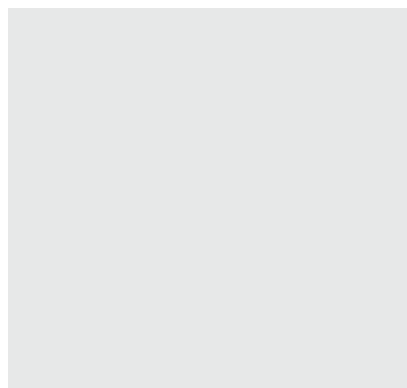
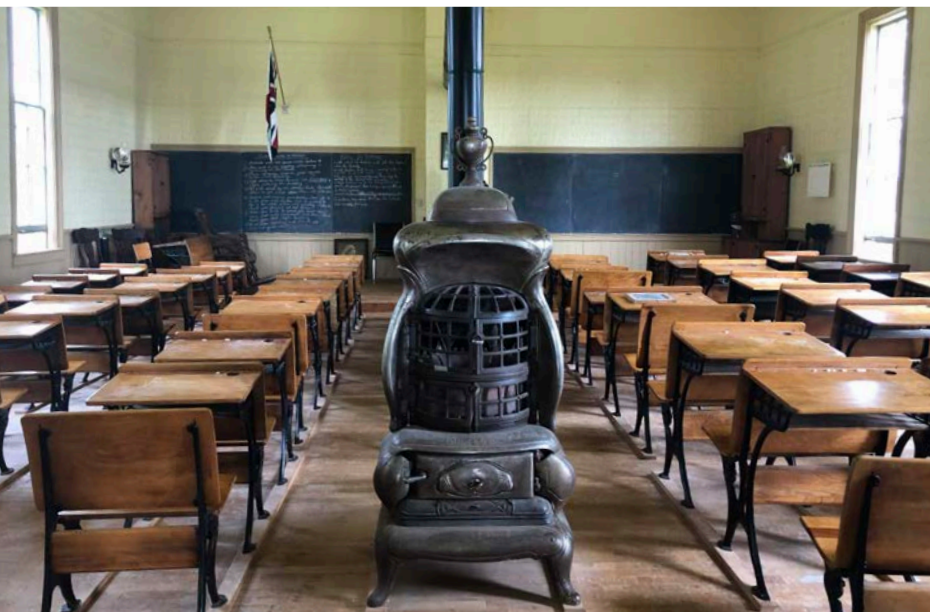


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The historic links to the Underground Railroad and Canadian black history in Chatham-Kent, Ont.

By Heather Greenwood Davis



The interior (LEFT) and exterior (ABOVE) of the integrated school on the former Elgin Settlement in Chatham-Kent, Ont.

WHEN THE American Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850, slaves caught anywhere in the United States could be returned to their owners. Their only hope of escaping the brutal system was to head north to Canada, where the slave trade was abolished in 1807. For many, the area of choice was southwestern Ontario's municipality of Chatham-Kent, a stopping point on the Underground Railroad — a secret network of safe houses that brought 30,000 to 40,000 fugitive slaves to Canada. Chatham-Kent's location on Lake Erie was just far enough from the border to deter slave catchers from kidnapping these escapees and returning them to captivity. And once they came, they stayed.

"In the 1850s, one-third of the population of this area was black," explains Samantha Meredith, executive director and curator at the Black Mecca Museum in downtown Chatham. "That was more than anywhere else in Ontario."

The museum and the nearby Buxton National Historic Site and Museum form a Canadian black history trail that goes far

beyond the Underground Railroad that links them and sheds light on a topic that often goes untaught in Canadian schools.

Kimberly Head, Buxton National Historic Site and Museum's assistant curator, says many people are shocked to learn that Canadians owned African slaves. Slavery exhibits range from neck-yoke torture devices to a 1.8-metre-long by half-metre-deep bunk used on a slave ship to hold as many as six full-grown people stolen from Africa and transported to North America. While devices such as these are often linked to the American slave experience, they were also used in Canada.

The museum, which is built on the original site of a "blacks-only" colony once known as the Elgin Settlement, shares success stories, too. Tours of the 170-year-old property explain how the colony produced doctors, statesmen and war heroes mere decades after they escaped bondage. In the mid-1800s, however, some Canadians opposed the colony. "Our only desire is that blacks be separated from the whites and that no encouragement be

given to their migration from the United States or anywhere else," said Chatham resident Edwin Larwill, in an 1849 public debate on the issue.

William King, an Irish reverend who founded the community, had to enlist the support of black settlers in the area, the Presbyterian church and the future Father of Confederation George Brown to make the settlement a success. In 1851, the desegregated school on site was so lauded that more white parents began to send their children there, and local whites-only schools were forced to close.

"There was a lot of hope then," notes Head, but it would be a mistake to think that the integrated school immediately ended racism. "People who had previously owned slaves were still very present, and it took a long time for attitudes to shift. Education is one of the things that really helped to change attitudes here." 🌐



Learn more about Chatham-Kent's black history through Uncle Tom's Cabin National Historic Site at cangeo.ca/tk.