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THE NEGROES IN UPPER CANADA

Excerpts from an Article
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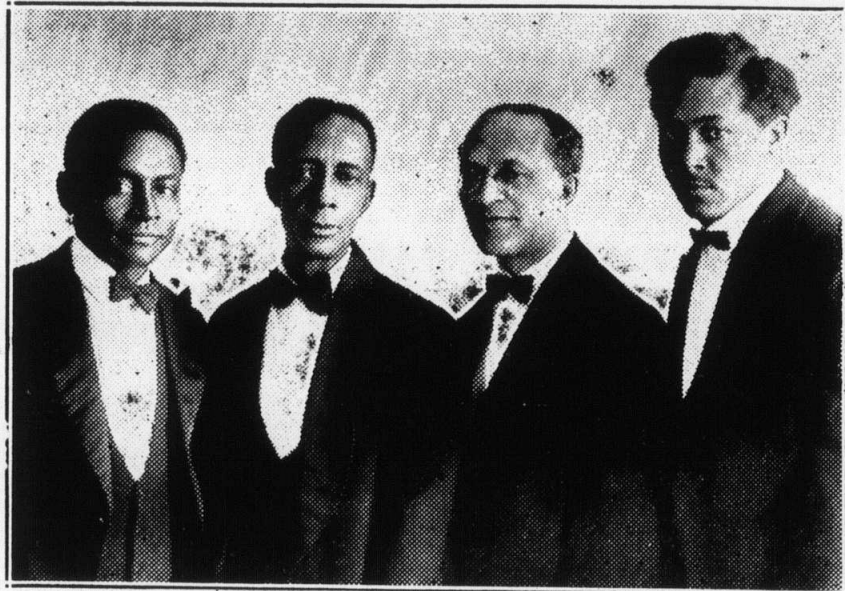
When the government of the United States emancipated the Negro slaves in the seceded states in 1863, there was instituted a Freedmen's Inquiry Commission to consider generally what should be done both with slaves who had been freed by the operations of the war and those who should later become free. The members of this commission were Dr. Samuel G. Howe, Robert Dale Owen and James Mackay. Dr. Howe, soon after his appointment, visited Upper Canada and later made a report to Secretary of War Stanton which presents much information on the condition of the refugees who had entered the British province and were there making their home. His findings were highly favourable to the fugitives and one sentence of the report has been frequently quoted, where, after noting some of the advances made by these people in their new home, he adds: "The refugees earn a living, and gather property; they marry and respect women; they build churches and send their children to schools; they improve in manners and morals—not because they were picked men, but simply because they are free men."

Dr. Howe was deeply impressed with this idea that it was freedom which improved the Negro. In Canada he found the black man facing severe hardships in many cases. The climate was harsh as compared with the South, sometimes there was difficulty in making a livelihood, and there was occasional prejudice. On the other hand, there was justice and opportunity and, above all, freedom. In the preface to his report Dr. Howe says: "When everybody is asking what shall be done with the Negroes and many are afraid that they cannot take care of themselves if left alone—an account of the manner in which twenty thousand of them are taking care of themselves in Canada will be interesting, even if it be imperfect, and contain superfluous speculations."

Dr. Howe's estimate of the number of Negro refugees in Canada was between 15,000 and 20,000. This is but one of many estimates and it is rather difficult to arrive at any definite figure.

The twenty eighth annual report of the American Anti-Slavery Society (N.Y., 1861), refers to "the thousand refugees" in Toronto and quotes from the Philadelphia "Friends' Review" an account of the visit of Joseph Morris, an Ohio Quaker, to Chatham, where he found 2,000 coloured people, one third of the whole population of the place. Their homes, he thought compared favourably with those of the whites and there were no cases of extreme destitution. He visited the Buxton colony which presented an impression very agreeable and encouraging and "he never saw any people more willing to rely on their own resources." Shrewsbury, on Lake Erie, was also

THE LONDON ELITE QUARTETTE First Negro Quartette to sing Over CFPL, LONDON—1931



Left to right — J. Lucas, J. F. Jenkins, F. Ball, Paul Lewis

1956 — 1955

The 99th Annual Conference of the British Methodist Episcopal Church of Canada will open its sessions at Beth Emmanuel Church, London, Canada on Tuesday, June 28th and will continue to July 4th, 1955 under the leadership of Rev. I. H. Edwards of Windsor, Ont.

The General Superintendent, Rev. F. O. Stewart, of St. Catharines will be unable to attend due to illness.

Minister of the entertaining church is Rev. Geo. Boyce.

visited, and here the colored people "manifested a spirit of independence in respect to obtaining the means of living and educating their children."

The presence of the Negro refugees in Canada does not seem to have attracted any special attention until late in the forties. The Negro created no special problem for the government or for the local authorities. His status in Canada differed in no material respect from that of any other citizen. He had to work or starve, therefore he worked. If he transgressed the laws of the land he was punished, though there does not seem to have been any unusual amount of Crime among the Negroes. The black man had the same civil rights as the white man, he exercised the franchise and could participate in politics.

