

Black History in Oxford County

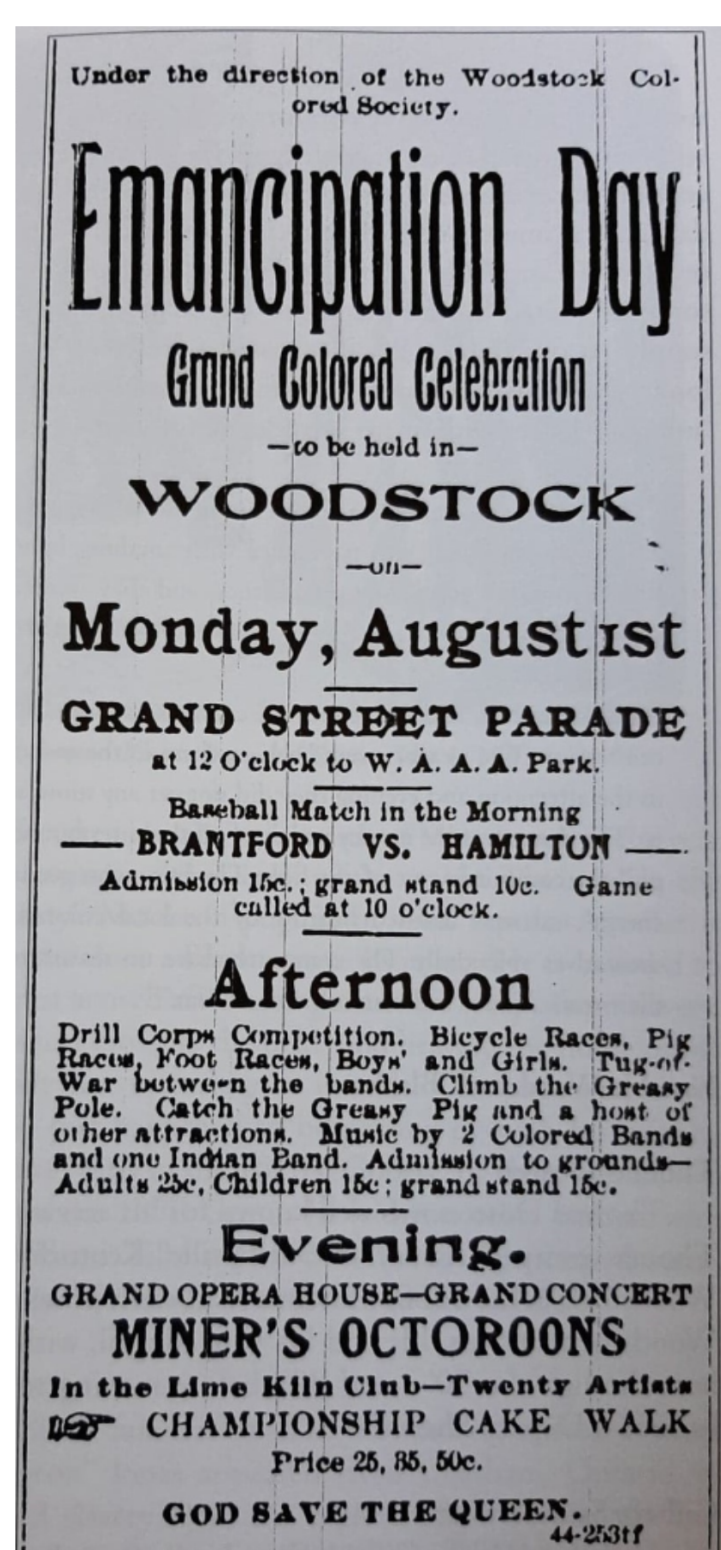


LeVerne, Charlotte, and Thomas George Marshall, 1945. Courtesy of the Woodstock Museum NHS. 2009.8.15

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.



Emancipation Day Celebration Announcement, "Woodstock Sentinel-Review", 22 July 1898.

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 known as 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, known as 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.



Oxford County MPP Dick Treleaven addresses the crowd at the opening ceremony of the African Methodist Episcopal Cemetery in Otterville, 3 July 1982.

Why Settle in Oxford?

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.



Employees of the Ingersoll Pork Packing Company, circa 1910. Courtesy of the Ingersoll Cheese & Agricultural Museum.