

## Even in Missisquoi! Slavery in Canadian History

Living as we do, shoulder to shoulder, with our flamboyant American neighbours, it seems we Canadians always have one ear tuned to the south. Ask a Canadian what he knows about Black history, for example, and chances are that he'll point reflexively at Uncle Sam : plantation slave owners and northern abolitionists, the civil rights movement and the Ku Klux Klan, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X - most of us are reasonably fluent in this basic vocabulary of Black history - *in America!* The apparently lesser-known fact remains though, that in *Canada* slavery was alive and well from the late 17th century until its final prohibition in 1833.

For practical reasons, both France and Britain left the institution of slavery intact in their distant colonies long after having banned it in their homelands. The manpower needed in carving 'civilized' settlements out of foreign wildernesses made forced labour a desirable evil. By 1685, France had formulated a series of regulations (called the *code noir*) controlling and managing the handling of slaves in her colonized territories. The Black Code not only enforced elaborate restrictions on the rights of those in bondage, it also stipulated that they be taught the Roman Catholic, and not the Protestant religion. As it happens, the installation of the Code coincided quite closely with King Louis XIV's receipt of a pertinent petition from New France; the colonists of French Canada were requesting permission to import slaves from West Africa. When the British seized New France almost a century later, they were rather accommodating victors in at least one respect: the articles of capitulation assured the French that they would be permitted to retain their Negro (and Amerindian) slaves or to sell them at will.

While slavery in Canada amounted to a mere fraction of its American counterpart, it continued to thrive here under the British regime. During the American Revolution, the British played both sides of the fence on the slavery issue. Anxious to draw any potential Loyalists firmly onto their side, British negotiators promised loyal American slave owners the right to keep their slaves on the one hand while, on the other, offering freedom to any slave who'd leave a Patriot master and join the Loyalist ranks. Three thousand free Afro-Americans joined the Loyalist migration to Nova Scotia in the 1780s; 1500 of them settled in the town of Birchwood, N.S. forming what would be, at the time, the largest community of free Blacks anywhere in North America. Hundreds of slaves, as well, accompanied their Loyalist masters to safety in the northern British territories. Of these, three hundred are thought to have remained in Lower Canada (later to be the Province of Quebec).

There is some evidence pointing to the existence of slavery in early Missisquoi, though how widespread it was remains to be determined. The remarks of the Reverend Charles C. Cotton, who arrived at Missisquoi Bay in 1804 and homesteaded in Dunham, suggest a minimal representation of Blacks in the area. In a letter to England dated January 1810, Cotton writes:

"...If you engage (a man) for a whole year...you pay about eighty or ninety dollars. You may judge by this, dear Father, how very expensive is the price of labour here, and not only that but the great difficulty there is of procuring good servants at all. It is pretty much the same thing all over Canada & thro' all the States where they have not many slaves. Here one but seldom sees a Negro, and the few there are, are free men." (*Letters: C.C. Cotton; MHS Volume 12, p.96*)

Three years prior to Cotton's observations, the business of buying and selling humans had been banned in the British Empire by the *Abolition of the Slave Trade Act* of 1807. While slavery, per se, would not be outlawed for another twenty-six years, the 1807 Act would have made the legal acquisition of slaves more difficult, perhaps accounting in part for the shortage of labour bemoaned by the good Reverend.

## Tips from the Archives

When browsing through one of the many periodicals to which the Archives Department subscribes, I came across an interesting article explaining a quick guide to dating photographs. Many of us have photographs handed down to us, generation to generation, but unfortunately dates are never written on them. There is a process you can follow to determine the dates, but keep in mind, as with everything else, there are always exceptions.

*Judy Antle, Archivist*

**Women:** If there are females in the picture, look at the hairstyle (this applies to both children and adults): in many cases this alone can give you a date. From the earliest days of photography, the 1840's, until about 1870, women's hair was always parted in the middle and tied or pinned at the back. This style largely disappeared by 1890. From about 1870, hairstyles changed rapidly. Ringlets were fashionable in the late 1870s and again around 1900, but only during the earlier period was the hair parted in the middle. Dresses are the next most important clue. This is almost the only way of dating photos (of women) prior to 1870. A heavy bow on a dress was a feature throughout the 1870s. The "sailor" top to the dress is unusual on girls though boys were often photographed in sailor outfits. Dress styles changed at least as often as they do today.

**Men:** Pictures of men are far harder to date than women. Men are usually photographed wearing a suit. While suits from the 1840s are different from those of the 1930s, the changes are far more gradual and have a greater overlap of styles than dresses. The same applies to hairstyles and facial hair.

The easiest way to date photographs of men is neckwear. Unlike suits and hair, neckwear did change fairly frequently. Ties, with a small knot as we use them today, are not seen before about 1900. Ties with a very large knot first appear in about 1870 but are out of fashion by 1900. Small bow ties are popular at all periods from the 1840s to 1930s but large were out of fashion by 1870. Beards are only helpful if they are of the "untidy" type. These were popular in the period 1860-1880.

**Smiling:** Having your photograph taken was a pretty formal affair, almost always done in a studio, until about 1900 when amateur photography came into being. A photograph was for posterity; life was serious and smiling is almost unknown before 1900.

**Conclusion:** The girl's hairstyle is the major indicator, confirmed by the bow on the dress and the men's hairstyles: this picture was taken between 1875 and 1880.

*(H. Moorshead—Family Chronicle March/April 2003)*



## We Like Hearing from You!!

Is there a topic you wish we'd cover in the newsletter—perhaps something about the Museum or Archives you'd like to know more about? Or do *you* have an interesting anecdote from Missisquoi's past which you'd like to share? Maybe you need help from our 500-strong readership to solve a history mystery that's puzzling you? Whatever the case, the Publications Committee welcomes your communications, and will do our best to address your questions and suggestions to your satisfaction. Contact us at: [mhsarchives@globetrotter.net](mailto:mhsarchives@globetrotter.net) or write us care of the Museum (address on cover page).

The Publications Committee is: Judy Antle, Archivist; Micheline Fecteau Côté, Director; Heather Darch, Curator; Ginette Gendreau, Director; Anne Lipowski, Director/Committee Head.