

BLACK HISTORY IN OXFORD COUNTY

Early Settlement

In the early 1800s, the American state of Ohio enacted “Black Codes”, racist laws that were intended to limit Black individuals' migration to Ohio, employment opportunities, and legal rights. These “Black Codes”, other laws enacted throughout America, and the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, led to a significant increase in Black settlement in Canada, including Oxford County, as individuals and families fled these restrictive and unjust laws.

In 1834, over 800,000 enslaved people in British North America (Canada), parts of the Caribbean, Africa, and South America, were emancipated by the British Imperial Act. This became known as "Emancipation Day", and led to even more Black individuals and families migrating to Canada from America where slavery was still legal until 1865.

The “codes” included such restrictions as:

- 1.) Obeying strict curfew laws, which meant stopping in the street to socialize with friends and family was often not possible.
- 2.) Not being allowed to testify in a court of law in your own defense.
- 3.) Requiring Black individuals to carry certificates of freedom at all times; they were not allowed to settle in many states without this certificate as proof of their freedom.
- 4.) Paying an expensive bond to guarantee the Black worker would not leave an employer.
- 5.) Requiring a certificate of freedom to be employed. If an employer was found to have employed a Black worker without a certificate, the employer would have to pay fees to the “owner” of the worker for the amount of time the person was employed by them.
- 6.) Limited employment due to being a Black individual.
- 7.) Being arrested for vagrancy if you were unemployed which, due to the difficulty of finding work based on the colour of their skin, many Black individuals experienced.

BLACK HISTORY IN OXFORD COUNTY

Why Settle in Oxford County?

Freed members of the formerly enslaved Black community in America were already living in Norwich Township by the mid-1800s. Many people arrived in Oxford County through the help of supporters of the Underground Railroad, others traveled on their own by road and railway. The Underground Railroad was created in the late 1790s by abolitionists, people who wanted to end the practice of slavery and provide a way for fleeing slaves to find safety. Abolitionists included members of the Religious Society of Friends, also known as Quakers. Railway terms were used as codes to ensure the Underground Railroad remained secret. “Conductors” fed and provided shelter to escaping people, often having to hide them in their homes or on their property. The locations where abolitionists hid people escaping slavery were called “stations” or “terminals”. The escapees themselves were called “cargo”. “Following the north star to Canaan Land” was a euphemism for escaping north to Canada; both free and fugitive Black people made their way north to Canada to seek shelter and security.

The mid-1800s was a time of progress and growth in Oxford County. New factories and businesses were opening, forests were being cleared, the Great Western Railway and roads were being built, and farms needed workers. With so many job opportunities many Black residents stayed in Oxford County even after the Civil War ended in the United States.



A view of the Great Western Railway line in Woodstock , 1866.

BLACK HISTORY IN OXFORD COUNTY

Black Communities

Otterville in Norwich Township was historically an important area of Black settlement in the County since the early 1830s. Many were free people from the northern U.S.A. who, despite being freed from enslavement, faced prejudice and racism in their daily lives and often found it exceedingly difficult to secure employment and support themselves and their families. Many sought security and a new life in Canada. Education was extremely important to these families and a school was built for their children in the Otterville area; the school would later be called S.S. (School Section) #18. Religion was also an important part of the Black community life in Oxford County. In the beginning, community members worshipped together in each other's homes. However, in 1856 the Black community finally had a church constructed to worship in, just outside the village of Otterville. Known as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, it also hosted large church camp meetings which were attended by both Black and Caucasian local residents. The church is no longer standing today, but the cemetery was restored and grave markers, displaying flaming candles, have been placed on unmarked graves by the South Norwich Historical Society.

