

# Freedom Celebration! Owen Sound's 150<sup>th</sup> Emancipation Day Picnic

**O**n the Aug. 4 and 5 Civic Holiday weekend this year, Owen Sound will again host a huge picnic to mark Emancipation Day. This will be the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this celebration, first held in 1862, to commemorate Britain's Act of 1833, which abolished slavery throughout the British Empire. That means that British North America, as Canada was known before Confederation, was a place where Black people were free, well before they were emancipated in the U.S. This is also why Upper and Lower Canada were the final destinations of the Underground Railroad.

Owen Sound is the site of the longest, continuously running Emancipation celebration picnic in North America. People have gathered in Owen Sound from throughout Ontario and the U.S. on the August Civic Holiday weekend, to acknowledge the Slavery Abolition Act, to socialize, to share history with young people and to celebrate liberty and justice for all, regardless of colour.

The stirring words in the Act of 1833 that fixed this freedom into law state "Slavery shall be and is hereby utterly and forever abolished and declared unlawful throughout the British Colonies, Plantations, and Possessions Abroad." For a legislative update, see "Every August 1 is Emancipation Day."

When Grey County became available for settlement in the 1830s, Black people began moving in. Owen Sound became the north-



At a past Emancipation Day opening celebration, Kenyon Miller of London, left, was bell ringer next to Town Crier Bruce Kruger of Bracebridge, who was born in Owen Sound.

ernmost destination or "station" of the Underground Railroad, which was a secret network of people who helped slaves escaping to freedom in the Canadas. Fort Erie, Niagara Falls and Windsor were some of the entry points to Upper Canada. For more details, see "Some Underground Railroad Sites Near the Niagara Escarpment."

According to Natasha Henry, author of the book *Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Can-*

*ada*, "the 150<sup>th</sup> continuous Emancipation Day celebration in Owen Sound reflects the extensive history of people of African descent not only in the region, but also in Ontario and Canada. It is also a perfect example of how August First commemorations have evolved since the 19th century. The event remains an important educational tool to teach and learn about the experiences and contributions of African Canadians."

## Every August 1 is Emancipation Day

As of December 2008, August 1 officially became known as Emancipation Day in Ontario, in recognition of the Act of 1833 that abolished slavery a year later. Ted Arnett, the Conservative MPP for the Escarpment-area riding Wellington-Halton Hills, had co-sponsored a Private Member's Bill with Maria Van Bommel, at the time a Liberal MPP. This was the first time a bill had been introduced by MPPs from different parties.

Arnett notes that ending slavery in the British Empire in 1834 had made Ontario "a beacon of freedom at the end of the Underground Railroad." Arnett continues "I hope this bill can remind Ontarians of our history of tolerance, respect, and freedom, and especially that it can be a source of pride for Ontario's Black community."

Harrison Park in the southern end of Owen Sound has a long history with the Emancipation Day Picnic, having been the gathering place for decades. A few years ago, the picnic expanded into Owen Sound's Kelso Beach Park, to allow for more participants, vendors and children's activities.

"A super-sized program will do the festival proud, just as a special milestone like this deserves," says Blaine Courtney, member of the



By Gloria Hildebrandt  
Photos by Mike Davis



Looking through a window in the Cairn at Harrison Park, Owen Sound. Emancipation Day celebrations combine socializing with opportunities for quiet reflection about slavery and freedom.



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board of directors of the Owen Sound Emancipation Festival. "We have a full Civic Holiday weekend planned."

Events include a pancake breakfast in Harrison Park on Aug. 4 and in the evening, an R&B/Soul concert in Kelso Beach Park. On Aug. 5 at Kelso, there will be a Gospelfest with two choirs from Toronto. For the whole weekend, Grey Roots Museum & Archives will host the exhibit "From Slavery to Freedom" and a Spoken Word event will be held.

### The Cairn

A beautiful memorial to the Underground Railroad was built in Harrison Park next to the Sydenham River, which flows north, the direction followed by escaping slaves. The Cairn suggests an old ruin of a house or chapel, with unglazed window frames that permit views within and without.

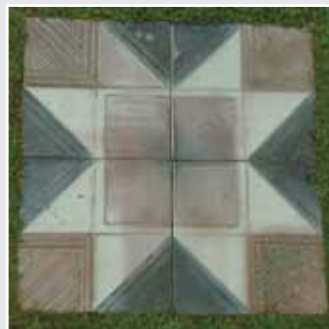
"The windows are replicas from the first Black, or back then known as Coloured, Church called Little Zion," says Bonita Johnson de Matteis, who designed the Cairn. She is an artist and resident of Owen Sound who is also a direct descendant of a slave who escaped by the Underground Railroad to the freedom of Owen Sound, and is the author and illustrator of two charming children's books about the Underground Railroad.

