist Church on Chatham's King Street is where abolition activist John Brown held clandestine meetings in 1858 to recruit Blacks for a guerilla war against slavery. His raid on the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, in 1859 resulted in his arrest and execution as a traitor and contributed to the outbreak of the American Civil War (1861–65).

Nineteen kilometres north of Chatham lies the town of Dresden, formerly the Dawn settlement. This is the location of Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site, which offers interpretive videos, exhibits, artifacts, and tours. It was here that Reverend Josiah Henson, a fugitive slave, co-founded the British American Institute, one of Canada's first industrial schools.

The site includes Henson House and four other historic structures. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was based on Josiah Henson's 1849 autobiography. The famous novel was published

in thirty-seven languages and outsold the Bible the year it was released.

The book increased awareness of the brutality of slavery. U.S. President Abraham Lincoln described the book as a catalyst for the American Civil War.

During the Civic Holiday in August, Dresden holds annual Heritage Day celebrations featuring people in period costumes, pioneer activities, games, and stories.

The most northern terminus on the Underground Railroad was Owen Sound, about 340 kilometres northeast of Dresden. This summer the community holds the 150th annual Owen Sound Emancipation Festival, which also takes place on the August long weekend.

"The festival is a testament to the city's multicultural roots and the importance placed on it by the Black community, many of whom can claim that they're descendants of slaves," explained festival chairman Blaine Courtney. 📍



By donating to Canada's History, you are helping to support all of our programs – popularizing Canadian history, honouring our best history teachers, introducing Canadian history to a new generation, just to name a few.

YOU CAN HELP CANADA'S HISTORY:

# DONATE

Your donation makes a difference!

Visit [Canada's-History.ca/Community/Donate](http://Canada's-History.ca/Community/Donate) or call 1-888-616-0067

CANADA'S HISTORY