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by

Fred Landon

The little Canadian town of Amherstburg is situated on the east bank of the Detroit River and not far from the mouth of that beautiful stream. From the later years of the eighteenth century it has figured in the history of Canada and today holds proud its place as one of the most historic spots in Ontario. Throughout the earlier period of the War of 1812 it was the headquarters of the British commander, Brock, and it was here that the first meeting took place between Brock and the great Indian chief, Tecumseh. Later, during the troubles of 1837 and 1838 there were important happenings at this point, particularly the capture of the schooner *Ann* in which Negro volunteers from the district had a hand. But apart entirely from its military importance, Amherstburg, or Fort Malden as it was called in earlier days, has special interest as being the chief place of entry for the large number of fugitives who made their way from the slave States of the South by way of the "underground railroad" to Canada and freedom. Even today there are many colored families resident in Amherstburg, descendants of those who came in the days before the Civil War and who did not leave their adopted home when the abolition of slavery and the downfall of the Confederacy made it possible for them to return in safety to the South. In other towns and cities of western Ontario there are similar groups of people whose color is a constant reminder of the movement of the fugitives into Canada in the first half of the last century.

The Negro population of Amherstburg on the eve of the Civil War was placed by one observer[1] at 800 out of a total population of 2000, a rather large percentage, it will be noted. In 1855 another visitor to the place[2] had estimated the Negro population at between 400 and 500, which would

indicate that the population had doubled in the late fifties. This might well be accounted for by the large number of Negroes who came into Canada between 1850 and 1860 consequent upon the operations of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. It does not necessarily follow that either of the figures given above represented the actual Negro population resident in Amherstburg since there must always, from its nature as a place of entry, have been many transients in the town. Probably most Negroes preferred a permanent location farther back from the international boundary where there was less risk of kidnapping and forcible return to American jurisdiction. This would account for the colonies in such towns as London, Ingersoll and Chatham, each of which even to this day has its Negro population.

The number of transients in Amherstburg must always have been somewhat of a problem for those engaged in any religious or philanthropic work at this place. The missionaries placed here by the American Missionary Society were driven to the greatest extremities at times when some unusually large incursion of fugitives made demands upon them for food, for shelter, for clothing and all other forms of assistance that could be rendered. In 1849 Isaac J. Rice, who had been located at Amherstburg since 1838, wrote to the *Liberator*:[3]

> "Whole families reach us, needing clothing, provisions, a home for a few days, until arrangements can be made for life, and all this amid strangers, the prejudiced.
>
> "They are driven from schools in the States, they are no better here. If they go in schools by themselves, their portion of public money is allowed; but Canadians will not teach them, so that your teachers from the States must do it and aid them also about getting land and various other ways.
>
> "Seven or eight missionaries are here, brought by my influence. . . . Last month three of us lay sick here and two were not expected for a time to live. . . . We have received at our house and clothed more than fifty from the south. . . . We need about $400 this fall. We are $100 in debt. We greatly need better accommodations, a house that will cost $250 or $300."

Less than a year later a letter signed by Milly Morse, of Foxboro, made an appeal through the *Liberator*[4] on behalf of Isaac Rice and his missionary work. This letter speaks of his efforts as follows:

> "He has suffered much in silence and given himself up for the good of the slave. . . . He has lived principally on bread and beans and without the means to purchase these."

The letter goes on to state that Rice had divided what he had with the fugitives until he was actually wanting for clothing. He had sold his watch and even his beds to buy food. He is quoted as placing the Negro population of Canada at about 20,000 with 3,000 of them located in the district around Amherstburg. He had clothed as many as 300 fugitives in one year and had 90 pupils in his school at that time. Siebert, in his study of the underground railroad,[5] says that after 1850 as many as 30 fugitives would cross in one day at Amherstburg, so that the figures given by Rice as to the extent of his work are probably not exaggerated. William Wells Brown, himself a fugitive, says that from the first of May to the first of September of 1842 he conveyed no less than 69 fugitives across Lake Erie to Canada and that, subsequently, on a visit to Amherstburg, he met no less than 17 of these located there.[6] The *Chicago Western Citizen* estimated in 1842 that there were $400,000 worth of southern slaves in and around the town.[7] The place was, as Prof. Siebert has pointed out, a terminus for several routes of the underground along which runaways travelled and which converged at Toledo, Sandusky and Cleveland. From the lake ports friendly captains of lake vessels brought the fugitives to the Detroit River, the last lap of a journey that had often been begun far in the South.

