

## The Queen's Bush Settlement, 1820-1867

On August 2, 2008, the Ontario Heritage Trust, the Wellington County Historical Society and the Township of Mapleton Historical Society unveiled a provincial plaque at Glen Allan Park in Glen Allan, Ontario, to commemorate the Queen's Bush Settlement, 1820-1867.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

### **THE QUEEN'S BUSH SETTLEMENT, 1820-1867**

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the vast unsettled area between Waterloo County and Lake Huron was known as the "Queen's Bush." More than 1,500 free and formerly enslaved Blacks pioneered scattered farms throughout the Queen's Bush, starting in about 1820. Many settled along the Peel and Wellesley Township border, with Glen Allan, Hawkesville and Wallenstein as important centers. Working together, these industrious and self-reliant settlers built churches, schools, and a strong and vibrant community life. American missionaries taught local Black children at the Mount Hope and Mount Pleasant Schools. In the 1840s the government ordered the district surveyed and many of the settlers could not afford to purchase the land they had laboured so hard to clear. By 1850 migration out of the Queen's Bush had begun. Today African Canadians whose ancestors pioneered the Queen's Bush are represented in communities across Ontario.

### **L'ÉTABLISSEMENT DE QUEEN'S BUSH, 1820-1867**

Au début du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, la vaste région inoccupée située entre le comté de Waterloo et le lac Huron était connue sous le nom de « Queen's Bush ». Vers 1820, plus de 1 500 esclaves noirs affranchis commencèrent à fonder des fermes disséminées sur l'ensemble de Queen's Bush. Bon nombre d'entre eux s'installèrent à la limite du canton de Peel et Wellesley, avec Glen Allan, Hawkesville et Wallenstein comme centres névralgiques. Ensemble, ces colons travailleurs et autonomes construisirent églises et écoles, et créèrent une communauté forte et dynamique. Des missionnaires américains éduquèrent les enfants noirs de la région dans les écoles de Mount Hope et de Mount Pleasant. Dans les années 1840, le gouvernement ordonna l'arpentage de la région, et de nombreux colons n'eurent pas les moyens d'acheter les terres qu'ils avaient défrichées au prix de tant d'efforts. Dès 1850, l'exode de Queen's Bush était entamé. De nos jours, les descendants afro-canadiens des pionniers de Queen's Bush vivent dans les collectivités de tout l'Ontario.

## **Historical background**

### **Introduction**

The Queen's Bush was a vast unsurveyed tract north of Waterloo Township and south of Lake Huron. Here was established the largest and by far the most widely scattered of all Upper Canada's Black settlements. It was also the first to which fugitive slaves from the American South migrated in large numbers. The conditions were extremely harsh, even for 19th-century Canada, and there was almost nothing in the way of either an economic or a social infrastructure to support the settlement. Despite this, by 1840 the area had the largest Black population in Upper Canada, containing at its peak between 1,500 and 2,000 people.<sup>1</sup> They established churches, schools and a vibrant and stable community life. Huge Emancipation Day celebrations were held each year on August 1 at Elmira and Hawkesville in Waterloo County.<sup>2</sup> However, the Queen's Bush settlement was destined to be short-lived; owing to the lack of resources and poor access to markets, few farmers were able to purchase their land when it finally was put up for sale in 1848. By the 1850s, migration out of the Queen's Bush had begun, although some African-Canadian families continued to live there well into the 20th century.

### **Early settlement**

Starting in about 1820 with lands granted to Black Loyalists near Fergus, African-Canadians and African-American immigrants, both fugitive slave and free, began migrating into the then-unbroken wilderness of the Queen's Bush. Apart from veterans such as Richard Pierpoint of Butler's Rangers, few had resources to purchase farms or livestock and equipment.<sup>3</sup> But they dreamed of independent land ownership. Some – including Paola Brown, who emigrated from Cincinnati at the time the Wilberforce Settlement was created in 1829 – settled near Winterbourne in Woolwich Township and founded Colbornesburg, which had a church and schoolhouse by 1832.<sup>4</sup> Others established homes northeast of Waterloo at Conestoga.<sup>5</sup> But the majority settled along the boundary between Peel Township (Wellington County) and Wellesley Township (Waterloo County).

