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The Life of Guelph's Samuel Venerable

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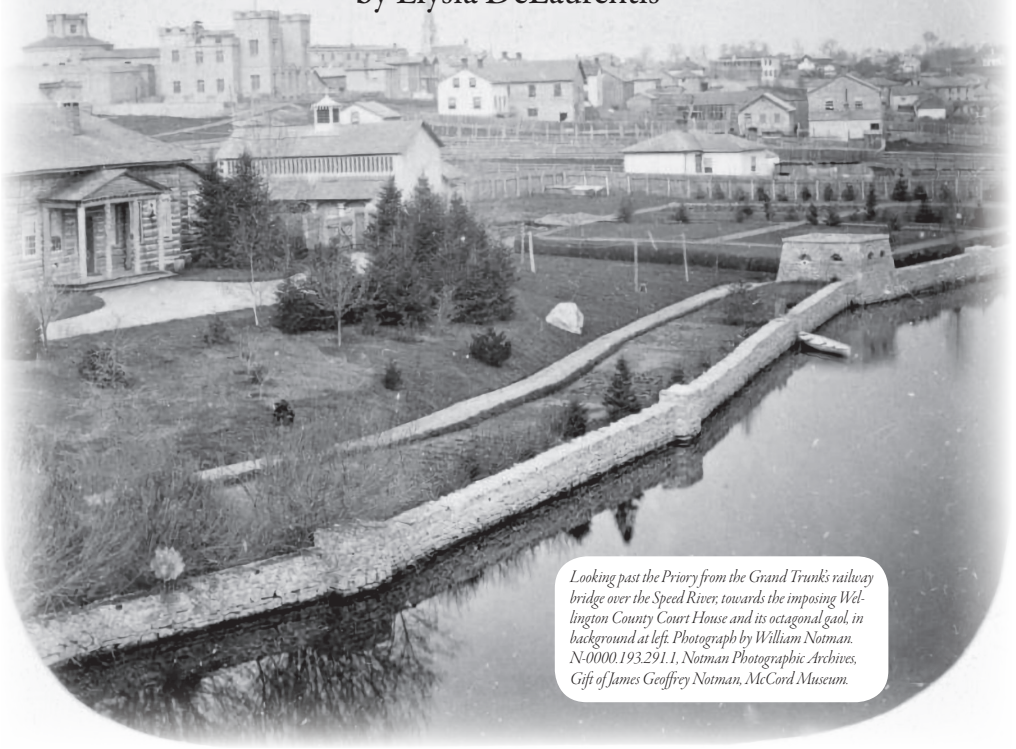
Article abstract

Having grown up enslaved in northern Kentucky, Samuel Venerable fled to Ontario in the early nineteenth century, establishing himself in Toronto, then London, before moving to Guelph where he lived out his last thirty years. He faced the same hardships as other refugees to Ontario, yet in many ways he was exceptional. He overcame odds not only to survive, but to live a productive and remarkably long life, and he rose from the lowliest social strata to become a man revered. Despite being illiterate, Venerable left a valuable record for historians. By relying on information recorded during his lifetime, and at the time of his death, this article focusses on Samuel Venerable and those with whom he formed connections to offer a fuller understanding of the successes and struggles faced by some Black Ontarians in the nineteenth century.

FROM VIOLENCE TO VENERATION

The Life of Guelph's Samuel Venerable

by Elysia DeLaurentis



Looking past the Priory from the Grand Trunk's railway bridge over the Speed River, towards the imposing Wellington County Court House and its octagonal gaol, in background at left. Photograph by William Notman. N-0000.193.291.1, Notman Photographic Archives, Gift of James Geoffrey Notman, McCord Museum.

Anyone in Guelph could have told you that he was aged, but no one, not even Samuel Venerable himself, could say with any certainty just how old he was. His 1891 obituary recounted the milestones in his life which included boyhood memories of the American Revolution. Venerable's pastor, the Rev. William T. Minter, ascribed such early memories, which would have made Samuel close to 120 years old, to stories he had heard as a child and later conflated into memory. Minter looked at the most likely scenarios, did the math, and put Venerable's year of birth, "as near as can be got at," at 1782. That would have made Samuel Venerable 109 years old when he died.[1] Living to a hundred

[1] "Death of Samuel Venerable," *Guelph Daily Mercury and Advertiser*, 2 May 1891; *Guelph Weekly Mercury*, 7 May 1891. Unless otherwise stated, quotations and biographical details come from these sources, along with public records such as directories, census records, and vital statistics.

