

ONTARIO

Underground Railroad brought thousands to freedom in Ontario

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A monument outside the Salem Chapel in St. Catharines, dedicated to Harriet Tubman who guided more than 300 slaves to freedom. LORI KNOWLES/Special to QMI Agency

There may not have been an actual "railroad" associated with the Underground Railroad, but its passengers were as precious as any train ever carried.

The term Underground Railroad refers to the passage of freedom seekers in the mid 1800s -- thousands of slaves and refugees who journeyed north from southern parts of the United States to freedom in Canada.

Their perilous and painstaking journeys -- from about 1830 to 1870 -- are commemorated during February, known widely as Black History Month. And few can tell their stories better than Lezlie Harper Wells.

Harper Wells is a direct descendent of a freedom seeker who arrived in Canada's Niagara Region in 1850. Her great, great grandfather, Jack Black, fled slavery in Kentucky with his brother and nine-year-old sister. They hiked thousands of kilometres alone by night, slogged through swamps and swam across rivers. They eventually crossed the Niagara River near Buffalo and settled along the northern shore at Ontario's Fort Erie.

"It was absolutely amazing," Harper Wells says, "to look at Fort Erie's 1851 census and there was (my great, great grandfather's) name."

Through her company Niagara Bound Tours, Harper Wells organizes customized, family friendly tours of Niagara's Freedom Trail, relating the stories of these courageous people.

Niagara Bound's tours take in historical spots near St. Catharines, Welland, Fort Erie and Niagara-on-the-Lake, including

points where freedom seekers crossed the Niagara River, homes considered "safe houses," the Salem Chapel in St. Catharines, where freedom seekers would congregate, and the landing point of Josiah Henson, believed to be the inspiration for a character in Uncle Tom's Cabin.

Along the tour, Harper Wells tells a lot of fascinating stories. She explains the struggles and horrors people faced while enslaved, the conditions in which they lived, and the challenges they overcame to escape. Her tours are also full of hope and joy, shedding light on Ontario's involvement in the Underground Railroad, a network of people who hid and guided slaves north to freedom.

With no money or means of transportation, many freedom seekers travelled in darkness, simply following the light of the North Star and searching for signposts -- trees bearing crude charcoal or mud markings that pointed the way to freedom. The Underground Railroad system included a number of code words and terms used to keep operations covert: "Stockholders" referred to abolitionists who believed in freedom for all; "human merchandise" meant runaway slaves and refugees; a "depot" was a safe stopping point (safe house) along the way; and "the other side" referred to the north side of the Niagara River in Canada, where slavery was prohibited.

Freedom seekers' passage was made even more perilous by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 -- legislation that gave rights to bounty hunters to track down fugitives and sell them back into slavery.

Harper Wells paints a vivid picture of Harriet Tubman, a freedom seeker who settled in the Niagara area, but returned covertly to the Southern U.S. an incredible 19 times to guide an estimated 300 people to freedom. While visiting the church attended by Tubman, Harper Wells mentions the bounty issued on this courageous woman -- \$40,000 to the bounty hunter who could return her to slavery, said to be the highest ever put on a freedom seeker.

Tubman was never caught, and lived out her last years in Niagara Region; 2013 marks 100 years since her death.

NEED TO KNOW

Niagara Bound's 2013 Underground Railroad Era Tours run on both sides of the border from February to October in Niagara and Buffalo regions. Single-day tours (\$40 per person) include a guide and shuttle transportation; guests are encouraged to bring a lunch. Preregistration is required. The tour is best suited to families with youth aged 12 years and older. For details, see niagaraboundtours.com. For information on Black History Month and Canada's involvement in the Underground Railroad, see blackhistorycanada.ca.

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