Ingersoll was a growing industrial centre in the early to mid-1800s; it became one of the northern terminals on the Underground Railroad. The Wesleyan Methodist Church in Ingersoll became a "station" where escaped enslaved people would be secretly smuggled into the attic in the middle of the night. A Black community church, the British Methodist Episcopal Church, was built on the south side of Catherine Street in Ingersoll, on the east side of the river. It soon became the centre of the community. By the late 1850s, it has been estimated that over 400 Black residents lived in and around Ingersoll. At the end of the American Civil War in 1865, when American slavery was abolished, many Black residents in this area reunited with their families in the American South.



Emancipation Day Celebration
Announcement, *Woodstock
Sentinel-Review*—22 July 1898

HISTORICAL BLACK COMMUNITY MEMBERS

George “Washington” Jones

George "Washington" Jones (also known as George "Gravy" Jones) was born into slavery around 1856. He lived in Chatham, Ontario for some time after escaping slavery before arriving in Woodstock in 1925 and appointing himself town-crier. His town crier attire included a swallow-tail coat, silk top hat, and medals and badges decorating his coat. Carrying a sandwich board and brass megaphone, Jones was a beloved and prominent figure on Dundas Street for 26 years. His booming voice could be recognized from afar and he was known for his lively and friendly demeanor. He was a leading source of information on local news and events. Besides his position as town crier, Jones worked odd jobs in the city.



Later in life Jones suffered vision loss, but continued his role with the help of a support cane and community members, who offered him aid in navigating the busy downtown streets. In 1951 Jones passed away in the House of Refuge, a former home for the destitute and those in need of long-term care in the County. Local business owners paid for his funeral and a gravestone in the Woodstock Baptist Cemetery, a gesture recognizing his significance to the community.



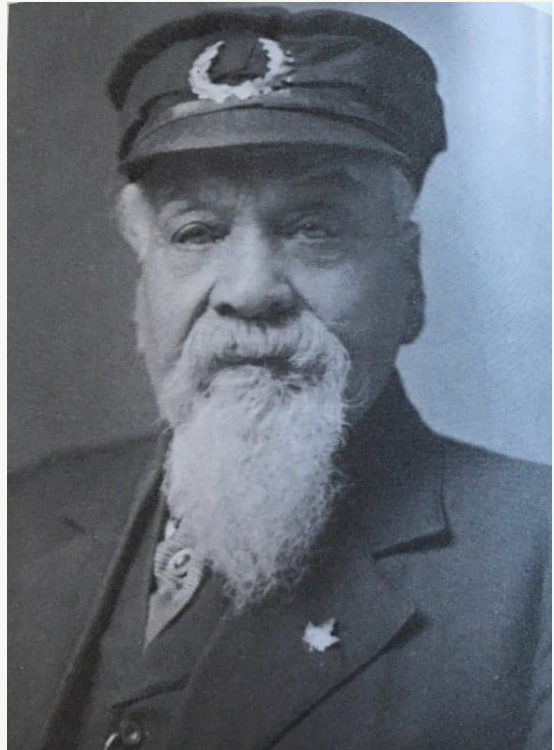
George “Washington” Jones working as town-crier in downtown Woodstock, ca. 1940s

HISTORICAL BLACK COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Marshall Anderson

Marshall Anderson, or Marsh as he was better known, was born in Norwich Township in 1844. Marshall and his family, his second wife Mary and their three children, moved to Woodstock, Ontario where sadly his wife died shortly after in 1881. He was employed for 2 years as a Board of Works employee. Then in 1882 he was hired as a night patrolman by the local businessmen of Woodstock to safeguard their downtown businesses after dark. The regular police force would finish their day shift and Marsh would take over. Despite being hired for security by merchants, his role covered all areas of police work. He held this role for 43 years and gained the respect of the entire community. He patrolled Dundas Street from Vansittart Avenue to Wellington Street. His dog, named Seeker, a Great Dane and Bloodhound mix, worked alongside him each night for 10 years. He sent Seeker into the back alleys and dark buildings first to sniff out trouble. If Seeker growled, Marsh would shine his light in the dog's direction and arrest any wrongdoers if needed. Marsh first adopted Duke as his companion when he was just a puppy, and the dog remained by his side until he passed away at the age of 11.