Abstract

Having grown up enslaved in northern Kentucky, Samuel Venerable fled to Ontario in the early nineteenth century, establishing himself in Toronto, then London, before moving to Guelph where he lived out his last thirty years. He faced the same hardships as other refugees to Ontario, yet in many ways he was exceptional. He overcame odds not only to survive, but to live a productive and remarkably long life, and he rose from the lowliest social strata to become a man revered. Despite being illiterate, Venerable left a valuable record for historians. By relying on information recorded during his lifetime, and at the time of his death, this article focusses on Samuel Venerable and those with whom he formed connections to offer a fuller understanding of the successes and struggles faced by some Black Ontarians in the nineteenth century.

Résumé: *Ayant grandi en esclavage dans le nord du Kentucky, Samuel Vénérable s'est enfui en Ontario au début du XIXe siècle, s'établissant à Toronto, puis à London, avant de déménager à Guelph où il a vécu ses trente dernières années. Il a dû faire face aux mêmes difficultés que les autres réfugiés en Ontario, mais à bien des égards, il était exceptionnel. Il a surmonté les obstacles non seulement pour survivre, mais aussi pour vivre une vie productive et remarquablement longue, et il est passé des couches sociales les plus basses à un homme vénéré. Bien qu'il soit analphabète, le Vénérable a laissé un témoignage précieux aux historiens. En s'appuyant sur des informations enregistrées de son vivant et au moment de sa mort, cet article se concentre sur Samuel Venerable et sur ceux avec qui il a noué des liens pour offrir une meilleure compréhension des succès et des luttes auxquels ont été confrontés certains Ontariens noirs au XIXe siècle.*

is still celebrated as a great accomplishment. When medicine was rudimentary, surgery meant amputation, and disease was almost as common as violence, it was a feat even more astounding.

Much can happen in a hundred and nine years and, like many marginalized people in the nineteenth century, what can be documented of Samuel Venerable's life is only a small part of his story. Piecing together the fragments, it is clear that his longevity can be attributed to good genes as much as to a healthy dose of luck and a will to live on his own terms. Helping him along the way were the connections he made with others, including at least four women with whom he had committed relationships. An appreciation of Samuel Venerable's long life and the path that brought him to Guelph allows one to contemplate the lives of others he knew—his friends, neighbours, and contemporaries—who also shaped the province's history, but for whom the written record is even sparser. Surviving records can illuminate their lives to some degree, but only those who lived the experience knew what it was like to be Black in nineteenth-century Ontario.

Even if the Rev. Minter's estimate had been off by a decade, there was no denying that Samuel Venerable had lived long and seen more than most. But it is not his great age alone that makes his life noteworthy. In at least a century on earth, Samuel Venerable had risen from the lowliest of social strata to become a

Looking over Guelph, ca. 1865. Wellington County Museum and Archives, 8245.

revered man. A recent popular history even likened him to a saint.[2] The reality is, of course, more nuanced. In some ways the people of Guelph would have known Venerable as an average man, a hard worker who lived simply and was just trying to get through life the best he could. In others, he was exceptional for his kindness to others, a spiritual person who volunteered to bring comfort to the sick and dying. Historical records combine to reveal a well-liked and determined man who faced the struggles inherent in one against whom the social cards were stacked; throughout Samuel Venerable's long life, violence was never far removed.

From Kentucky to Canada

Some time in the late eighteenth century, Samuel Venerable was born into slavery near Covington, Kentucky, on the wrong side of the Ohio River, across from Cincinnati. A natural feature, the river served as the boundary between the free states of Ohio and Indiana on the north shore, and the slave-state of Kentucky to the south. For this reason, one historian metaphorically described the river as "the horizon separating sunlight from shadow."[3] Samuel Venerable's parents, Catherine and Samuel Sr., were both enslaved at the time of his birth. Like others in that position, they would have been kept illiterate, as Samuel himself would remain all of his life.[4] Who it was that claimed Venerable as property upon his birth has not been

[2] Jerry Prager, *Blood in the Mortar: Freedom in the Stone* (Elora: Jerry Prager, 2018), 5.