The arrivals, all too frequently, were in pitiable state. Usually they were without money, food or clothing suited to the rigors of a Canadian winter. Children arrived with scarcely enough to cover them and that of thin cotton. There was probably excuse for some of the appeals that were broadcasted in the United States for clothing, food and money, though some of the more ambitious Negroes strongly condemned this practice as leading to imposture and fraud. Doubtless there was fraud at times, money and supplies destined for needy fugitives getting into other hands, but such things have ever been where need exists and charity is more open-handed than sharp-eyed.

There are many romantic tales have come down of the reunion at Amherstburg of families separated in the South. Miss Martineau says she was told by a gentleman that the sublimest sight in America was not Niagara or Quebec or the Great Lakes but the leap of a slave from a boat to the freedom of the Canadian shore. Fort Malden must have seen many touching incidents of this character. Rev. William Mitchell, in his book on the underground railroad, tells of a Negro named Hedgman who had been sold south from Kentucky but escaped and made his way to Canada, locating at

Amherstburg. His wife had been separated from him and of her and his family he had lost all trace. Twelve years after he had arrived in Canada the wife also escaped from her owner and eventually arrived at the very town where her husband was located. Friendless and alone she wandered about the streets seeking shelter and was attracted by the singing in a little chapel. Opening the door timidly the first person she saw was the husband from whom she had been so long separated and of whose whereabouts she had had no knowledge.[8]

The church and the school occupied an important place in the life of a majority of the fugitives. Old and young seemed seized with the desire to go to school and the churches were the meeting place for all. There was a surprising keenness about the desire of many of these people to better themselves. Canadian law drew no distinction between black and white in matters of citizenship, of which education was one. In practice, however, there were not infrequently some distinctions likely to be drawn, the whites preferring that Negroes should have schools of their own.[9] As might be expected under such circumstances, there were some Negroes ready occasionally to test the principle of their right to share the benefits of the public schools. When Benjamin Drew visited the place in 1854 he found the Negro separate school a small low building, having neither blackboard nor chairs. Long rough benches were placed against the walls with desks before them. The whole interior was comfortless and repulsive. The teacher was a colored woman, apparently doing the best she could under the discouragement of poor surroundings and frequent absences of her pupils.[10] The situation was improved shortly after this, however, by the Colonial Church and School Society, of England, opening a school,[11] and when Dr. Samuel G. Howe visited Amherstburg in the summer of 1863 he found 90 colored children enrolled in the school with an average attendance of 60.[12] Levi Coffin, the abolitionist, visited the town in 1844 and stayed at the mission school. He was much impressed with the work that was being done then and in his reminiscences pays tribute to the self-sacrifice of Isaac Rice, who, he says, had given up fine prospects in Ohio to take up this work to which he felt himself called. Coffin describes Fort Malden as “the great landing place, the principal terminus of the underground railroad of the west.”[13]

An educational movement among the Negroes quite apart from the schools had its origin at Amherstburg in 1854 when the first True Band was formed, similar organizations springing up in other communities where Negroes were located. The True Bands were open to both sexes and a small monthly fee was charged. The aims of the Bands were to improve the

schools, increase the attendance, abate race prejudice, arbitrate disputes between members of the Negro race, to assist the destitute, suppress begging, etc.