The Cairn in Harrison Park, Owen Sound. "It has an unfinished look like the mysterious ruins of other countries and cultures," says Cairn designer Bonita Johnson de Matteis. "I wanted to show that early freed men and women were here...we are still here."



## Quilt Code: Truth or Fiction?

It's been said that some quilt patterns contain hidden meanings that helped fugitives escaping to Canada. People along the Underground Railroad would hang up the quilt codes to convey vital information. Here are some of the quilt patterns from the Cairn with their meanings:



**North Star** – follow the North Star to freedom in Canada



**Monkey Wrench** – gather your tools and belongings to escape



**Drunkard's Path** – avoid capture by taking a complex, difficult route





**If rocks could talk. The Cairn contains some rocks donated by slave states, free states and Canadian entry points to freedom.**



The right-angle wall of the Cairn consists of fieldstones, including rocks that were donated from U.S. free and slave states, as well as border points on the Underground Railroad. These rocks are labelled “Granite Donated by The Free State of Maine, Wilmington Blue Rock Donated by The Former Slave State of Delaware, and Niagara Escarpment Limestone Donated by The City of St. Catharines.”

Yet “the majority of the stone work came from Owen Sound quarries,” notes de Matteis. “At the turn of the century, Owen Sound quarries gave employment to many men of the Black community, my great grandfather being one of them. He met his death in a detonation accident at Oliver Quarries on Owen Sound’s east side.”

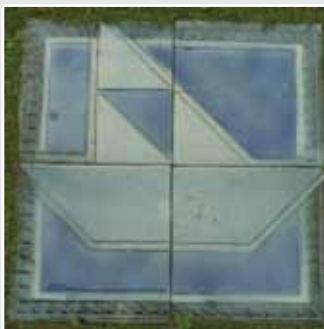
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**Log Cabin** – the central square in a dark or yellow colour indicated a safe house for fugitives



**Wagon Wheel** – a wagon can carry you home to freedom



**Sailboat** – take a boat to cross the Great Lakes

Sim Salata, collections manager at Grey Roots Museum and Archives in Owen Sound, points out that since 2008, the quilt code theory has been controversial. Scholars report they have been unable to authenticate the theory from first-hand accounts of fugitives or Underground Railroad helpers.



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This "Underground Railroad Quilt" completed in 2003 shows some of the quilt block codes said to be used to communicate with escaping slaves. Quilt top by Ella Hyslop, quilt finished by Queens Bush Quilters, pattern ©Quilters' Line, Markdale, Ont.



Fun, games, picnics and some history are important elements for children at Emancipation Day festivities.

## Books on the Topic

*Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Canada*, Natasha L. Henry, Natural Heritage Books, 2010

*Talking About Freedom: Celebrating Emancipation Day in Canada* (for teens), Natasha L. Henry, Dundurn, 2012

*Going North: The Story of Geraldine's Great Great Grandfather* (for children), Bonita Johnson de Matteis, The Ginger Press, 2007

*Threads: Piecing Together the Underground Railroad* (for children), Bonita Johnson de Matteis, The Ginger Press, 2008

The floor of the Cairn is suggested by square tiles including several that resemble colourful patterned quilt blocks, created by Jim Hong Louis. The quilt patterns have coded messages thought to pertain to the Underground Railroad. For more about these, see “Quilt Code: Truth or Fiction?”

After people experience the Cairn, de Matteis says “I hope they take away a sense of awe. I hope their imaginations allow them to shudder, to cringe, to be fearful. Then, I would love for them to imagine knowing the only way through this terrible truth is to keep on moving, hoping and praying. Then, I want them to be thankful for their homes and guard them.” **EV**



## Some Underground Railroad Sites Near the Niagara Escarpment

**Fort Erie:** The Slave Quarters, Bertie Hall; Freedom Park; Little Africa; The Crossing

**Niagara Falls:** Lundy’s Lane Historical Museum; Nathaniel Dett Memorial Chapel British Methodist Episcopal Church

**Niagara-on-the-Lake:** Negro Burial Ground; Parliament Oak School; William Stewart homestead

**St. Catharines:** Central Ontario Network for Black History; Salem Chapel, British Methodist Episcopal Church; St. Catharines Museum at Lock 3 Welland Canal Centre

**Ancaster:** Griffin House National Historic Site

**Hamilton:** Stewart Memorial Church

**Oakville:** Oakville Museum at Erchless Estate

**Collingwood:** Sheffield Black History and Cultural Museum

**Owen Sound:** Grey Roots Museum & Archives