

NEWS

New projects pay homage to black history in Halton

By Gillian Francis Burlington Post

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The Halton region and surrounding area have a long and fascinating black history. Oakville, Hamilton, Toronto, Kingston, and St. Catherines were all connected to routes along the Underground Railroad. Thousands of escaped slaves and freeborn African-Americans settled in these communities in the early 19th century in search of a better life.

Today, the legacy of Halton's first black immigrants is preserved through a variety of local institutions and societies including the Oakville Museum, the Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton, and the Halton Black History Awareness Society. All of these organizations are in the process of updating their historical content and introducing new projects to the public in order to include subject matter that is more relevant to modern audiences.

Oakville Museum has been devoted to recording and preserving black history in the Halton region for over 20 years. Their first exhibit was installed in 1999, and their second in the late 2000s. Currently they are planning to introduce a third.

"I'd like to be able to re-research the black history content that we have at the museum...there's more information available through digitization and searchable databases than was when it was first done," explains Julian Kingston, Supervisor of Oakville Museum.

The current exhibits focus primarily on the underground railroad, slavery, and black history dating from pre-confederation to the 1960s. The new exhibit would focus more on recent black history, from the mid 20th century to present day.

“[It] becomes less of a story about the underground railroad, and more of a story about immigration,” Kingston explains.

Although the museum hasn’t set an opening date for the new exhibit, they do know what content they want to include. The Canadian Caribbean Association of Halton (CCAH) released a documentary earlier this year called *Legacy Voices*, and Oakville Museum wants to make the film a part of its permanent collection.

Legacy Voices follows the stories of a few black individuals who immigrated to the Halton area from the Caribbean. They talk about their first impressions of Canada, about launching their careers on foreign soil, and about their hopes, dreams, and fears. Although it was screened by members of CCAH during the August long weekend, the Oakville Museum will make the film accessible to a wider audience.

Andrew Tyrrell, President of CCAH, helped produce the documentary. He says that although it helps provide insight into immigrants’ experiences with racism in Canada, it also focuses on positive community stories.

“They were all so incredibly grateful for Canada, to allow them to come to this country and call it home and to flourish and have a better life not only themselves, but for the successive generations,” he says.

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Tyrrell, who has roots in both Nevis and Guyana, moved from Winnipeg to Burlington with his family in the mid 80s. He has fond memories of being part of Halton’s vibrant Caribbean community. He says he attended parties, dances, dinners, and barbeques held by CCAH. He met his wife at Burlington Mall, a story which he recounts in the documentary.

Tyrrell says being part of an ethnic minority in Halton helped him connect with other Caribbean and African immigrant families and form strong bonds with them.

“Back then, there weren’t a lot of black people. It was really kind of special when you saw somebody because you either knew their family or you knew they were new, so you wanted to welcome them,” he explains.

Halton Black History Awareness Society (HBHAS) is also updating their content. Based out of Burlington, HBHAS has been recording and preserving the important events and experiences of Halton's black community for decades. They provide resources to help teachers include black history in the curriculum and they send speakers into classrooms to talk about their research.

Now they are altering their content, to include not only historical facts, but anti-racism dialogue. According to Dennis Scott, Chair and Cultural Integrator of HBHAS, teaching anti-racism means providing clear examples of discrimination, what it looks like and how to stop it.

"A lot of mindsets can change if they are educated," he states.

Scott also believes that an anti-racism education should not be limited to recognizing negative trends and patterns. It should be proactive, focusing on black freedom, appreciation for black culture, and on moving towards collaborative solutions.

"It's appreciation that will open peoples' eyes in regards to why it's important to work with each other," he says.

Scott is a seventh generation Canadian. He is the descendent of slaves from Kentucky and the Carolinas. One of his ancestors was smuggled across the border in a coffin. Another shot one of her oppressors in order to make it to freedom. He joined HBHAS to piece together his own family's story and to help preserve the legacy and memory of Canada's first black settlers.

Through his research, he found many historical details that surprised him, including the effort communities made to erase black families and black culture from city records. Families' surnames were anglicized in the census and street names in historically black neighbourhoods were changed to reflect the achievements of white people.

“They were trying to say there were no blacks associated with this community at all,” says Scott.

He also found that there were many positive historical movements brought about by counterculture groups, whose historical narratives were overshadowed by more tragic events.

Scott explains that most people know about the horrors of slavery and the Ku Klux Klan, but not many people know that the Emancipation Act of 1834, which banned slavery across Canada, was brought about by a movement that originated within Halton, nor do they know that Hamilton businessman Isaac Buchanan hosted the largest black freedom festival in the world in 1859.

Today, HBHAS continues to promote black culture and reinforce positive messages. They host the Halton Freedom Celebration Festival annually in Spencer Smith Park. The event provides attendees with the opportunity to celebrate black culture through music, food, and art. It takes place August 1st on Emancipation Day, which marks the anniversary of the abolition of slavery in Canada.

In 2018, Burlington became the first city in the world to officially proclaim August as Emancipation Month and HBHAS took part in the flag raising ceremony. As of 2020, Emancipation Day is the longest continuously running festival in North America.

Scott says that HBHAS’s anti-racism education program will reinforce this proactive approach and uses history to emphasize black freedom and the need to move forward positively by celebrating black culture. He also hopes their program will inspire black youth to reach their best potential and go out and make their own histories.

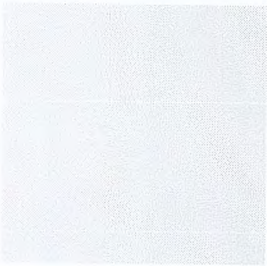
“One of the reasons it’s so important for me to get this re-education system, is so that individuals have an appreciation for themselves,” Scott explains. “If you can’t believe in

yourself you can't really believe in anything else."

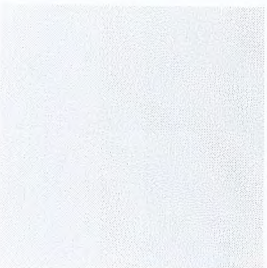
Kingston also adheres to the idea that history can greatly impact personal development.

"You don't know where you're going unless you know where you've come from," he says.

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