Marsh famously foiled a bank robbery at the Molson Bank in Woodstock one night. Five bank robbers were overheard at the Royal Hotel making plans to rob the bank. Marsh was told the details. Marsh took them by surprise just as they were finding an entrance to the bank and sent them running. He was also the guard in charge of taking infamous conman and convicted murderer Reginald Birchall back to the county jail from the courthouse after his conviction in 1890. Marsh was also a member of the Woodstock Fire Brigade, and throughout his lifetime in Woodstock became a highly respected member of the community. Marsh passed away in 1932 at the age of 88.



Marsh Anderson in uniform.

Photo Source: "A Safe Haven: The Story of Black Settlers of Oxford County" by Joyce A. Pettigrew.

HISTORICAL BLACK COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Susan LeBurtis

Susan LeBurtis was born in Grey County, Ontario in 1857. In 1895, she and her husband William moved to Woodstock. Her husband was the minister of the British Methodist Episcopal Church and Susan worked as a milliner, a person who makes women's hats. Susan was well known for her herbal remedies, which she gave to friends and neighbours when they were ill. Her remedies became so well known that she and William opened the LeBurtis Medicine Company at 331 Dundas Street in Woodstock. After her husband passed in 1910, she continued to help people with her medicines. She was eventually prosecuted by the medical association for practicing without a license. However, the case was dismissed as it was found that she did not prescribe medicines for illnesses that she diagnosed herself; she was simply selling her remedies to customers based on what was ailing them. She died in 1926, after many years of helping people from all over Canada, the United States, and from other parts of the world.

Dr. John Taylor

Dr. John Taylor was born in 1803 and escaped from slavery in the 1850s, eventually fleeing to Canada. He lived briefly in Tillsonburg, Ontario in the early 1860s but lived the rest of his life in Innerkip, Ontario until his death in 1884. He became known for his skill with creating effective cures for all sorts of health ailments. Dr. Taylor had learned some of these cures from his father, who had been a doctor in Africa. Despite being a locally respected physician, he was eventually charged with practicing without a license by the medical association. Dr. Taylor believed he was targeted because he had cured a man who other medical professionals had stated was incurable; Dr. Taylor saved the man's leg even though it was believed it must be amputated. He fought back at the physicians who were laying the charges, stating that they were causing deaths by prescribing chemicals such as mercury and arsenic to their patients, and that their lack of pharmaceutical knowledge led to the accidental death of many people. Dr. Taylor used remedies found in nature, like herbs, bark, and roots. A book of his medical cures was published after his death by the Woodstock Sentinel-Review Steam Publishing House, a copy of which is available at Western University's Archives & Special Collections. In the introduction to his book, Dr. Taylor stated: "I am one of the few who believe that in every country there are herbs to cure every disease natural to that country, if we only knew them."

HISTORICAL BLACK COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Gilbert Sanders

Gilbert Sanders was born in America circa 1841. He arrived in Woodstock, Ontario after escaping slavery in the American South. He established and ran the only barbershop in town on Dundas Street. In 1889, Sanders' barbershop was located at 129 Dundas Street West. Sanders can be found in the Canadian Census in 1871, where he is listed as being unable to read or write; it has been estimated that only about 10 per cent of people who were enslaved were literate. Slave owners were generally opposed to enslaved people learning to read and write as it was considered a potential threat to the institution of slavery. Often, enslaved people found ways to educate themselves. Two other Black men were also listed under Sanders's name employed as barbers in the 1871 census, Henry Anderson and William Tillman.