The Queen's Bush remained an unorganized territory until the late 1840s. Much of the land was Clergy Reserve set aside when Lieutenant Governor Simcoe had military surveyors lay out the new province of Upper Canada in 1792-93. Cultivation, rental or sale of Clergy Reserve lands was intended to support the Anglican Church. Policies changed by the fourth decade of the 19th century, and these lands were put up for sale in the late 1840s. Since land was not available for purchase in the earlier years, Black settlers in the Queen's Bush squatted, as did many white families, and set about carving farms out of the bush.

One of the early Black settlers, John Little, who eventually became a prosperous farmer, described his experience of arrival to the area in 1842:

Then we marched right into the wilderness, where there were thousands of acres of woods which the chain had never run around since Adam. At night we made a fire, and cut down a tree, and put up slats like a wigwam. This was in February, when the snow was two feet deep.<sup>6</sup>

Clearing the land was a desperately difficult task. Dense mixed forests and thick underbrush covered the landscape, and bears and wolves were prevalent, especially in the early years. Every inch of soil had to be cleared before planting could begin. People sowed their crops between the stumps, cultivating with heavy hoes and hand rakes. Even experienced farmers found the work hard unless they could afford oxen, the most effective means for breaking up the soil. Helping one another, and with seed and farm tools sometimes borrowed from local white settlers, including Mennonites, farmers were able to clear and plant a few acres. Burning hardwood produced potash that was a marketable commodity.

Farms were often extremely isolated. Still, there was lots of wood to be had, and neat cabins soon dotted the clearings in the bush. Homes were built of logs and additions were made as needed. Men, women and children who had recently fled slavery fared the worst for they had no resources to purchase even the simplest tools, and hunger was their constant companion. Still they persevered, and some became prosperous farmers. A list of the Black settlers in Peel Township was included in Robert Kerr's Survey of 1843, transcribed from his Field Notes.

Thomas Smallwood, a Black abolitionist who visited in 1843, considered the Queen's Bush Settlement an example to all African-Americans of what they could do if they were provided the opportunity:

If the example of a few of my coloured brethren, whom I visited at the Queen's Bush, in 1843, was more generally followed by my coloured brethren in America, they would soon be worth something. Those men had settled there with no means whatever. They had to go fifteen miles out into the settlements, and there work for the farmers, a fortnight, to get provision sufficient to enable them to work one week in clearing their own land. And, while I was there, they were making their three meals a day on potatoes and salt; and this was their language to me, "friend Smallwood, you see how we have to live here, but we are willing to bear it, until we can get a foothold." I visited them again about three years after, the same men, some had four, some five, and some six hundred bushels of wheat in their barns, with a good portion of stock, and every thing else necessary for comfort around them. Thus, instead of having to go into the settlements to work for provision, they could hire men to work for them, and send their teams out with wheat, which brought them cash.<sup>7</sup>

Reverend William King, who visited in 1848, also wrote about conditions in the Queen's Bush area: "Without means, far from market, and bad roads, they could scarcely support themselves, still they bore up against these difficulties and struggled on with the hope that industry and perseverance would soon provide a comfortable home."<sup>8</sup> A letter in the *Provincial Freeman* of June 20, 1856, called the people of the Queen's Bush "alarmingly destitute." A series of poor harvests caused real hardship, with people resorting to eating wild plants such as ramp and cow cabbage.

### **Despite hardship, communities form**

Although in the early 1800s the majority of Black settlers were illiterate or nearly so, they were anxious to have their children educated. But in the southwestern part of Peel Township, education for Black children was difficult to acquire. They were generally excluded from white-run schools, and, despite a deep commitment to education on the part of African-Canadians as a whole, the labour of children was often needed on the farm.

American missionaries such as the Reverend William Raymond and his wife, Eliza, came to the Queen's Bush to provide an education for the Black children, starting in 1838. Fidelia Coburn, a singularly dedicated young woman from Maine who had taught at the British American Institute in Dresden in 1842, moved to the Queen's Bush in 1843. She started an eight by 14-foot log school,<sup>9</sup> which also served as her home and as an orphanage for several Black children, at Mount Pleasant Mission on Lot 13, west half at Concession 3. The Reverend Elias E. Kirkland, a Wesleyan Methodist preacher, and his wife, joined Coburn in 1845, and John S. Brookes of Massachusetts came in 1846 to open his own school four miles away at the Mount Hope Mission. In 1845-46, 225 children were enrolled in the two schools. Two sisters, Mary and Susan Teal, and a Wesleyan missionary named Melville Denlow, came later.<sup>10</sup>

