

*In An Old Ontario
Cemetery*

Fred Landon

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In An Old Ontario Cemetery

By FRED LANDON, Dalhousie Review, Volume V, 1926

*Farewell, old master,
Don't come after me.
I'm on my way to Canada
Where coloured men are free.*

—Refrain of old negro song.

Anthony Burns, the fugitive slave whose case caused Boston to riot in 1854, and whose surrender to his master in the South cost the United States Government forty thousand dollars, is buried in the old cemetery at St. Catharines, Ontario. Jerry McHenry lies in an unmarked grave at Kingston, while at Syracuse, N.Y., an endowment provides that every five years there shall be a public lecture delivered that shall tell the story of the events in which he figured on the first day of October in the year 1851. In Kent County, in western Ontario, there are graves of men who knew John Brown of Harper's Ferry fame, and talked with him when he came to Canada in May of 1858. They were black men, and there were black men with him at Harper's Ferry on that Sunday night in October, 1859, when he challenged the whole United States on the issue of slavery.

They sleep in unmarked graves for the most part, these negroes who sought freedom, and whose miseries were occasionally displayed in some sensational court case when the Fugitive Slave Law was in force. The stone that marks Anthony Burns's grave is broken into pieces, but the inscription is easily read:

In Memoriam
Rev. Anthony Burns
The fugitive slave of the Boston riots, 1854.
Pastor of Zion Baptist Church.
Born in Virginia, May 31, 1834.

Died in the Triumph of Faith in St. Catharines,
July 27th, A.D. 1862.

The city of Boston ought to restore that broken stone, because it commemorates a great day in Boston's history. Burns was the last fugitive

slave ever seized on the soil of Massachusetts. His case made the Fugitive Slave Law a dead letter as far as that State was concerned. Moreover, the case aided in making the obnoxious law a dead letter in other States as well. As for Burns himself, there was scarcely a chance that he would be freed after his arrest on the evening of May 24, 1854. He was a runaway from a Virginia plantation, his master had found him, and the law itself was watertight. Did it not forbid a jury trial? Did it not refuse the slave a chance to defend himself? Did it not even offer a premium to the court to restore the property to its owner? President Fillmore had signed the Bill in September, 1850, and there had been much rejoicing in the South when it became law. A Washington editor stated that he could fill forty-eight columns of his paper with expressions of joy and congratulation from the slave States. The South failed, however, to take into account the effect that this law would have upon Northern sentiment. In the end it was a disastrous piece of legislation for the slave-holding States.

A young Boston lawyer came into the court-room on the morning of May 25, when the negro Burns was before the Commissioner. Richard H. Dana was his name, and but for his coming the court proceedings would have been swift and sure. He offered his services to the negro, but Burns was afraid that intervention would only make his situation worse. "It is of no use," he said; "they will swear to me and get me back; and if they do, I shall fare worse if I resist."

Then there came others into the court, Theodore Parker among them. Parker talked to the fugitive, and urged him to accept the offices of Dana. The negro was apparently stupefied with fear, but in the end he agreed to let the lawyer plead for him. This was on a Thursday, and a postponement was made to the following Monday. Within a few hours inflammatory handbills were on the streets, and on Friday morning there was a call for a public meeting of protest to be held in Faneuil Hall that evening. It was a mob that gathered, and those who addressed them were artists at stirring passion. "See to it," said Wendell Phillips, "that tomorrow, in the streets of Boston, you ratify the verdict of Faneuil Hall, that Anthony Burns has no master but his God." Theodore Parker followed, with words that were plainly meant to incite violence. "I am an old man," he said; "I have not seen a great many deeds done for liberty. I ask you, are we to have deeds as well as words?"

These were dangerous sentiments to express before an audience of the mood of that Boston gathering. There was a tumult that neither Phillips nor Parker could stay. Straight to the court-house went the mob, and there found action already under way. A party led by Thomas W. Higginson was using a

large beam in an effort to break down the door and release the negro fugitive. The door was smashed in, but in the confusion one man was killed, and Higginson himself was wounded. A military force took things in charge the next day, and from that time matters proceeded in a regularly legal fashion. Burns was brought up for examination, and in due course ordered to be returned to his owner.