The coming of so many people of another race and color into southwestern Ontario was not pleasing to all the white inhabitants. Deep prejudice manifested itself at times and an occasional outburst in some newspaper reflected the feelings of an element of the population. The *Amherstburg Courier* of October 27, 1849, prints a resolution of the district council passed on October 8 of that year, protesting vigorously against the proposed Elgin settlement which was planned by Rev. William King as a home for fugitives from slavery. This resolution, which appears to have been instigated by a local politician, Larwill, resident in Chatham, declared that "there is but one feeling, and that is of disgust and hatred, that they (the Negroes) should be allowed to settle in any township where there is a white settlement." The resolution proceeded to ask for a disallowance of sale of lands to Negroes, suggested a poll tax on Negroes entering the country, asked for an enactment against amalgamation and a requirement that Negroes shall furnish good security that they will not become a burden. It was also suggested that it would be well to ascertain whether it would be politic to allow them the suffrage.[14]

Amherstburg itself does not seem to have been the scene of any unusual manifestations of racial prejudice, despite the presence there of so many Negroes. Dr. Samuel G. Howe, who visited the place in 1863 to investigate conditions, has left us some interesting data. The town clerk said of the Negroes that "a portion of them are well behaved, and another portion not. . . . A great many of these colored people go and sail in the summer time and in the winter lie around and don't do much. We have to help a great many of them, more than any other class of people we have. . . . I think the Council have given more to the colored people than to others." But he added that they were no worse than the French.[15]

A Mr. Park, resident in Amherstburg, told Dr. Howe that the Negroes were part of them indolent and part industrious. They tended to neglect their own poor and begged more than the whites. A Captain Averill who was interviewed said that the Negroes were satisfactory as sailors, "the best men we have," but they were never made mates and none owned ships of their own.[16]

Benjamin Drew, when he visited the place, found Negro mechanics and shopkeepers, while one of the best hotels in the place was also kept by a man of color. Those whom he interviewed said that they were able to make a

living. He mentions one James Smith who had been driven into Canada by the operation of the Fugitive Slave Act. He was making a comfortable living from a small grocery business, owned a lot worth $200 and had some other property.[17]

Howe gives some interesting figures of taxation that he obtained from the town authorities. At the time of his visit in 1863 one in three of the whites was a taxpayer and one in eleven of the Negroes. The average tax paid by a white was $9.52 as compared with $5.12 paid by a black. There is not as great difference here as might be expected. There were 550 taxpayers in all and 71 of these were colored.[18] Howe found the home conditions superior to those of other foreigners and much superior to slave quarters in the South. The houses were tidy, in good repair and had gardens adjoining. He found carpets and curtains, pictures on the walls, tables decently spread and other indications of a proper family life. The exceptions were chiefly among newcomers who had not yet had opportunity to better themselves.[19] Beyond the town limits there were Negroes located on the land, and Dr. Howe speaks of one Buckner, a colored man, who had his place in good cultivation with a number of fine cattle and signs of thrift and care about the place. The soil around Amherstburg was of good quality and rewarded any refugees who were resourceful and industrious enough to undertake farming.[20] One family group from Virginia, fine looking mulattoes of unusual intelligence, formed what was known as the McCurdy settlement in the township of Malden and had their own school and teacher.

How many fugitives passed through this “terminal station” of the underground railroad in the period before 1860 can never be computed. Immigration agents were not there in those days to register newcomers or determine their fitness for entry to the country. Had they been there they would probably have been evaded. Only by the casual references of travellers and others, or by the scanty records of missionary workers, may be obtained an idea of the steady stream of people fleeing from slavery who came in by this doorway. Amherstburg, living on today chiefly in the reflection of its historic past, may well attract the interest of a citizen of the United States, as it does that of a Canadian, for it played an international rôle in days gone by.

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[1] Mitchell, W. M., *Underground Railroad*, London, 1860, p. 149.

[2] Drew, Benjamin, *The Refugee; or the narratives of fugitive slaves in Canada related by themselves, with an account of the history and condition of the Colored population of Upper Canada*, Boston, 1856, p. 348.

[3] *Liberator*, November 23, 1849.

[4] *Liberator*, August 23, 1850.

[5] Siebert, W. H., *Underground Railroad*, N. Y., 1899, p. 194.

[6] Brown, Wm. Wells, *Narrative of William W. Brown, a fugitive slave*, Boston, 1847, pp. 109-110.

[7] Issue of September 23, 1842.

[8] Mitchell, *Underground Railroad*, pp. 55-60.