Negro refugees were found enrolled in the Canadian militia from an early date. There were coloured men on the Canadian side in the War of 1812 and during the troubles of 1838 they were much in evidence. Sir Francis Bond Head speaks of their promptness in answering the call to arms, while the Rev. J. W. Loguen says that he was in command of a black company in 1838. Rev. Josiah Henson, the founder of the Dawn colony, was on active service during 1838 and did garrison duty at Amherstburg for several months. He was present when the schooner Ann affair took place in January, 1838. "The coloured men," he says,

AN ODE TO LONDON ON HER 100TH BIRTHDAY

Ah! swiftly moves the steady hand of time
No matter what the work or where the clime
By mankind chosen for the life long tasks

Which economic law of each one asks
And all along the speed-way we call life,
Where weakling trampled fall 'mid surging strife

Bright resting places greet us as we pause
To bask with ego in the throng's applause,

No bright spot can man e'er hope to find
Than that prepared by those who stayed behind
To gaily deck the old home town again

In welcome to the boys, now stalwart men.
So here we gather free from business care,
To smile with joy at good friends everywhere

And boast again in reminiscent mirth
That London is the best old town on earth.

As one by one we greet the old pals here
With hearty clasp and jovial words of cheer,
We realize that men from out this town

On every side the globe have won renown.
What greater honor can a city claim
Than that she turns out men who climb to fame?

So though they call you London in the Woods
We know full well that you've turned out the goods.

Now as we mingle gaily in this scene
Bright mottled as it is with nature's

"were willing to defend the government that had given them a home when they had fled from slavery."

LONDONER ACHIEVED NATIONAL FAME IN "GREEN PASTURES"

Some time around the year London became a city, there slipped into the little South-western Ontario centre—perhaps singly, perhaps together—two poor but happy persons. Here they were married.

For them London was the end of the trail, which had begun in the slave plantations of the Southern United States. Freedom at a terminus of "The Underground Railway" was theirs.

October 29, 1934, the son of this humble colored couple was to receive the highest honors London could offer—the freedom of the city. Richard B. Harrison "De Lawd" of Marc Connelly's prize winning Pulitzer play "Green Pastures" had returned in triumph to his native city. On hand to greet him was the mayor of the city and some of the boys with whom Dick Harrison had played baseball in the days of his youth—on those days when he wasn't busy peddling papers in order to help the family finances or from a gallery seat watching the actors perform in the theatres of his day.

Richard B. Harrison climbed to fame first in 1930, a few months after the poignant and beautiful Green Pastures had opened in Broadway. At 68, he was described at the time as "The centre figure in what in many respects is the most remarkable drama ever produced on the North American stage. . . . Both actor and play are unusual. Harrison had never appeared in a theatrical presentation.

Yet, the native Londoner won instantaneous success, in his portrayal of the Messiah as the Negro slaves pictured Him and longed to see Him appear in the days of their tribulations. He won universal praise from the critics, this in spite of the fact

green,
We feel the thrill which only can be known

By growing boys, who, feeling quite alone,
Go back to mother's knee and by God's plan

Are giving help which only mothers can,
For as we come in answer to your call
We know you've been a mother to us all.

But as the sounds of joy are rising high,
A deeper reverent feeling seems to cry

For silence, till we pay the homage due
This glorious shrine as to fond memory's view
We call again the hardships bravely met

By pioneers that they might firmly set
Foundations here, on which there stands today
The city of our birth in grand array

on her 100th birthday.

here had been much adverse criticism about the presentation before it was offered. The Theatre Guild had turned down the chance to present "Green Pastures." Eminent performers had rejected the role of "De Lawd."

Twice Harrison was offered the role before he finally accepted. First, he said he didn't have the time, or as he an actor. The Harlem friend who had originally sent him to Connelly persisted in his efforts and Harrison paid a second trip to the producer's office. The man who for years had made his living as a lecturer and speaker on dramatic art to Negro schools and colleges accepted. Even he was surprised by his success, but as Prof. Fred Landon, the Londoner who has written so much on the Negro settlements in Western Ontario was to say in 1939 Free Press article:

"Richard B. Harrison . . . will probably stand out in the days ahead as one of the great actors produced by his race."

Mr. Harrison, fourth child in a large family, left London about 1880. His first job he recalled on his 1934 visit was in a Windsor area distillery where "he was chambermaid to a herd of cattle."

It was an unidentified newspaperman in that Detroit of the late '80's who was directly responsible for "De Lawd's" ultimate success. Like many another newspaperman, this Detroit lackey money, gave theatre passes instead of tips to young Harrison, persuaded him to study drama. One of the books which the young Negro was handed was Shakespeare's Richard III, a work in which he showed the deepest of interest. By his middle 20's he was launched on his profession as lecturer and dramatic reader; he visited out-of-way places in the south, the west, "talking on the dramatic art, or the great artists of his race."

Yet, he still maintained his boyhood interest in the stage. He watched the great actors and great actresses of the day perform. This career continued until the late 1920's when chance took him to New York and a friend advised him to see Connelly about this play "Green Pastures."

"De Lawd's" return to London for the presentation of "Green Pastures" at the Grand was a triumph. He was greeted at the railway station by Mayor Wenige and three members of the "old gang" who had played ball here in the days of the championship Tecumseh's—William Nolan, Frank Smith and Ed Saunders. Mayor George Wenige was on hand to extend a civic welcome.

"It was a return to the city where he was born and where he left 54 years ago. His visit to the scenes of his youth was touching and Mr. Harrison was visibly affected by the warmth of the welcome."

Mr. Harrison died soon after his visit here.