

*Canadian Negroes and
the Rebellion of
1837*

Fred Landon

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CANADIAN NEGROES AND THE REBELLION OF 1837

By

Fred Landon

There are a number of interesting references in the literature of the times to the part played by Negro refugees in defending the frontier of Canada during the troubles of 1838. The outbreaks in both Upper and Lower Canada in 1837 were followed by a series of petty attacks along the border in which American sympathizers participated. Sandwich, on the Detroit River, was one of the objectives of the attacking parties and there were also threats on the Niagara River frontier. One of the parties of “rebels” had taken possession of Navy Island, in the Niagara River, and a small ship, the *Caroline*, was used for conveying supplies. A Canadian party under command of Colonel MacNab crossed the river, seized the ship and after setting it afire allowed it to drift over the falls. This gave rise to an international issue and was the occasion of much bluster on both sides of the line that happily ended as bluster. All along the border on the American side there were “Hunter’s Lodges”^[1] organized during 1838 and this movement, joined with the widespread political disaffection, made the times unhappy for the Canadian provinces.

Sir Francis Bond Head, who was Governor of Upper Canada when the troubles of 1837 began and whose conduct did not tend materially to quelling the unrest, wrote his “apologia” a couple of years later and in it he speaks of the loyalty of the colored people, almost all of whom were refugees from slavery. He says:

“When our colored population were informed that American citizens, sympathizing with their sufferings, had taken violent possession of Navy Island, for the double object of liberating them from the domination of British rule, and of imparting to them the blessings of republican institutions, based upon the principle that

all men are born equal, did our colored brethren hail their approach? No, on the contrary, they hastened as volunteers in wagon-loads to the Niagara frontier to beg from me permission that, in the intended attack upon Navy Island, they might be permitted to form the forlorn hope—in short they supplicated that they might be allowed to be foremost to defend the glorious institutions of Great Britain.”^[2]

Rev. J. W. Loguen, in the narrative of his life, says that he was urgently solicited by the Canadian government to accept the captaincy of a company of black troops who had been enrolled during the troubles. As the affair was then about all over by the joint effort of the Canadian and United States governments, he did not accept the offer but he makes this interesting comment:

“The colored population of Canada at that time was small compared to what it now is; nevertheless, it was sufficiently large to attract the attention of the government. They were almost to a man fugitives from the States. They could not, therefore, be passive when the success of the invaders would break the only arm interposed for their security, and destroy the only asylum for African freedom in North America. The promptness with which several companies of blacks were organized and equipped, and the desperate valor they displayed in this brief conflict, are an earnest of what may be expected from the swelling thousands of colored fugitives collecting there, in the event of a war between the two countries.”^[3]

Josiah Henson, founder of the Dawn colony in Upper Canada and famous as the reputed “original” of Mrs. Stowe’s Uncle Tom, says in his narrative that he was captain of the second company of Essex colored volunteers and that he and his men assisted in the defence of Fort Malden (Amherstburg) from Christmas 1837 to May of 1838. He says further that he assisted in the capture of the schooner *Anne*, an affair which took place on January 9, 1838.^[4]

John MacMullen, in his *History of Canada*, says that among the troops on the border during 1838 “were two hundred Indians from Delaware, and a body of colored men, settlers in the western part of the province, the poor hunted fugitives from American slavery, who had at length found liberty and security under the British flag.”^[5]

A rather interesting aftermath of the rebellion is contained in an item appearing in the *Amherstburg Courier* of March 10, 1849, reporting a meeting of Negroes in Sandwich township to protest against the Rebellion Losses Bill.^[6] Colonel Prince was thanked for his opposition to the measure.^[7]

Eighty years after the rebellion the Negro men of Canada were again called upon to fight, this time in another land and in a conflict that was destined to affect every race and every land. The service that was rendered in the Canadian army by the colored companies of pioneers will some day receive due recognition at the hands of an historian. In the meantime, it is not forgotten by the people of Canada.

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- [1] A convention of Hunter's Lodges of Ohio and Michigan, held at Cleveland, September 16-22, 1838, was attended by seventy delegates.
- [2] Head, Sir, F. B., *A Narrative* (London, 1839), page 392.
- [3] Loguen, J. W., *The Rev. J. W. Loguen as a Slave and as a Freeman* (Syracuse, 1859), pp. 343-345.
- [4] *An autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson*, "Uncle Tom," from 1789 to 1881 (London, Ont., 1881), page 177. A sketch of Josiah Henson appeared in THE JOURNAL OF NEGRO HISTORY for January, 1918 (Vol. III, no. 1, pp. 1-21). This is condensed from his autobiography which appeared in several editions.
- [5] MacMullen, John, *History of Canada from its first Discovery to the Present Times* (Brockville, Ont., 1868), pp. 459-460. He gives as his authority Radcliff's despatch, "10th January, 1838."
- [6] The Rebellion Losses Bill proposed compensation for those who had sustained losses in Lower Canada (Quebec) during the troubles of 1837. It was fiercely

opposed in Upper Canada (Ontario) by the element that regarded the French as “aliens” and “rebels.” When Lord Elgin, the Governor, gave his assent to the bill in 1849 there were riots in Montreal in which the Parliament Buildings were burned.

[7]

Col. Prince was one of the leaders in the defense of the Canadian frontier along the Detroit River during 1838, afterwards a member of the Canadian Parliament. During the troubles of 1838 he ordered the shooting of four prisoners without the form of a trial. The act was condemned by Lord Brougham and others with great severity and is one dark spot on the records of the Canadian forces during the trying period.

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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