

Appreciating Our Halton Black History

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Local Lens: The Black Experience in Halton

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Canadian black history is filled with amazing tales of bravery, innovation, and hard-fought battles against the status quo, all being done by people who faced harsh discrimination and prejudice. As a result of slavery in the United States, Canada was viewed as a 'safe haven' where slaves could escape to freedom. Southern Ontario was one of the most occupied places by black people during slavery in the 1800s and post-emancipation in the 1900s due to its close proximity to the United States border. While Black people occupied all parts of Southern Ontario, most accounts of Ontario's black history often glance over the vast amount of black people that lived in Halton – Black people made up 40% of the Oakville population alone between 1850 and 1860 (Levy, 2020). Most accounts of black history in Ontario have glossed over Halton in favor of larger cities and regions like Toronto, Windsor, and London, and thus many fail to realize that Halton was home to many black people, all of whom contributed to their communities in various ways. Their actions hold significance not only to the Halton region, but to Canada as a whole. "Conductor" James Wesley Hill whose strawberry farm made Oakville a one-time strawberry industry capital in Canada, made multiple trips to Maryland to lead 700-800 people to Oakville through the Underground Railroad (Oakville's Black History, 2022). Another person was Sarah Pooley who lived in Burlington and was also an enslaved person under the ownership of Joseph Brant, the leader of the Six Nations people (Rickert-Hall, 2021). Additionally, there was Alvin Duncan, who served as a radar operator in the Royal Air force in the Second World War and became the Resident Black Historian for Oakville. While Halton Black History may not contain as many prominent figures as its neighboring cities and regions, the racism and injustice, as well as the notable actions performed by black people living in Halton deserve equal acknowledgment from all Canadians. Current Halton residents must be

made aware of the rich history that documents the acts of the Black Canadians who helped shape their towns into the vibrant, diverse, and innovative communities that they are today.

“Conductor” James Wesley Hill was an escaped slave who arrived in Canada from Pennsylvania by means of a packing box. While he stayed in many places in Ontario, he finally settled in Oakville around 1850. Hill was hired by a man named John Alton to work at a woodlot removing tree stumps and cleaning underbrushes (Oakville's Black History, 2000). But his story does not stop there. While Hill could have stayed put in Oakville enjoying his newfound freedom, he felt compelled to help his fellow people in the United States. Hill’s desires brought him to the state of Maryland where he, at the expense of his own life, helped lead approximately 700-800 African Americans to freedom in Oakville through the Underground Railroad. His actions in Maryland earned him the title of “Canada Jim” and he is still honored for these acts today. When historians look back, Hill’s actions not only displayed his noble character and great service to black slaves in America, but also, they highlighted the major part Oakville played in the Underground Railroad. Oakville was one of the main entrance points for slaves coming to Canada and many African Americans’ first view of Canada was the Oakville harbor (Machan, 2013). In addition to freeing many black slaves, Hill provided jobs for many of them on his strawberry farm. His work on the strawberry farm helped Oakville to become a one-time strawberry industry capital in Canada. James Wesley demonstrated bravery in the face of great danger and integrity through his actions, and helped establish a path for upcoming black people after him who could be inspired to see the success that a black man could achieve in spite of the challenges he faced. A farmer, a conductor, a businessman, and ultimately a hero.

Another person of inspiring action was Sophia Pooley. Although she lived as a resident in Burlington, Ontario, in the early 1800s, she was first enslaved by the famous First Nations

