

FREEDOM, FAITH, AND FELLOWSHIP: EMANCIPATION DAY CELEBRATIONS

at the Cathedral Church of St. James

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“And it came to pass that the Lord did bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt.”

-Holy Bible (King James Version), Exodus 12:51

Emancipation Day celebrations were a part of St. James’ social calendar and history from as early as 1838. The abolition of the enslavement of Africans in British colonies on August 1, 1834 was commemorated in parts of the Caribbean, the United States, and in villages and large centres in Canada like Toronto with street processions, speeches, dinners, balls, musical concerts, and church services.

During the mid-nineteenth century, Toronto was a centre of abolition activity in the fight to end American slavery. The Provincial Freeman, briefly headquartered on King Street just west of Jarvis Street was utilized by editor Mary Ann Shadd Cary to dispel stereotypes of Blacks, promote anti-slavery ideals, publicly denounce American slavery, share editorials on the atrocities of slavery, and to discuss the problems of runaways in the province. The same can be said for the Toronto Globe edited by George Brown, a known anti-slavery activist. Many meetings were held at St. Lawrence Hall such as speaking engagements with guests like African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass and the 1851 North American Convention of Coloured People. Several court challenges at Osgoode Hall on Queen Street attacked slavery in the American south.

Toronto’s diverse Black population in the 1800s comprised of Toronto-born Africans, some likely descendants of local slaves once owned by people such as William Jarvis, the first sheriff of York (Toronto) and Peter Russell, administrator of Upper Canada; United Empire Loyalists like Peter Long; free Blacks from the United States including Wilson Ruffin Abbott; and ex-slaves like Thornton and Lucie Blackburn. Hundreds of these individuals, out-of-town guests from the United States and across Ontario, and White community members such as attorney George Dupont Wells and Michael Willis, principal of Knox College, celebrated liberation at various venues in the city, including St. James. Many of the people listed above were church members or occasional visitors of this historical church.

St. James was a regular gathering place for August First. Celebrants participating in parades marched to the church for religious services. Church leaders such as Archdeacon John Strachan and Reverend Henry James Grasett were main speakers on Emancipation Day. Strachan addressed celebrants in 1838, while Grasett spoke at the St. Lawrence Market in 1839 and at the church in 1844, 1854, 1856, and 1860 he delivered sermons and speeches. Grasett was involved in Emancipation Day commemorations for at least twenty years – what messages did Grasett impart to the crowds? What was the motivation for his consistent involvement? Based on his longstanding participation in an event related to eradicating slavery, it can be concluded that Grasett was a committed abolitionist. As such, no doubt Grasett would have denounced American slavery, encouraged gatherers to continue to agitate for its end, and extolled the importance of a strong, cohesive community. Thanksgiving services provided an opportunity to educate the masses through sermons. Church ministers also played the role of teachers as many members of their congregation could not read or write. Sermons focused mainly on freedom and taught about the atrocities of slavery. Messages also discussed how to approach the future and how to take advantage of their free life in the north.

Church services were an integral part of Emancipation Day observances. Annual commemorations began with giving God thanks for delivering themselves, their relatives, and their ancestors from bondage and to express gratitude for the acknowledgement of their God-given rights. Many African Canadians held strong Christian beliefs and interpreted

the African enslavement experience with Biblical connections, associating their plight from slavery in the North America and the Caribbean to the Hebrews who were brought out of bondage in Egypt, and considered themselves a chosen people handpicked by God to make the pilgrimage to Canaan, the land of milk and honey promised by God to his children. Blacks remained steadfast in their faith that God would put an end to the evil of slavery and when they were delivered out of captivity with the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 the long awaited day had to be rejoiced.

The hymnals and spirituals sung in church were a soulful, musical expression of the elation former slaves felt for their freedom from bondage and the determination to persevere in their life on Earth with God's grace. Songs like "We Shall Overcome," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Where Ever He Leads, I'll Go," "He Leadth Me," "I'm Free, Praise God I'm Free," and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" were a few of the favourite songs that conveyed these messages.

Attending commemorations at St. James also provided the opportunity for fellowship among city residents. Black and White men and women of different economic and social backgrounds worshipped together, sang together, and broke bread together. Emancipation Day was a public arena where the evolving social interaction between races and gender during the Victoria ear became evident. This time together also provided welcomed support for newcomers and the opportunity for more established citizens to practice their Christian faith through charity initiatives and compassionate ministry.

The first of August observances in the then core of Toronto (along King Street between Jarvis Street and University Avenue) were an opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism to the British crown and gratitude for freedom. They were also used as a platform to bring awareness to the many social and political issues faced by African Canadians.

The Christian tenets, which governed the lives of many Blacks in Canada, were intricately woven into Emancipation Day festivities. Through yearly reminders of the fulfillment of God's promise, they remembered the horrific and triumphant experiences and sacrifices of their ancestors.

In 2005 St. James continued the tradition of observing August First with an interfaith Caribana service. People of Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Sikh, and Hindu faiths gathered to listen to speakers who lectured about the history of the marked day, to be entertained by dancers, drummers, and singers, and to enjoy an arts and cultural fair. For over 170 years St. James has recognized Emancipation Day in some form.

This year the book, *Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Canada*, by Natasha Henry (Natural Heritage Books/ Dundurn Group) will be launched at St. James on Thursday, September 16th. When the passage of the Abolition of Slavery Act, effective August 1, 1834, ushered in the end of slavery throughout the British Empire, people of African descent celebrated their newfound freedom. Now African-American fugitive slaves, free black immigrants, and the few remaining enslaved Africans could live unfettered lives in Canada — a reality worthy of celebration. This new, well-researched book explores the social, cultural, political, and educational practices of a distinct African-Canadian tradition across Canada with emphasis on Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and British Columbia through descriptive historical accounts and appealing images.

The evening will include musical performances, poetry recitals, and a lecture, reading, and book signing by the author.



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