Funds and goods to assist the settlers were sent through the Canada Mission (organized by the Reverend Hiram Wilson), and through the Wesleyan Methodist Church and the American Missionary Association. Some Blacks found the missionaries paternalistic, and not entirely honest in how they distributed bundles of clothing sent by American donors. In addition, the proud African-Canadians in the Queen's Bush took exception to being portrayed as impoverished and on the brink of starvation, tactics used by some of the missionaries in their lectures and articles to enhance the always-sporadic income their missions received. However, successful farmer John Little said that although he hated and feared whites when he arrived from slavery, "the feeling wore off through kindness that I received from some here, and from abolitionists who came over from the States to instruct us."<sup>11</sup>

### **The African-Canadian Church in the Queen's Bush**

Churches were constructed, including those at Yatton, Glen Allan and Wallenstein. These were not only religious centres for the widely dispersed populace, but also places for public meetings,

social occasions, and the creation of self-help and moral improvement societies such as temperance associations.

One of several denominations active in the Queen's Bush was the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), first organized in 1816 by the Reverend Richard Allen in Philadelphia. The Upper Canadian Conference was formed on July 21, 1840, at Toronto, with 12 churchmen in attendance. James Dorcey constructed a log AME church "south of the Conestoga River" in 1841. He farmed the north half of Lot 18, Concession 1, Peel Township.<sup>12</sup>

In 1844, Reverend Samuel H. Brown was assigned to the Queen's Bush. Originally from Maryland, he took the oath of allegiance to the Crown in 1842 from his residence in York County.<sup>13</sup> Brown would spend more than 40 years ministering to the local populace, constructing the Peel Township AME Church on his farm on Lot 16, Concession 4, of Peel Township. In 1856, the denomination would be renamed the British Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>14</sup>

The Reverend Samuel H. Brown was by all accounts an inspiring preacher. He was regularly assigned leadership roles at annual meetings of the AME. Camp meetings held on the Brown farm drew thousands of participants, white as well as Black.<sup>15</sup> Despite a decline in the local population through the 1850s, Brown's church boasted 165 members and 60 children in Sunday school by 1862, by which time a larger frame church was constructed near the original log building. Samuel H. Brown died in 1881 and was buried at the cemetery there.<sup>16</sup>

Three AME Annual Meetings were held at the Queen's Bush, the first in 1846. Among the several resolutions passed was one "prohibiting the use of the Canadian pulpits to slaveholders and their apologists."<sup>17</sup> The second was held on July 30, 1847. One of the preachers present was the Reverend Josiah Henson, who was received into the church at the 1841 AME meeting in Hamilton.<sup>18</sup> A third meeting in July 1853 saw the 70-member Peel Township AME congregations host 14 ministers, who "drafted resolutions recognizing Canada as a safe haven for fugitive slaves and urged parishioners to take the oath of allegiance to become British citizens."<sup>19</sup>

The first regular Baptist minister in the Queen's Bush was a Scot by the name of James Sims, whose family had settled as farmers in Peel. He served both Black and white parishioners as an itinerant preacher, although there was as yet no church building. One was eventually constructed at Glen Allan, but it always struggled, reporting only 12 members in 1857. A local Black, John Lawson, whose family were successful farmers in the area, ministered to their needs. The Wesleyan Methodist church was also active in the area, generally ministered to by white pastors.

### **Period of decline**

The Black communities of the Queen's Bush were short-lived. In the 1840s, the government ordered the district surveyed and many of the settlers could not afford to purchase the land they had laboured so hard to clear. Four petitions to the government resulted in eased payment schedules, but cash was scarce in the bush, and land agents worked on commission.<sup>20</sup> The more unscrupulous threatened the African-Canadians, and people were talked into selling their land, buildings and the crops in the field for next to nothing, or sometimes even into simply walking away.<sup>21</sup>