[3] Frank K. Mathias, "Slavery: The Solvent of Kentucky Politics," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society,* 70:1 (January 1972), 1.

[4] Rooda Lee et al explained that, "...the constraining of Black education [was] a method to suppress Black agency and rebellion," quoting a formerly-enslaved man, John Little, who explained that, "being a slave, I did not know my age; I did not know anything": Rooda Lee, Scott Parker, and Elizabeth Broderick, "The Struggle for Education in the Queen's Bush Settlement," published 25 November 2018 in *The Black Past in Guelph: Remembered and Reclaimed* <https://blackpastinguelph.com> (accessed on 27 March 2021).

recorded but it is clear that Samuel grew up amid all of the violence, hardship, privation, and disrespect that slavery entails.

It was under these conditions that, as a teen or young man, Samuel Venerable met and married a young woman who was enslaved on a neighbouring farm. Her name has not been passed down but, as a young Black woman, her life would have been no easier. According to accounts Venerable gave later in life, he and his wife had had three children together by 1812 when war with the British was declared. They subsequently welcomed an additional four before their lives changed abruptly.

It's unlikely that the night Samuel Venerable escaped was the first time he'd considered it. Living as he did in the northern reaches of Kentucky, an awareness of his proximity to freedom must have been as tantalizing as it was a frustration. Slavery was not as ubiquitous in Kentucky as it was further south, but it impacted the lives of those enslaved just as sharply. The southern states relied on slave labour to mass produce crops such as cotton and sugar cane. Kentucky's climate and terrain simply didn't accommodate farming on such a large scale. For this reason, wide swaths of the state, such as its mountainous regions, remained generally free of slaveholders.[5] Its northern bluegrass region, however, had long hosted a large population of enslaved people who toiled on small farms in the labour-intensive hemp industry.[6]

A self-congratulatory sentiment prevailed in Kentucky's newspapers of the day, reinforcing the notion among that state's slaveholders that Kentuckians were good and commendable people who did well by their slaves and, in so doing, provided an example to the nation of how smooth and well-functioning the institution could be.[7] Any enslaved person in Kentucky would have begged to differ. In contrast to the narrative of the good and merciful slaveowner were the lived experiences of thousands of people in bondage.

Word of the abolitionist movement was whispered among the state's Black population. It was also a topic delicately broached by some White Kentuckians, with ideas filtering into the region from abolitionist strongholds in the north. As Canadian historian Karolyn Smardz Frost relates,

> Nearly all the men and women who staffed the packet boats that carried mail, passengers, and cargo between the Ohio River ports linking Louisville with Cincinnati and other northern cities were Black, and some conspired with sympathetic Kentuckians to assist people on their way north. Such vessels came back from northern places sometimes bearing with them abolitionist publications and even abolitionists themselves, who dared the perilous journey into the American South to spread the word that, as one song

[5] Mathias, "Slavery," 1.

[6] Talbott, "First Hemp Crop," <https://explorekyhistory.ky.gov> (accessed on 5 June 2021).

[7] Mathias, "Slavery," 3.

said, 'in Canada, coloured men are free'.[8]

The abolitionist movement gained traction in the 1820s and had come into its own by the 1830s, the same decade that the British Empire abolished slavery altogether. Drawing on the egalitarian wording of the American Constitution and Christian notions of charity, love, and the creation of humanity in God's image, abolitionist arguments that questioned the denial of rights and freedom to some based only on the colour of their skin were undeniably compelling.

