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Undergraduate Student Research Internship 2022

August 15th, 2022

### Forest City Memories: A Comprehensive look at Black History in London Ontario

The way we record history and reflect on the events of the past often shows the present foundation a community stands on to be socially sustainable and to look toward the future with better clarity. The city of London's history is some of the richest in Ontario, and the heroism surrounding this history is proudly planted throughout the nooks and crannies of London and beyond. Anyone walking through Victoria Park will notice the Holy Roller tank which fought on D-Day and beyond, or the war memorial featuring a proud and rigid soldier and canons to celebrate Victoria Park and London's military history. With all the emphasis on the rich military past of the Forest City, you may walk right past the information board detailing the beginning of an integrated school system between white and black children in the park (Hill, 1981). Or completely overlook the sign which speaks of Mary and Ann Titré; sisters who became the first Black women to teach integrated classes in the province of Ontario, and their education prowess being the first instance in North America of Black individuals teaching integrated classes successfully (Hill, 1981). It is quite evident to me that London's Black history is rich but not necessarily conventionally recognized within the city, or at least how the history deserves to be recognized. Through this paper I wish to enlighten the reader with captivating Black History I've learned and absorbed this summer during my research studies in and around London, and to detail these myths and truths in how they affected the Canadian way of living.

One of the very first journeys I took that was crucially captivating took place in a woodland area on the outskirts of the city. There lies a tree standing almost 700 feet high which is impossible to miss and is said to be a pillar in the racial history of London during the mid-1800s for hundreds to thousands of freedom seekers, who is rumored to have used the tree as a meeting point when escaping bondage through the Underground Railroad (Ghonaim, 2017). Although this history is extremely interesting the key word here is ‘myth’.



(Photo Credits: Sheila Creighton, imageryoflight.com)

Although there is no detailed proof confirming that enslaved peoples utilized this tree as a meeting point. This makes the size and overall importance surrounding this tree even more grand. Rightly earning its spot as heritage tree since 2012 (Ghonaim,2017). I found that this tree very well might have been a beacon for enslaved peoples but also renders as a landmark that personifies the sometimes-opaque grasp of Black history in Canada.

The next step of my journey led me to the Central Branch London Public Library, in which I spent countless hours looking through old London Free Press newspaper articles dating from

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1852-1999. News and Media have undoubtedly been one of the primary avenues to shaping thought and creating dialogue around the issues and stories within a given community. From local sports to provincial legislation, the London Free Press has helped embody the events and experiences within the Forest City since 1852. (Hopkins, 1898) This rings true when considering the Black history that has taken place in London Ontario and onward. The London Free Press has been documenting and providing commentary on the experiences that affect Black Canadians from the past to the present. Although the London Free press as well as the London Advisory were the primary newspaper used throughout London's history, another newspaper was making the rounds which was founded in London and focused on news involving Black-Canadians; this paper being *The Dawn of Tomorrow*.



(Photo Credits: London Public Library)

*The Dawn of Tomorrow* was founded by James F. Jenkins who sought to live in Canada after experiencing the racism and discrimination present in the south (Hill, 1981). The first paper was published in 1923 from the Jenkins family home on Glenwood Avenue in London, Ontario. I was able to visit this house as it is still standing firmly and is a documented heritage site. The Dawn of tomorrow features expressive and opinionated pieces of how Black Canadians can more

easily maneuver the complicated space that was Canada both socioeconomically and politically, and even news highlighting a Black choir singing at a local Christmas parade (*Dawn of Tomorrow*, 1945). It was a newspaper whose title implied it was looking onward toward better days, a central allegory for the often-hopeful attitudes of Black individuals throughout history. *The Dawn of Tomorrow* was a paper that started in London Ontario but affected the lives of thousands of Black Canadians.

Although London was a place which stood on the grounds of liberating and emancipating Black Canadians, inevitably it was also a place where racism unfortunately took place from the early settlements of Black Canadians all the way to the late 20th century. For example, Dr. Samuel G. Howe - representative of the USA freedmen's inquiry commission making repeated mention in his reports of Negroes being treated unfairly in London (Landon & Frost, 1918-1967), Dr. Alfred T. Jones a Black resident of London in the early 1900s reporting a “mean” prejudice in London that was unlike the United States (Landon & Frost, 1918-1967), or 1989 JP Rushton; a psychology professor at The University of Western Ontario publicly proposes a ‘scientific’ study which hypothesized that White individuals are the more intelligent race and proposing there are comprehensive variables which prove Black individuals are less intelligent through social organization and reproductive strategies. This study was publicly debated against by David Suzuki on Western Campus’ Alumni Hall in 1989 (London Free Press, 1989), with some publicly agreeing with Rushton and most publicly degrading him.



(Photo Credits Toronto Star)

All these examples show case that even though London Ontario for many Black persons was a place which represented emancipation and liberty, still simultaneously very well possessed the same discrimination freedom seekers were determined to escape from in the first place and is truth that must always be understood and acknowledged to better understand the present and the future.

In Conclusion, I hope that this paper may shed some light on a topic that is not commonly known across the Forest City and have some readers walking away from it with a changed perspective on the city of London and its deep-rooted history involving the Black experience. London Ontario is home to many extremely important firsts surrounding the heritage of Black Canadian citizens across the country; the first Black newspaper *The Dawn of Tomorrow* and Mary and Ann Titré the first Black Women scholars teaching integrated classes being worthy highlights. From the very nature and spirit of the meeting tree which has a rich and wondrous myth attached to its name, to the flawed and dangerous studies of a past Western University professor, London holds rich and powerful social history which brought about a city with present-day ongoing and improved values that focus on passionate inclusion and diversity.

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