



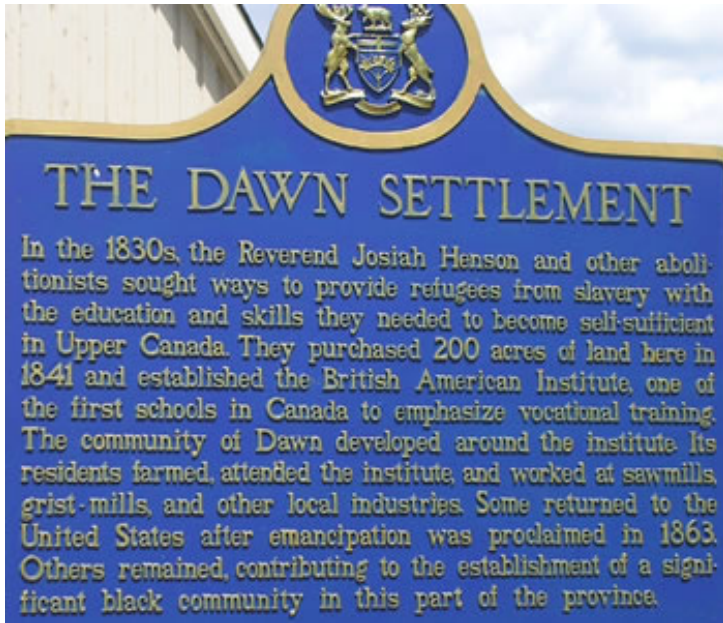
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## The Josiah Henson Story: Maryland Black History in Canada

By Dan Morhaim

(OWINGS MILLS - Jan. 3, 2008) - While on vacation this summer in Ontario, Canada, my wife Shelley and I decided on a whim to take our car off the main highway and explore some back roads. Little did we know this would lead us to a fascinating part of Maryland Black history.

The town of Dresden in southern Ontario was beautiful with lovely farms and a quaint downtown. Then we saw a sign: "Uncle Tom's Cabin". Curious, we followed the sign to a museum devoted to the personal history of Josiah Henson and the larger story of slavery in general.

Josiah Henson was born a slave in Charles County, Maryland in 1789. Before he was 18, he had been sold three times. When he was 30, he was living on a plantation in Bethesda, and he had saved enough money to buy his freedom. But his owner, taking advantage of Henson's inability to read, tricked him into agreeing to an outrageously large purchase price. Upon discovering the cruel hoax, Henson planned and executed a daring escape on the Underground Railway with his wife and four young children.

After a perilous journey, he settled in Dresden, Ontario, Canada. In 1793, Ontario had enacted laws that granted immediate freedom to any slave who entered the province. Henson found that he was not alone, that other Blacks had made the same journey. He began working on farms, taught himself to read and write, became a minister, and eventually was able to buy 200 acres of land on which he founded a community for Blacks, including a school, chapel, businesses, homes, and a newspaper on which he served as editor and publisher.

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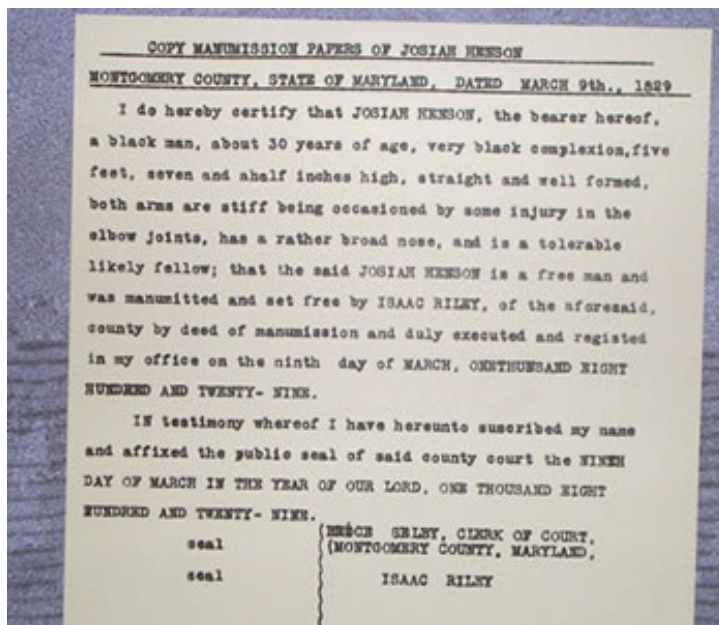
In 1849, he wrote his autobiography: "The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself". In it he recounts the life of a slave, including the story of how his father was punished for protecting his wife (Henson's mother) from an overseer. His father was whipped almost to death and then sold south to Alabama. The family never heard from him again.

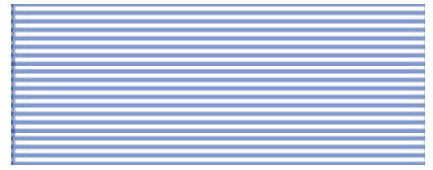
This book came to the attention of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who used Henson as the model for the character of Uncle Tom. Her book "Uncle Tom's Cabin" made the horrors of slavery a political issue, and it energized the abolitionist movement.

Henson updated his autobiography several times. His fame led to his being invited to England and presented to Queen Victoria. He continued to lead his community and promote Black self-sufficiency. He died in Dresden in 1883 at the age of 93. Incidentally, his great grandnephew was Matthew Henson, who trekked to the North Pole with Admiral Perry in 1909.

The museum was large and modern, and it offered a complete look at slavery, including devices used to torture slaves and documents of the slave trade. One of these records was issued in Montgomery County, Maryland for Josiah Henson. Seeing this gave me chills and brought home just how recent and close the slavery issue is for Marylanders, even in this small Ontario town.

The term "Uncle Tom" is now used pejoratively. But for Josiah Henson, and for those he helped to find freedom and independence, as well as for the thousands who read his story, it meant something very different. It was his life of courage, vision, and leadership that helped change history.





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