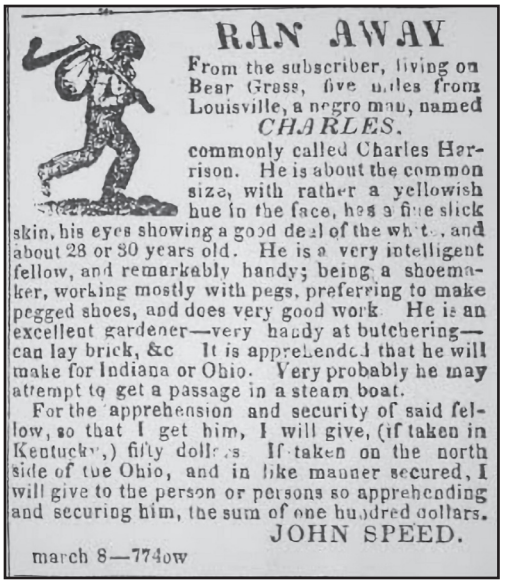
One woman who became persuaded by these ideas was the wife of the very slave owner who claimed Samuel Venerable as his chattel. As the head of his household by virtue of his gender, this man owned the family assets—the house and land, the livestock, and the enslaved humans, all of which held great monetary value. Persuading landowners to forfeit a large part of their wealth for the higher ideals of social egality would not have been an easy task. It may have been more efficient to plant the seeds of abolitionist thought in the minds of women. They held no voting rights or political office, but with the ear of husbands, fathers, and children, and their value to the household, women wielded influence. In Samuel Venerable's case, it was his master's own wife who began to talk to him of his inherent self worth. She told him on more than one occasion that he should have as much a right to freedom as she did.

The lowliness of Samuel's station had been ingrained in him since birth but these ideas resonated and gave him the courage to stand up to the injustices he witnessed daily. Slaveholders considered such ruminations dangerous. Indeed, Venerable's subsequent outbursts served to annoy his owner who, as a result, deemed him a 'bad' slave, one not easily put in his place. For those who purchased human beings and kept them in bondage, there was the ever-present threat that an enslaved person's resistance would influence others to action.

Things came to a head sometime between 1826-1836 when Venerable witnessed his wife's overseer abusing her; it could very well have been a sexual assault. Instinctively Samuel rushed over and put a stop to it by knocking the man down. When the slaveowner got wind of Venerable's actions, he was livid; he would have viewed it an affront to White authority and the last straw in dealing with a slave who had asserted his own will one time too many. He informed Venerable of his decision to send him to the slave markets of the South to be sold.

As bad as things were in Kentucky for those enslaved, word had spread northward that life in the southern states could be worse. A threat such as that made by Samuel's owner was one that any Black Kentuckian would have dreaded. Realizing that he was bound to be separated from his family either way, Samuel Venerable decided to leave his loved ones

[8] Karolyn Smardz Frost, *Steal Away Home: One Woman's Epic Flight to Freedom – And Her Long Road Back to The South* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2017), 17.



RAN AWAY

From the subscriber, living on Bear Grass, five miles from Louisville, a negro man, named CHARLES, commonly called Charles Harrison. He is about the common size, with rather a yellowish hue in the face, has a fine slick skin, his eyes showing a good deal of the white, and about 28 or 30 years old. He is a very intelligent fellow, and remarkably handy; being a shoemaker, working mostly with pegs, preferring to make pegged shoes, and does very good work. He is an excellent gardener—very handy at butchering—can lay brick, &c. It is apprehended that he will make for Indiana or Ohio. Very probably he may attempt to get a passage in a steam boat.

For the apprehension and security of said fellow, so that I get him, I will give, (if taken in Kentucky,) fifty dollars. If taken on the north side of the Ohio, and in like manner secured, I will give to the person or persons so apprehending and securing him, the sum of one hundred dollars.

JOHN SPEED.

march 8—774ow

Ads, such as this one from the Louisville Public Advertiser of 1826 or 1828, provide historical evidence of the people behind the statistics of Slave Schedules. It also reveals why fugitives were not safe once they crossed the Ohio River. Not only were those who fled actively sought and their descriptions publicized, but it was common for Kentucky slaveowners to offer additional incentive to people who recaptured escapees north of the Ohio River.[10]

on his own terms and risk his life for a chance at liberty.