[9] See Howe, S. G., *Refugees from slavery in Canada West, Report to the Freedmen's Inquiry Commission*, Boston, 1864, pp. 50 ff.

[10] Drew, *Refugee*, p. 348.

[11] This organization had already opened a school for Negro children in London, the work being under the superintendence of Rev. Dr. Hellmuth, afterwards Bishop of the diocese of Huron.

[12] Howe, *Refugees from slavery*, p. 67.

[13] Coffin, Levi, *Reminiscences*, Cincinnati, 1876, pp. 249-250.

[14] The resolution goes on to say: "The increased immigration of foreign Negroes into this part of the province is truly alarming. We cannot omit mentioning

some facts for the corroboration of what we have stated. The Negroes, who form at least one-third of the inhabitants of the township of Colchester, attended the township meeting for the election of parish and township officers, and insisted upon their right to vote, which was denied them by every individual white man at the meeting—the consequence of which was that the chairman of the meeting was prosecuted and thrown into heavy costs, which costs were paid by subscription from the white inhabitants, as well as many others. In the same township of Colchester the inhabitants have not been able to get schools in many school sections in consequence of the Negroes insisting on their right of sending their children to such schools. No white man will even act with them in any capacity; this fact is so glaring that no sheriff in this province would dare to summon colored men to do jury duty. That such things have been done in other parts of the British Dominions we are well aware of but we are convinced that the Canadians will never tolerate such conduct."

{The above extreme views fail to present the true situation. Negroes did occasionally do jury duty and held some minor offices. The justice of Canadian law is indicated by the punishment that fell upon the individual mentioned in the above resolution who discriminated against Negro voters.}

The *Amherstburg Courier* of January 12, 1850, says that "the white inhabitants are fast leaving the vicinity of the proposed colored settlement (the Elgin settlement) for the United States" and adds: "The colored company is about to be disbanded at Thorold. The western district will, no doubt, be their future place of abode should the Elgin Association carry out their designs. It appears from the advertisement that Raleigh is to be settled by darkies of good moral and religious character already actual settlers, thus leaving the runaway, worthless majority as well as all newcomers to prey upon the community at large."

[15] Howe, *Refugees*, p. 58.

[16] Howe, *Refugees*, pp. 58 and 75-77.

[17] Drew, *Refugee*, p. 349.

[18] Howe, *Refugees*, p. 61.

[19] "The refugees for the most part live in small, tidy houses; not shanties, with old hats sticking out of broken windows. Their habitations are not filthy huts, in filthy grounds, but comfortable dwellings, in good repair. Many are owned by the occupants. They have little gardens, which seem well cared for. This is the case not only in the Colonies, as they are called, where the form and dimensions of the houses are prescribed by the Company, but in those places where the refugees are entirely free to live as they choose. In the outskirts of Chatham and other large places are scores of small two-story houses, with garden lots, owned and inhabited by refugees who came to the country penniless.

"We visited many of these houses, and found that the decencies of life are well observed, and that the comforts of life are not wanting. Cooking, eating and sleeping are not done in the same room, but in separate ones. They are tidily furnished; and some have carpets on the floors; and curtains at the windows. It is pleasant to see the feeble dawnings of taste in rude pictures, and simple attempts at ornament.

"The tables are decently spread, and plentifully supplied. It is evident that they spend more money upon their households than foreign emigrants do. They live better; and they clothe their children better. They say, indeed, that this is the reason they do not lay up so much money as many Irish and Germans do." Howe, *Refugees*, pp. 63-64.

[20] "The soil of Malden seems superior to that of Colchester and improves, on approaching Amherstburg, to the finest quality. In both townships there are a good many people of color who generally rent the farms on which they

reside or obtain so many years' possession on condition of clearing a certain extent of wood. A considerable amount of tobacco is here grown, chiefly by the black population." Shirreff, *A tour through North America*, Edinburgh, 1835, p. 207.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Mentions of “Ibid.” in the footnotes have been replaced with the full citation.

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[The end of *Amherstburg, Terminus of the Underground Railroad* by Fred Landon]