Then came the last and most impressive part of the whole affair. Through streets that had been cleared by the military and that were lined with soldiers, there passed one of the strangest processions that American history records. Preceded by a force of artillery and marines and a civil posse of one hundred and twenty-five men, there passed along a shuffling frightened negro. That was Anthony Burns. Behind him marched more marines and more police. Fifty thousand people who stood on the line of march hissed, groaned, and cried "Shame." Windows were draped in black, church bells tolled, and at one point in the procession's route there was a coffin suspended on which were the words "The Funeral of Liberty." In such manner Boston expressed its opinion of the Fugitive Slave Law, expressed it so forcibly that there was never another fugitive case in the State.

In due time Burns was ransomed, sent to school and college, and eventually settled in St. Catharines, Ontario, as pastor of the little coloured Baptist church. There he died in the second year of the war, forgotten in the great events that were then taking place. There is one family in St. Catharines which still treasures his memory, because the aged mother was one of his congregation, and played the organ at a memorial service that was held after his death.

* * * * *

This story of Anthony Burns has been recalled because his was the most dramatic episode in connection with the enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. The story of Jerry McHenry, however, is almost as well known to students of American history. He was arrested at Syracuse on the first day of October, 1851, claimed by a Missourian as his slave. The little city was full of people that day, for the county Agricultural Society was in session, and the Liberty Party was holding its annual convention. Jerry McHenry made a bold attempt at escape, which was foiled, but word was soon passed around, and that night the police office where he was confined was attacked by a mob headed by two quite respectable abolitionists, Gerrit Smith and Rev. Samuel J. May. The mob battered in the door, overpowered the guard and seized the prisoner. He was quickly removed to another part of

the city, secreted for a few days, and then sent safely through to Canada. He died in Kingston in 1853.

The case of Anthony Burns was by no means the first to excite Boston sympathy. In February, 1851, there was another famous case, that of a negro known as Shadrack. When he was taken up as a runaway, George Ticknor Curtis, acting as his counsel, secured an adjournment of three days. There was official as well as unofficial defiance of the Fugitive Slave Law in the State of Massachusetts even at that time, the use of the jails for imprisonment of fugitives being forbidden. Shadrack was being detained, therefore, in the Federal court-room in the court-house. Into this room a mob of coloured men came, carried off the fugitive, and he too was recorded as "gone to Canada." Theodore Parker was so thrilled by the rescue that he wrote in his diary: "I think it is the most noble deed done in Boston since the destruction of the tea in 1773."

That same year saw also the Gorsuch affray in Lancaster County, Pa. Gorsuch, a Maryland planter, came with his two sons, searching for two slaves who had been missing for three years. He had his warrants in order, and all three were well armed. They proceeded to the home of a negro family named Parker, where they supposed the runaways were hidden, and broke into the lower part of the dwelling. The negroes thereupon barricaded themselves on the upper floor, and sounded a horn to attract help. This was quickly forthcoming, upwards of one hundred men arriving armed with weapons of every description. Among them were some Quakers, then as always foes of slavery. There were hot words, then firing and fighting, in which the elder Gorsuch was killed and one of his boys wounded. No other casualties occurred. There followed treason trials in which Castner Hanaway, one of the Quakers, was the central figure. He was defended by Thad Stevens, and the jury speedily returned a verdict of not guilty. One negro was placed on trial, and also acquitted. The other negroes had disappeared, Parker and two others arriving at Kingston, Canada, ten days after the affray. Mrs. Parker joined them a few months later and the party spent the winter in Toronto, going on in the spring to the Elgin settlement for refugees, in Kent County, near the present city of Chatham. There they were still living as late as 1866, when Parker contributed his narrative of the Gorsuch tragedy to *The Atlantic Monthly*.

The list of Fugitive Slave Law cases to which the postscript "Gone to Canada" could be added might be much extended. Canadian correspondence of Garrison's *Liberator* and other anti-slavery journals furnishes many an episode of those troubled times. It had not needed the Fugitive Slave Law, of

course, to make Canada known, since slaves had been making their way thither from the very beginning of the century. But the law of 1850 turned what had been but a trickling stream into a black flood that poured over the border between 1850 and 1860. There had been those in earlier days who dreamed of Canada as a land where great numbers of black people might be colonized, as the American Colonization Society was trying to plant settlement in Liberia. Benjamin Lundy had this in mind when he came to Upper Canada in January 1832, and traversed the western part of the province between Niagara and Detroit. His journal gives a lively picture of the journey across country as viewed from the top of a stage-coach. When he came to the village of London, he turned north to visit a negro settlement known as Wilberforce, and he was greatly pleased with it. In the articles that subsequently appeared in his newspaper, *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, he warmly commended Upper Canada as a home for refugees from the South. The Wilberforce colony was itself a by-product of severe laws against the free negroes, enforced by the State of Ohio, which drove several hundreds of these people out of Cincinnati about the year 1829. It was never more than a small community, but there are many references to it in the narratives of travellers. Appeals were made on behalf of the settlement in England and in the United States, and it was even proposed to establish a college there for the training of coloured youth. All these plans, however, fell through, and to-day the settlement is forgotten.