Many of the details of his journey weren't recorded, but the tales of others who undertook similar flights make clear that once he left the farm, Samuel would have been driven by the urgency of expediency, the perils of the night, and the constant fear of recapture. John Hall, a man of the same generation who later called Owen Sound home, fled northern Kentucky at around the same time. Like Venerable, Hall weighed the odds of escape against the near certainty of torture that awaited him at the slave markets of New Orleans. According to information Hall recounted later in life, he "learned of his [master's] intention [to sell him] and escaped into Ohio on the eve of the departure. He was pursued by bloodhounds, but... threw the dogs off the scent by rubbing onions on his feet."[10] And Henry Bibb, who was born in Kentucky in 1815, escaped slaveholders numerous times only to be recaptured and tortured. Under British rule and cultural influence, racism was rife in what is now Ontario, but Bibb explained of his attempts that, "I made a regular business of it and never gave it up until I had... landed myself safely in Canada where I was regarded as a man, and not a thing."[11]

Samuel Venerable fled the very night that his owner revealed his plans to sell him. Where in Kentucky he lived at this time is unrecorded, but it must have been closer to Louisville than Covington, for the former became the first stop of his long journey. There, he stole away on one of the many boats that plied the

[9] As published in Tim Talbott, "Random Thoughts on History," <http://randomthoughtsonhistory.blogspot.com> (accessed on 26 March 2021), with additional gratitude to Kathy Nichols of the Farmington Historic Plantation in Louisville for narrowing down the clipping's date of publication and the newspaper from which it came.

[10] "A Man with a Strange History," newspaper clipping, ca. 1900, as published in Peter Meyler, "Daddy Hall's Incredible Story Through the Years," *Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal* 3 (2005-2006), 3.

[11] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself with an introduction by Lucius C. Matlack* (New York: Henry Bibb, 1849), 15-16.

Ohio River. He may have been assisted by a dockworker or another in Louisville who, at great risk to themselves, worked to help others find freedom.[12] However it transpired, Venerable found passage up the Ohio River, travelling eighty kilometers to arrive on the north shore at Madison, in Indiana's Jefferson County.

Venerable would be forgiven for breathing deeply as the boat docked in the free state of Indiana, but even in Madison, he was perilously close to Kentucky and to the slave catchers whose livelihood depended on his failure. Madison was home to a thriving free Black community but some of its White residents were as pro-slavery as their southern neighbours, and it wasn't unheard of for even free Blacks to at times thwart the escape of fugitives by selling them out to slave catchers.[13] American historian, J. Michael Raley, makes clear that the Underground Railway "movement as a whole was interracial, dangerous, and complex, with blacks working in tandem with trusted Whites at great peril to themselves and their families."[14] Putting trust in anyone was fraught with great risk, but that is what Samuel Venerable did. Whether he approached one of the town's Black churches, or already had the name of one who could help him, there were certainly people in Madison determined to help refugees who came their way. Raley further explains that,

> Many fugitive slaves arrived at Madison and its environs exhausted, physically unable to move on for several days. Working in tandem with the free black residents of the Georgetown district, rural Jefferson County white abolitionists and black farmers supplied fugitive slaves with temporary shelter, hot meals, dry clothing, encouragement, and, at the appropriate time, connections to the next station northward.[15]

For Samuel Venerable, that next station was Newport (Fountain City). Located near the Ohio border northeast of Madison, Newport had long served as a line on the Underground Railway through the work of Black families in the area. It wasn't until the mid-1820s that a community of Quakers became involved. Known as the Society of Friends, they were a Protestant religious group with pacifist and egalitarian leanings who

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[12] The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 made clear that not only was an enslaved person escaping bondage a crime, but any who knowing aided them, in any state, could also be prosecuted and face a fine of up to $500 USD in addition to up to a year in prison. "Fugitive Slave Act of 1793," *Proceedings and Debates of the House of Representatives of the United States at the Second Session of the Second Congress, Begun at the City of Philadelphia, November 5, 1792*, "Annals of Congress, 2nd Congress, 2nd Session (5 November 1792 to 2 March 1793)," 1414-1415, as reproduced at <www.ushistory.org> (accessed on 19 November 2021).

[13] In Madison, several free Blacks, "severely beat a black man named John Simmons for betraying a runaway slave. Having overheard a conversation... Simmons had passed the information on to slave catchers who recaptured the fugitive at North Madison and returned him to his Kentucky owner." J. Michael Raley, "The Underground Railroad in Jefferson County, Indiana: An Interracial Partnership Ahead of its Time," *Indiana Magazine of History* 116:4 (December 2020), 323.