The enrolment at the two mission schools declined, and by 1849 Fidelia Coburn (by then Mrs. Brooks) recommended their merger with the newly-founded public school system. By 1850, a major migration out of the Queen's Bush had begun. The Mount Hope School closed in 1849 and the Mount Pleasant, then run by Susan Teal alone, closed in 1853. African-Canadians left the Queen's Bush and settled mainly in Guelph, Kitchener, Owen Sound, Collingwood, Niagara, St. Catharines, Buxton and Chatham.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the hardships, Black families continued to migrate into the Queen's Bush during the settlement's later years. Following the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, the entire community of Sandy Lake, Mercer County, Pennsylvania, moved to Canada. The Travis family, for example, settled in the Queen's Bush initially at Normanby Township, near Durham, prior to moving to Buxton in the 1860s.<sup>23</sup> Remaining settlers tended to become workers on the farms of white farmers, a practice that continued into living memory in the area.<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Despite the conditions, some farmers of the Queen's Bush did very well, retaining their land into the 20th century. But it would be a mistake to consider those who migrated out of the Queen's Bush to have failed in any way. Not only was their success impeded by circumstances of geography (access to mills and markets), the harsh climate, lack of roads and other services, an absence of public institutions, and the completely untamed nature of the wilderness into which these settlers inserted themselves, but the lands on which they chose to settle were not available for purchase.

In addition, there were some less-than-honest land agents that took advantage of vulnerable settlers. Norman Hisson, who lived at Glen Allan through the 1970s, said in an interview in the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* of July 20, 1979: "From what I was told [William Lawson and William Douglas] were about the only two of the original settlers who didn't get beaten one way or another on land deals." Some of the European settlers also cheated the Blacks. Norman Hisson, said in the same article, "I can remember my mother telling me stories . . . about how agents and other white people moved the [surveyors'] stakes at night."<sup>25</sup> Nor did the majority of

Blacks coming into the region have any resources on which to draw; they lacked money, tools, livestock and any means to acquire the same.

By any measure, these intrepid Black pioneers achieved much. They cleared vast acreages, constructed buildings, cut rudimentary roads, dammed streams, and added other improvements to farms from which succeeding waves of European settlers benefited. They formed stable families who lived in freedom, often for the first time. Men and women provided the necessities of life for the children and elderly relations. As an example, the aged Sophia Pooley, who had been a slave of Joseph Brant and had no relatives in the Queen's Bush, lived there because she knew she would be looked after. Facing tremendous odds, these industrious and self-reliant settlers<sup>26</sup> built schools and churches, developed social, intellectual, and moral self-help organizations, and united the communities that they formed around missionary and other causes. Emancipation Day was a time of great celebration, and religious revivals were held in the Queen's Bush as late as the 1880s.

The deepest significance of the Queen's Bush Black Settlement can be measured in the complex and supportive society these disenfranchised, usually illiterate, and profoundly oppressed people demonstrated they could create, given only liberty, a few acres of ground and an axe.



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<sup>1</sup> Linda Brown-Kubisch, "The Black Experience in the Queen's Bush," *Ontario History* 87, 2 (June 1996); "The Queen's Bush Settlement: Important Anti-Slavery Symbol," *Waterloo County Times* (Spring 1997); Peter Meyler, "The Queen's Bush Settlement," *Ontario Black History News* (Spring 1997), np. For original documentation of the population being between 1,500 and 2,000, see "Address of the Colored Inhabitants of Hamilton to His Excellency, the Earl of Elgin," *Guelph Herald, and Literary, Agricultural and Commercial Gazette*, vol. 1, no. 10, (Tues., Nov. 2, 1847), Guelph, Canada West.

<sup>2</sup> *Dumfries Reformer and Weekly Intelligencer*, Aug. 5, 1863, cited in Kubisch-Brown, *Queen's Bush Settlement*, 286n61.

<sup>3</sup> By about 1835, most Blacks in the Garafraxa settlement at Fergus had moved northwards to Priceville in rural Grey County. There they constructed the Durham Road, most of which is now Hwy. 4. Mistreated and discriminated against there, these families later moved to Collingwood and Owen Sound. See Peter and David Meyler, "Searching for Richard Pierpoint: A Stolen Life" (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1999), 109-112; David Meyler, "Strange Destiny: the Garafraxa Settlement of Richard Pierpoint, in *Wellington County History* 9 (1996), 66-71.