On October 24, 1869 Sanders married Caroline "Carrie" Hisson from Otterville, and the couple had three children by the time the 1881 census was taken. After suffering with bronchitis for a year, Caroline died on November 8, 1885 at the age of 35. Her death was registered by Woodstock night watchman Marshall Anderson, who was also a member of the Woodstock Black community. Shortly after Caroline's death, Gilbert Sanders appears to have had a romantic relationship with a woman named Flora Johnson, who was also from Woodstock. They had a son together named John, who was born in Brantford, Ontario on September 2, 1886. Flora never took Gilbert's name, which means it was likely that the pair never ended up marrying. Gilbert Sanders' exact date of death and burial location are unknown at this time, but it is known that he died before 1901.



Portrait of Gilbert Sanders.
Courtesy of Woodstock Museum
NHS. X1980.451.1

HISTORICAL BLACK COMMUNITY MEMBERS

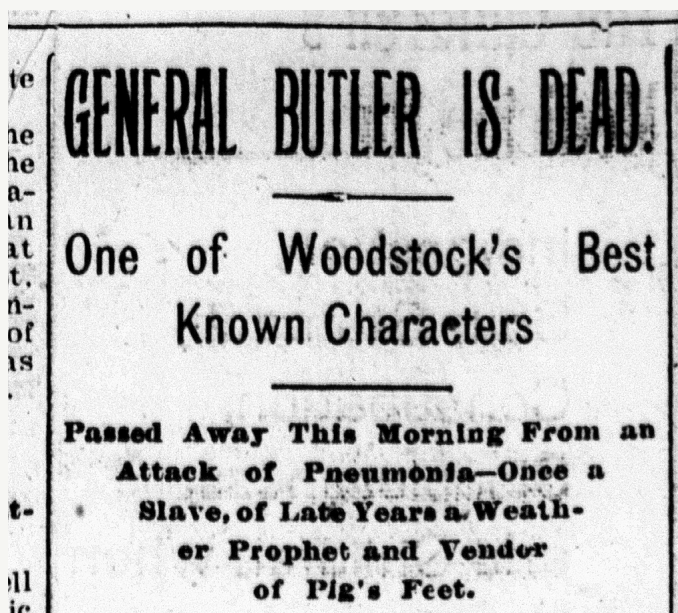
William “General” Butler

Born in 1823 in Dorcan County, Pennsylvania, on the banks of the Susquehanna River between the cities of Philadelphia and Harrisburg, William “General” Butler arrived in Ontario with his wife Anne and four children in 1856 and eventually made his way to Woodstock. While in Ontario, he and his wife had an additional six children, ten in total. Over the next thirty plus years, he held many different occupations from labourer, to cook, to a white-washer (coating the exterior of buildings with white paint or chalked lime). In 1861 he was a confectioner and operated a confectionary store and ice cream parlor on the site of the old Opera House; though later, his chief claim to fame came through the manufacturing of taffy of all kinds. The “General” was also considered a great story-teller and a well-known weather prophet. When he passed away in February 1899, the newspaper noted that: “The General’s figure will be greatly missed upon the streets of Woodstock and citizens of all ages will note with regret the passing of another familiar character, one who in his long life had made himself popular by his good nature and quaint humor.”

In 1881, Butler placed the following advertisement in the Woodstock paper highlighting his services (verbatim):

“De ole hen am chirpin’, De robin am singin’, De voice of de rooster is heard in the land. De pigeons am flyin’, De ganders am sighin’, An the big Town Constable Am showin his hand. De md’s growin’ depper, De sewers a diggin’, De rats am comin’ out of the cellar to see. De lambs am a callin: De spring calf am bawlin’, An the white-wash season is open for me. Wheneber you’re feeling’, It’s time for house-cleanin’, Jes send round your boy For the General, that’s me. May office is down below De Port Dover Railrow, On the fust street, turn norf come and see. The General.”

The headline of an obituary for William “General” Butler, printed in the *Woodstock Sentinel-Review* newspaper. 27 February 1899.