[14] Raley, "The Underground Railroad in Jefferson County," 296.

[15] *Ibid*., 300.

eschewed traditional church hierarchy. White abolitionists, these Newport settlers had left North Carolina to support the formerly-enslaved, after that state passed legislation ousting Black people altogether. One of them, Levi Coffin, had assisted fugitives from slavery since his boyhood in North Carolina. He and his wife Catharine moved to Newport, Indiana in early 1826.

Venerable's obituary made clear that it was Madison-area Quakers who helped him on his journey to freedom, and Levi Coffin's reminiscences suggest that it may have been in his very house that Venerable found shelter. Coffin later recalled that,

> In the winter of 1826-27, fugitives began to come to our house, and as it became more widely known... that the slaves fleeing from bondage would find a welcome and shelter... the number increased. Friends in the neighborhood who had formerly stood aloof from the work, fearful of the penalty of the law, were encouraged to engage in it when they saw... the success that attended my efforts. They would contribute to clothe the fugitives, and would aid in forwarding them on their way, but were timid about sheltering them under their roof; so that part of the work devolved on us.[16]

Whether or not Venerable was taken in by the Coffins or another member of the Newport community, that it was Madison-area Quakers who sheltered him allows one to narrow down the decade of Samuel Venerable's escape to the years in or after 1826.

Though Levi Coffin later proclaimed himself the "President of the Underground Railroad," the movement's secrecy necessitated that it was never a hierarchical system, but rather comprised small, secretive, independent networks efficient at sheltering and transporting refugees just as far as the next place of refuge. Those involved didn't necessarily know the details of an escapee's journey beyond that point, and for their own safety, that was probably for the best.[17] From Madison to Newport to points further north, it was through this clandestine network that Samuel Venerable arrived to the relative safety of Ontario.

A New Life in Ontario

The United States had passed its Fugitive Slave Act in 1793, which made both escaping bondage and the aiding of such escapees a punishable crime. By contrast, that very same year Lt. Gov. John Graves Simcoe was working in Upper Canada, as Ontario was then known, to abolish slavery in the province altogether. Like other English abolitionists, he found the institution inherently un-British with no constitutional support, and it was sharply at odds with his Christian beliefs. That some of his peers in government were themselves wealthy slaveowners hindered him in these efforts, but he

[16] Levi Coffin, *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the Reputed President of the Underground Railroad, Being a Brief History of the Labors of a Lifetime in Behalf of the Slave, with the Stories of Numerous Fugitives, Who Gained Their Freedom Through His Instrumentality, and Many Other Incidents*, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Co., 1880), 107-108.

[17] Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 184-85; Raley, "The Underground Railroad in Jefferson County," 299.

was successful in passing an Act to limit slavery in 1793.[18]

Simcoe's Act was the first such legislation in the British Empire and, though it didn't offer freedom to those already enslaved in Upper Canada, it specified that any children born to them would automatically gain their liberty when they reached the age of twenty-five. Importantly, it also prohibited the further importation of enslaved people into Ontario. As a result, slavery in the province was already waning when the British Empire finally abolished the practice completely in 1833.[19] As Canadian historian, Afua Cooper, made clear, one of the most poignant repercussions of Simcoe's 1793 Act, "was the idea that any slave arriving on Upper Canadian soil from another country would immediately be free."[20] It didn't take long for this news to reach those enslaved in the United States.