The American abolitionists were, of course, naturally interested in the refugee colonies in Canada, and several of them visited the country to see for themselves what happened when black men and women were entirely free. Levi Coffin, commonly regarded as the head of the Underground Railroad system, came to Canada in the fall of 1844. At Sandwich, on the Detroit river, he had opportunity to see the impartiality of Canadian justice in the matter of a man's colour:

The Queen's Court was in session at Sandwich while we were there, and a white man was on trial for having, under the inducement of a bribe, decoyed a fugitive across the river into the hands of his master. We went into court and listened for a time with much interest to the lawyers pleading. We heard Colonel Prince reaffirm the proud boast of England, that the moment a fugitive sets his foot on British soil his shackles fell off and he was free. We afterwards learned that a heavy penalty of fine and imprisonment was placed on the culprit.

William Lloyd Garrison crossed the Detroit river in 1853, when the movement into Canada was at its height, but he saw only the border refugee settlements. Had he gone farther inland, he would have encountered the most interesting of all the negro settlements, that known as the Elgin Association of Buxton. This was founded in 1848 by Rev. William King, a Scottish clergyman who had gone to the State of Louisiana and there, by inheritance through his wife, become the owner of fifteen slaves. Unable to satisfy his conscience by any arrangement that was possible in a slave State, he finally brought them to Canada, and determined to devote his life to educating them for citizenship in the new land. He secured a large grant of crown lands, and the colony which began with his own group quickly gained by accessions of refugees until it numbered several hundred souls. The families were placed on fifty-acre lots, which they were required to clear, and on which they must build a house of approved pattern. Dr. Samuel G. Howe visited the place in 1864 as a representative of the Freedmen's Inquiry Commission, and in his report he says:

Buxton is certainly a very interesting place. Sixteen years ago it was a wilderness. Now, good highways are laid out in every direction through the forest; and by their side, standing back thirty-three feet from the road, are about two hundred cottages, all built on the same pattern, all looking neat and comfortable. Around each one is a cleared space, of several acres, which is well cultivated. The fences are in good order; the barns seem well filled; and cattle and horses and pigs and poultry abound. There are signs of industry and thrift and comfort everywhere; signs of intemperance, of idleness, of want, nowhere. There is no tavern and no grogery, but there is a chapel and a school-house. Most interesting of all are the inhabitants. Twenty years ago most of them were slaves, who owned nothing, not even their children. Now they own themselves, they own their houses and farms, and they have their wives and children about them. They are enfranchised citizens of a government which protects their rights. They have the great essentials for human happiness, something to love, something to do, and something to hope for; and if they are not happy, it is their own fault.

Buxton is still a negro community, probably Canada's most distinctly negro village. Rev. William King, who spent most of his life there, is buried in the neighboring city of Chatham. There were several other colonies projected, but most of them were like Wilberforce, large in conception but

small in achievement. Henry Bibb, a very able negro who had considerable reputation as an orator, had large plans for a colony on the Detroit river and was able to enlist considerable support from the State of Michigan, but the difficulties were too great. Bibb is best known as the editor of a bright little paper published at Sandwich in the early fifties and bearing the name *The Voice of the Fugitive*. It was well edited and well printed, and is a mine of information on the conditions existing among the fugitive negroes in the vicinity of the Detroit river. Bibb was sincerely desirous to see the condition of his people improved, and he believed that the proper way to go about effecting an improvement was to stir within them feelings of self-respect. He was at all times hostile to begging and appeals to charity, except for the sick and aged. For the able-bodied, hard work was his policy, and he preached it in every issue of his paper. He continually urged the fugitives to go on the land, where he knew they would have some chance of independence.