HISTORICAL BLACK COMMUNITY MEMBERS

The Morton Family

HENRY AND ANNIE MORTON

Henry I. Morton was born in Ontario, Canada in 1873. Originally from Peel Township in Wellington County, Henry made his way to Woodstock, Ontario where he worked for the McIntosh Coal Company for 40 years. His first wife was Hattie Gardner, who he married in 1898. Hattie had previously been a suspect in the death and potential murder of her first husband Levi Gardner, along with her lover William McComas. The pair were found not guilty in the end. Hattie died in 1906. After Hattie's death, Henry got remarried to Annie Lewis in 1918. They lived at 82 Main Street in Woodstock and were married for 36 years until Henry's death in 1954. Henry was survived by 10 children: Harold, Donald, McKenzie, Embry, John, Douglas (father of former Buffalo Bills defensive lineman and stand-up comedian Greg Morton), Dorothy, Isobel, Elizabeth, and Phyllis.

Annie was born in 1897 in Oakville, Ontario. After Henry's death, she got remarried to Jack Walters. Annie was a poet; in the mid-1960s she published a book of 70 poems titled: "This is Annie". At this point in her life she was paraplegic. Annie passed away in 1967.

EMERY MORTON

Emery Morton, known as "Embry" by family, was the son of Henry and Annie Morton, born in August, 1929. After some troubled teenage years, Emery enlisted in the military in the early 1950s and fought in the Korean War (1950-1953). He was a Private in the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. After the war, he returned to Woodstock where he lived in an apartment at 520 Dundas Street with his wife Patricia. Emery worked as a machinist at J. Stewart Manufacturing. He and Patricia later lived at 200 Park Row in Woodstock. In 1958, Emery was listed as a mechanic at J. Stewart Manufacturing in the city directory.

Emery was a primary witness to an infamous murder in Woodstock during the 1950s. On June 10, 1954, Emery was on his way home walking west on Simcoe Street when he heard yelling and screaming in a nearby house. He ran into the kitchen of the house where he saw Velibor Rajic stabbing Florence Boyd on the floor. Emery yelled at the assailant to stop. Rajic turned to Emery and starting approaching him with the knife in his hand. Emery quickly left the kitchen, planning to grab something outside to use as a weapon to defend himself. Thankfully the police arrived at that moment. Emery was a chief crown witness during the trial, which led to justice being served as Rajic was found guilty of murdering Florence Boyd. Emery appears to have left Woodstock by 1960. He died in July of 2016, and is buried at Pine Hills Cemetery in Scarborough, Ontario.



Portrait of Emery Morton from the *Woodstock Sentinel-Review* newspaper, 11 June 1954.

HISTORICAL BLACK COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Tillsonburg's Barbers

ALBERT FREEMAN

Albert Freeman was born in Dereham Township in 1862 to David and Sarah Freeman. David and Sarah were both born in America but made their way to Ontario in the mid-1800s. In 1862 they lived on lot 11, concession 10 in Dereham and were listed as farmers in the 1871 census, although they did not own the land. Albert was one of eight Freeman children. At the age of 19, Albert was listed as a barber in the 1881 census. He ran a barbershop on Broadway in downtown Tillsonburg, Ontario. He briefly employed another man named George Wayner, who was also a part of the Black community in Oxford County. Albert eventually moved to Brantford, where was listed as a barber in the 1891 census.

GEORGE WAYNER

George Wayner was born in North Norwich Township on December 1 in 1855. His parents were James Wayner and Esther Wayner. His father was born in America, and his mother was born in Ontario, then known as Canada West. The couple had seven children in the 1861 census. The Wayner family later moved to South Norwich where George attended school. By the time he was in his mid-20s, he was working as a barber for Albert Freeman in Tillsonburg. He only worked there for a brief period before emigrating to Michigan where he opened his own barbershop. Wayner died in Pontiac, Michigan in 1928.

MALACHI BIRD

Malachi "Professor" Bird was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania around 1838. He worked as a barber until he enlisted in the "Colored Regiment" in February 1865, during the American Civil War. He deserted a month later, and was eventually discharged from the army after the war ended that year.