leader, Joseph Brant. Pooley's story was published in 1856 and her story is one of the only first-person accounts of an enslaved person in Canada (Holroyd, 2014). She was born in New York in 1777 and was stolen from her parents and brought to Niagara at the age of seven, where she was sold to Joseph Brant (Craggs, 2021). She lived with the Brant family for about 12-13 years in many places, Burlington being one of them, and she was surprisingly integrated into many of the family's activities, such as hunting. Sophia Pooley recounts that Brant treated her quite well, however, his third wife treated her quite poorly and abused her on a daily basis (Rickert-Hall, 2021). Brant eventually sold Pooley to a prominent Englishman by the name of Samuel Hatt. Pooley lived with Hatt for seven years before escaping. She was not pursued by Samuel Hatt, as the time of her escape coincided with the Slavery Abolition Act in late 1833 (Henry, 2020). Pooley's time spent in Burlington is not the only thing that connects her to Halton. Her first owner was quite a prominent figure in Halton, so much so that he has his own hospital named after him in Burlington— The Joseph Brant Hospital. It is important to note, however, that while Pooley did describe Brant as a kind owner, slavery in its raw form is never excusable. While Pooley's life accomplishments may not sound as astounding as that of James Hill, it is important that society continues to recognize all accounts of black people, regardless of the appeal. Black people during all times in history faced vast difficulties and each person was able to live through these challenges and work to overcome them in their own unique way. Black history should not be limited to only those that have attained a certain degree of accomplishments in the world, rather black history is open to anyone that has experienced the black struggle in any way.

One man that certainly experienced the black struggle was Alvin B. Duncan. Duncan was born on February 27, 1913 in Oakville, Ontario to Alexander and Isabella Duncan, whose

ancestors had previously escaped slavery via the Underground Railroad (Mendleson, 2009). Duncan witnessed his own share of racism and at the age of 17, he watched the Klu Klux Klan storm into his village to prevent a black man from marrying a white woman—the ritualistic cross burning event that was performed by the Klan is an event Duncan could never forget. Later, when the Second World War started, Duncan became eager to join the Royal Canadian Air Force. It took him two attempts to pass the exam and even when he did, several discriminatory events occurred, including a military doctor who claimed that Duncan’s heart “was on the wrong side” in an attempt to rattle him off course (Mendleson, 2009). Unshaken, Duncan persisted through these struggles to eventually secure a spot on a secret mission in Northern Ireland, where the British were using radar technology to monitor the ships in the Northern Atlantic. Out of 5000 Canadian radar operators, Duncan was one of two blacks present. After his service, he returned to Oakville and proceeded to put together Oakville’s Black history and officially became Oakville’s Resident Black Historian (Levy, 2020). Many of the stories present today could not have been present without Duncan’s expertise and his efforts helped connect several landmarks and communities to distinct events from Oakville’s past.

A question that I often asked myself when I first embarked on this investigation was: What separates Halton’s black history from all the others? From reading various stories, the racism present seemed to be fueled by the same prejudice and people's unwillingness to stray from harmful societal norms. Each story told of the resilience that all black people displayed in the midst of their various challenges. At a glance, black history in Halton is very similar to black history in other places in Ontario and around Canada but what I discovered was that the uniqueness of Halton’s black history was not necessarily due to the details of each story, rather it was simply because it was my black history— history unique only to residents in the Halton

region. In the end, all of these stories are part of us, intricately woven into our societies, shaping the communities in which we live. This research taught me another important lesson which helped to guide the selection criteria that I used for the inclusion of different stories in my paper. My first impulse for writing this story was to write only about people with a long list of accomplishments and solely discuss people who had done extremely brave things over their lifetime. With this criteria in mind, Sarah Pooley did not appear to meet my standard of perceived Black significance in Halton Black history as her story did not seem to have the “exciting features” that the others had. Eventually, I was able to realize that it was wrong for me to choose to validate certain stories while neglecting others based on their backgrounds, academic achievements, or economic status. It would be like one selecting only a few puzzle pieces to create a picture, failing to realize that each piece plays an equally important role in forming it. Likewise, I was selecting specific types of stories, failing to understand that each story forms the wonderful picture of Halton Black History. No puzzle is complete without all of its pieces, likewise, Halton Black history cannot be complete without all the stories that form it. Similarly, on a much bigger scale, Canadian Black history cannot be complete without the stories of the Black experience in Halton. As I read these stories from a Halton perspective, I am proud to share such history with all of these unique and amazing individuals and equally eager to add to this history myself.

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