Bibb was not the only prominent negro fugitive who held to the idea of settlement on the land. Josiah Henson, better known than Bibb because of his widely-read biography, had the same idea though he accomplished but little. Henson was the founder of what was known as the Dawn settlement, and in his later life was received by Queen Victoria while on a visit to England. His own claim that he was the original of Mrs. Stowe's "Uncle Tom" probably has little foundation, though he may have suggested some parts of that remarkable piece of propaganda. Henson's own story of his life, in slavery and in freedom, went through several editions, and is one of the most interesting of the narratives written by fugitives.

There are dark sides to the picture, as well as bright. The condition of many of those who came into Canada was pitiable, and was not greatly improved by their coming. Some were sick, some were unable to stand the climate, some were unwilling to work. There was a disposition to depend upon charity, rather than to undertake seriously the making of a livelihood. The American Missionary Association of New York sent in a body of workers after 1848 who found the Canada Mission, "one of the most unpromising fields of labour under their care." At times the Mission station at Amherstburg would be filled to overflowing with men, women and children, newly-arrived, for whom food, shelter and employment must be found. The State of Michigan was anti-slavery in sentiment, and its people were generous in supplying aid, an Association for the express purpose of aiding the Canadian fugitives being formed in 1851. Money and supplies of all kinds were collected and forwarded to meet the needs; one noble woman, Mrs. Laura Haviland, came to Canada and spent some years among the black people as a teacher and missionary.

The presence of these thousands of black fugitives in the province was bound to have its effect in creating anti-slavery sentiment. The founding of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada followed upon the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law, and it continued active until the close of the Civil War. Included in its executive were Rev. Dr. Willis, Principal of Knox College; George Brown, editor of *The Globe*; and Oliver Mowat, afterwards Premier of Ontario. The Society was in constant communication with the anti-slavery forces in the United States, and gave much assistance to the fugitives in Canada. Canadian sentiment generally was anti-slavery, and the propaganda of the Society probably had something to do with creating this sentiment. When the Civil War came, the Canadian enlistments in the Northern armies were large, totalling, according to an estimate that Sir John Macdonald caused to be made, approximately forty thousand.

It may properly be urged that the geographical location of Canada had something to do with breaking down slavery in the United States. Slave property could never be secure as long as the Canadian provinces would admit and shelter runaways. The Fugitive Slave Law might be operative on one side of the Detroit river, but it did not apply on the other side of the river. Those constant references in slave songs to the crossing of Jordan may have more than a spiritual significance. Anyone who will examine the collection of negro songs used by the Fisk Jubilee Singers will be struck by the numerous references to the crossing of rivers, stealing through woods, facing travel difficulties of every kind. These were ideas that were deeply impressed upon the negro mind. It required great fortitude to achieve freedom, and the lessons were easily applied to spiritual things. Even to-day, these same ideas are found recurring in the religious expression of negroes, in Canada. In slave days these crude songs may have been one of the means by which knowledge of the land of freedom to the North was extended. There are a number of interesting slave songs in which the idea of freedom in Canada is prominent, the best known probably being "Away to Canada." The version given below, and which has no doubt been somewhat refined by the editor, was taken from Henry Bibb's paper, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, a file of which for 1851-52 is in the library of the University of Michigan:

"Away to Canada"
(Tune—Oh Susannah).

I'm on my way to Canada,
That cold and dreary land;
The dire effects of slavery

I can no longer stand.
My soul is vexed within me
To think that I'm a slave,
I've now resolved to strike the blow
For freedom or the grave.

O Righteous Father,
Wilt thou not pity me,
And aid me on to Canada,
Where coloured men are free.

I heard the Queen of England say
If we would all forsake
Our native land of slavery
And come across the Lake,
That she was standing on the shore
With arms extended wide
To give us all a peaceful home
Beyond the rolling tide.

Farewell, old master,
That is enough for me—
I'm going straight to Canada
Where coloured men are free.

I've served my master all my days
Without a dime's reward,
And now I'm forced to run away
To flee the lash abhorred.
The hounds are baying on my track—
The master's just behind,
Resolved that he will bring me back
Before I cross the line.

Farewell, old master,
Don't come after me,
I'm on my way to Canada
Where coloured men are free.

Grieve not, my wife, grieve not for me;
Oh, do not break my heart;
For nought but cruel slavery
Would cause me to depart.
If I should stay to quell your grief,

Your grief I would augment;
For no one knows the day that we
Asunder may be rent.

Oh, Susannah,
Don't you cry for me,
I'm going up to Canada
Where coloured men are free.

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.

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[The end of *In An Old Ontario Cemetery* by Fred Landon]