According to the 1870 US census, Malachi was living in Millersburg, PA with his wife Ellen and their three children. Ellen was born into slavery in Virginia but headed north with Malachi after slavery was abolished. In the early 1870s, they immigrated to Tillsonburg, Ontario where Malachi ran a barbershop downtown on Broadway. Their eldest daughter Martha stayed in Pennsylvania.

Sadly, in the short period of time they lived in Tillsonburg, they lost three children. Ellen then tragically died at the age of 28 in 1877. She and their children were buried in the Pioneer Cemetery. Four months later, Malachi remarried a woman named Margaret Miller from Ingersoll. They moved to London, ON, where he died two years later of tuberculosis at the age of 41 in 1879.



A photograph of Broadway looking north in Tillsonburg, Ontario. Taken in 1908.

HISTORICAL BLACK COMMUNITY MEMBERS

The Anderson Women

HANNAH ANDERSON

Hannah Julia Anderson (nee Topp) was born in 1819 in Barton Township, Wentworth County, Ontario. She spent her childhood days in Barton and the city of Hamilton. In 1842, at the age of 23, Hannah married Lindsey B. Anderson. After their marriage, Hannah joined her husband on his farm in South Norwich where he had built them a shanty in the woods. Surrounded by isolating wilderness, with no neighbours close by, Hannah assisted her husband with running the farm on lot 8, concession 11.

According to Hannah's obituary, "At that time wolves howled day and night, and they and the bears were so bold that the settler's stock was in continual danger." Hannah would walk alone to the nearest settlement of Otterville to buy provisions, using a footpath through the woods. It was a 3-mile distance, a trek that would take around 1 hour of walking. It took the Andersons many years of hard work to clear their 50 acres. During that time, they also started their family, having eleven children in total. Hannah's husband, Lindsey, also worked as a carpenter and became known for his work as a minister of the British Methodist Episcopal Church. He was the preacher at the Otterville African Methodist Episcopal Church (later known as BME Church) for a short period in the mid-1850s. Lindsey died in 1888.

Hannah was the owner of the farm for the rest of her life. After her husband's death, she moved to Woodstock with her daughter Jane to join the rest of her daughters who were living in the city. She lived with her daughters until her death at the age of 91 in 1910.

FRANCES LETITIA ANDERSON

Frances Anderson was born in 1856 to Lindsey and Hannah Anderson on their farm in South Norwich. She lived on the farm until 1881 when she moved to Woodstock at the age of 24 with her sisters Margaret (32), Laura (26), and Rebecca (22). The sisters were known locally as being very ambitious. They ran a business together on Dundas Street, working as milliners (making women's hats), and hairdressers. Frances worked as a hairdresser and designed straw and felt hats. She was particularly known for her skills and business savvy. She moved to New York City a few years later where she worked as a dressmaker.

In 1922 she bought a house at 46 Wellington St. S. in Woodstock with her sister Jane, where she returned to live in 1924 due to illness. She assisted her sisters with their business, continuing her work as a dressmaker.

Frances died a year later in 1925 at 69 years old. Her obituary noted that she was "held in high-esteem by all who came in contact with her." She never married, and was self-sufficient her entire life during a time when it was often expected that women must rely on a husband to survive. Her career allowed her to live successfully as a single woman.