<sup>4</sup> *Colonial Advocate*, August 2, 1832; Linda Brown-Kubisch, *The Queen's Bush Settlement: Black Pioneers 1839-1865* (Natural Heritage Books, 2004), 26-31. See also Letter from Jackson & Howell to Mickel at Guelph, 11 April 1833, in Wellington County Archives. This refers to the colony at Colbornesburg that questions the morality of Paola Brown, "a Gentleman of Colour." (Illustration #1).



<sup>5</sup> Interview with William Jackson, in Drew, 189.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with John Little, Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee, Or A North Side View of Slavery* (Boston: John H. Jewell, 1856), 216.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Smallwood, *A Narrative of Thomas Smallwood (A Colored Man)* . . . (Toronto: James Stephens, 1851), 55.

<sup>8</sup> Rev. William King, *Ecclesiastical and Missionary Record V* (1848), 6-7, cited in Donald G. Simpson, *Under the North Star: Black Communities in Upper Canada*, ed. Paul E. Lovejoy (Trenton N.J.: Africa World Press, 2004), 183.

<sup>9</sup> 2.4 metres x 1.2 metres

<sup>10</sup> Linda Brown-Kubisch, "The Missionaries in the Black Settlement of the Queen's Bush," in *Wellington County History* 9 (1996), 72-88; The Queen's Bush Settlement, esp. Ch. 2; "The Queen's Bush Settlement," *Waterloo County Times* (Spring 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Interview with John Little, in Drew, 216-217; Brown-Kubisch, *Queen's Bush*, 100-103.

<sup>12</sup> *Der Morgenstern* (Berlin, Ont.), May 20, 1841. Dorsey farmed the north half of Lot 18, Concession 1, Peel Township. His farm could well have been where the church was built, and interestingly, the 1877 Atlas of Wellington County shows a schoolhouse at the boundary of the north and south halves of Lot 18, so perhaps this was a reuse of an existing community building or at least of the site on which the AME church had stood. A year later he was ordained and sent to the St. Catharines Circuit.

<sup>13</sup> Brown-Kubisch, *Queen's Bush*, 73.

<sup>14</sup> At the Chatham meeting of the Canadian Conference in September 1856, a move was made to separate the Canadian church from the American one. Bishop Willis Disney stepped down from his post in the AME Church, with the Reverend Samuel H. Brown of the Queen's Bush temporarily presiding. Disney became the BMS's first Bishop. See Handy, 215-217; Payne, 363.

<sup>15</sup> Brown Kubisch, *Queen's Bush*, 75.

<sup>16</sup> "Peel," Wellington County Atlas, 1877; Brown-Kubisch, 75 & 168.

<sup>17</sup> Payne, Bishop Daniel Alexander, *History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, ed. C.S. Smith (Nashville, Tenn: AME Sunday School Union, 1891), 203.

<sup>18</sup> James A. Handy, *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History* (Philadelphia: AME Book Concern, 1902), 144.

<sup>19</sup> Brown-Kubisch, *Queen's Bush*, 152-3.

<sup>20</sup> These are printed out in full in Brown-Kubish, *The Queen's Bush*, 236-243.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with John Francis, in Drew, 195-7; Wright, "Ex-Slaves Farmed," quote from Mrs. J.E. McDougall of Drayton, "The first settlers of Peel came in about 1840 and were mostly Negroes who had been assisted to escape from slavery by the abolition societies of the USA. Being squatters they soon sold their rights to white people who paid \$3 to \$4 an acre for the land."

<sup>22</sup> Interview with William Jackson, in Drew, 190.

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication, Bryan Prince, Buxton Museum and National Historic Site, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Thorning, "Black Settlers in Peel Township," unpublished manuscript, OHT files.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald Wright, "Ex-Slaves Farmed in Peel and Wellesley: Black Settlers Largely Ignored by Historians," *Kitchener-Waterloo Record* (July 20, 1979), 31.

<sup>26</sup> A.E. Byerly, 18 handwritten pages, ca. 1930, and is listed as item Bye 8-7 in the file /envelope "Places", Byerly Collection, Guelph Public Library. Byerly references letter written by Rev. William King, *Ecclesiastical and Missionary Record V* (1848), 27.

W.F. Mackenzie, "Peel Township", *The Guelph Weekly Mercury and Advertiser*, (October 24 and 31, 1907).

William Kells, "Sketches of the Early Settlement of the North Riding of Wellington - Township of Peel," *Elora Observer and Salem and Fergus Chronicle* (May 10, 1867).