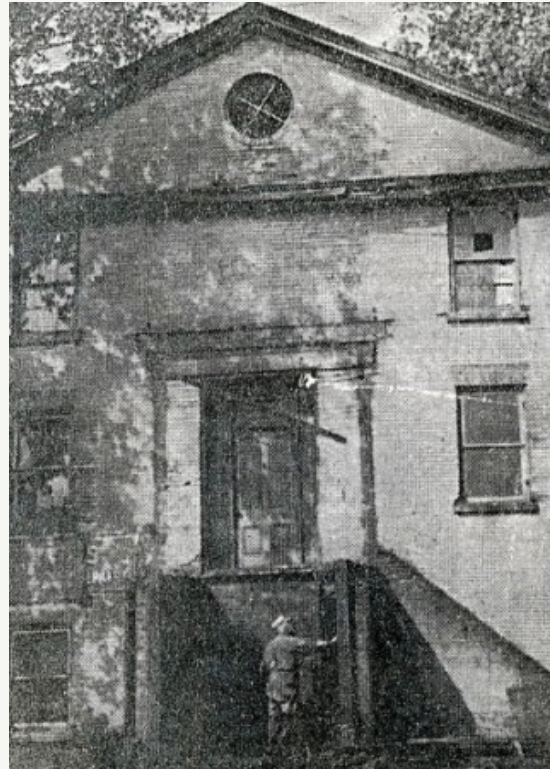
Portrait of Hannah Anderson.

SIGNIFICANT BUILDINGS

Wesleyan Methodist Church

The Wesleyan Methodist Church was built on the west side of Oxford Street (now 110 Oxford St.) in Ingersoll, Ontario in 1854. It was physically constructed through volunteer labour, Ingersoll residents who had been formerly enslaved before fleeing to Canada. Many local Black residents had valuable construction skills, such as bricklaying and roofing. The church had a capacity for around 500 people, the minister's living quarters were located on the top floor. The church was most notably a safe haven for people escaping slavery. Assisted by Quakers who held strong anti-slavery beliefs, Black people were fleeing to Southwestern Ontario from plantations in the American South, even from as far as New Orleans, Louisiana. Having to work under the protection of darkness, people escaping slavery were secretly smuggled into the attic of the Wesleyan Methodist Church at night. The church was a well known terminal of the Underground Railroad. Some people arrived in Ingersoll by stage coach from Port Burwell, Ontario; an operation run by abolitionist Harvey C. Jackson. Ingersoll locals who condemned slavery provided employment opportunities for freed people on nearby farms. A number of famous individuals spoke at the church, including abolitionist John Brown in 1858. Amelia Webster was also a famous speaker at the church. Webster had spent months in an American prison in the South, charged with teaching enslaved people how to read and write.

The church choir included many local Black residents. The church no longer provided religious services after 1865, when the Wesleyans moved to another location on King Street. The building was, however, the first public building in Ingersoll to be lit by electricity. After its closure as a church, the building housed a number of local businesses. Today, the building is no longer standing



The Wesleyan Methodist Church in Ingersoll.
Photograph taken by Stanley J. Smith in 1956.
Courtesy of the Ingersoll Public Library:
ingersolllibrary.wordpress.com.

SIGNIFICANT BUILDINGS

Hawkins Chapel

The former church known as Hawkins Chapel on Park Row in Woodstock, Ontario, was established by two men who had escaped slavery in America; George Washington, a porter at the O'Neill House, and Dan Anderson, a stonemason. The church was also commonly known as the Park Row Community Chapel by locals. Washington and Anderson began their work to establish a British Methodist Episcopal Church for Woodstock's Black community in 1883. They canvassed door to door at local houses to garner support for the construction of a chapel and, by 1886, the two men purchased a lot at 257 Park Row. The wood frame chapel, which had a 200 seat capacity, was finally opened on December 2, 1888 and would eventually provide service to around 75 local Black families. The church eventually became known by the name of its first minister Right Rev. Walter Hawkins.

Over the years, local white families also began attending the church, as one minister Rev. Winston H.H. Clarke stated: "There are no colour lines in our church; we deal with the character of the people." The church closed in 1972 for several years. In July, 1977, Rev. George Boyce re-opened the church and painted it black and white, as evidence that it was open to any race. Despite the almost decade-long revival, the church was closed permanently in 1986; a private home now stands at the site where the chapel once stood.

A photo of the Park Row Community Chapel in Woodstock, taken while it was still in use as a church.