Many refugees who came by way of Madison and Newport arrived in Ontario via Detroit. That Samuel Venerable's first home on Canadian soil was Toronto suggests that his route to freedom more likely involved crossing Lake Erie from Sandusky, Ohio or a similar 'railway' stop, before arriving at Buffalo or Ontario's Niagara Peninsula. From either place it was a short journey by land or across Lake Ontario to York, which in 1834 officially became Toronto. The city's population then wasn't large, and its Black population was smaller still. Yonge Street barber, Elisha Edmunds, who was interviewed by Toronto's *Globe* newspaper in 1886, informed the reporter that, "When he reached Little York on the 11th of July 1832, there were only six coloured families in the place."[21] Edmunds and his family added an additional seventeen people to that population. All members of Toronto's Black community would have known one another, and some may have hailed from the same regions of the U.S. Karolyn Smardz Frost notes that while some of the city's White population resented this influx of refugees, others were supportive. Regardless of how the wider population felt, unlike many American cities, she explains that in Toronto of the 1830s,

> No one stepped off a sidewalk into the city's notoriously muddy streets when a white person wanted to pass.... Instead, black Canadians owned homes, stores, restaurants and one very nice hotel. Generous and community-spirited, they saw to the needs of incoming freedom-seekers as well as their own.[22]

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[18] Simcoe's 1793 legislation is more properly titled, an "Act to prevent the further introduction of slaves, and to limit the term of contract for servitude within this province."

[19] Afua Cooper, "Acts of Resistance: Black Men and Women Engage Slavery in Upper Canada, 1793-1803," *Ontario History* 99:1 (Spring 2007), 9-12. The British Slavery Abolition Act was passed at the end of August 1833, but came into effect 1 August 1834. Known as Emancipation Day, this date has been celebrated annually and, in the nineteenth century, these celebrations were often large events that brought people together from other communities.

[20] Cooper, "Acts of Resistance," 13, 15.

[21] "Our Coloured Citizens: Interviews with Some of Them on Important Subjects," *The Globe*, 5 February 1886, as printed in Smardz Frost, *Steal Away Home*, 41.

[22] Smardz Frost, *Steal Away Home*, 41-42.

As a free man, Samuel Venerable enlisted as a soldier during the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837, likely joining the company raised in his adopted city of Toronto. During that conflict, the province's five other Coloured Companies were based further south in Hamilton, Niagara, and St. Catharines, and west in Chatham and Sandwich (Windsor). Historian Wayne Edward Kelly found that among Ontario's early nineteenth-century Black population, the desire to serve was strong, despite rampant social prejudice in the province. He quoted the Rev. Josiah Henson, who had fled slavery in the United States and who, himself, led the Sandwich Coloured Company during the Rebellion. Looking back in 1881, Henson reflected that, "The coloured men were willing to help defend the government that had given them a home when they had fled from slavery."[23] That government was eager to accept their help, finding these recruits to be trustworthy and loyal fighters. Kelly explains that in contrast to many of the White units,

> The black soldiers were extremely loyal to the colonial government and desertion was rare. Many were escaped slaves who despised the United States.... The Coloured Corps effectively reduced desertion from the British Army by removing white soldiers from posts close to the United States and by providing patrols to deter and arrest potential deserters.[24]

Despite this fervent loyalty, service, and appreciation for Upper Canada, the social prejudice of the day affected the esteem by which these soldiers, and their companies, were held by officers and other figures of authority. Aside from being in segregated units, Black men found themselves out of the running to become officers themselves. Black companies were led by Whites, but deeming such an assignment lowly, it was often only the young or otherwise inexperienced White officers who ended up accepting such positions, to the detriment of the Coloured Companies they led.[25]

At some point after the Rebellion, Samuel Venerable made his way westward to the city of London, but when or why he made this move is unclear. Though he does not appear on the census of 1851, he had likely moved to London by that decade. In 1855, it had around twelve-thousand inhabitants, with a Black population of close to 350.[26] In June of that year, Benjamin Drew of Boston, Massachusetts, visited the city under the auspices of the Canadian Anti-Slavery Society to conduct interviews with some of its Black residents as part of an initiative to record the experiences of those who had fled slavery. He didn't interview Venerable in the course of that

[23] Josiah Henson, *An Autobiography of Rev. Josiah Henson* (London, ON: Schuyler, Smith & Co., 1881), 177, as quoted in Wayne Edward Kelly, "Race and Segregation in the Upper Canada Militia," *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research* 78:316 (Winter 2000), 129.

[24] Kelly, "Race and Segregation in the Upper Canada Militia," 270.

[25] *Ibid.*, 273.

[26] Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008), 147 [originally published Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1856].

endeavour, but those he did speak with provide a feel for the city at the time.

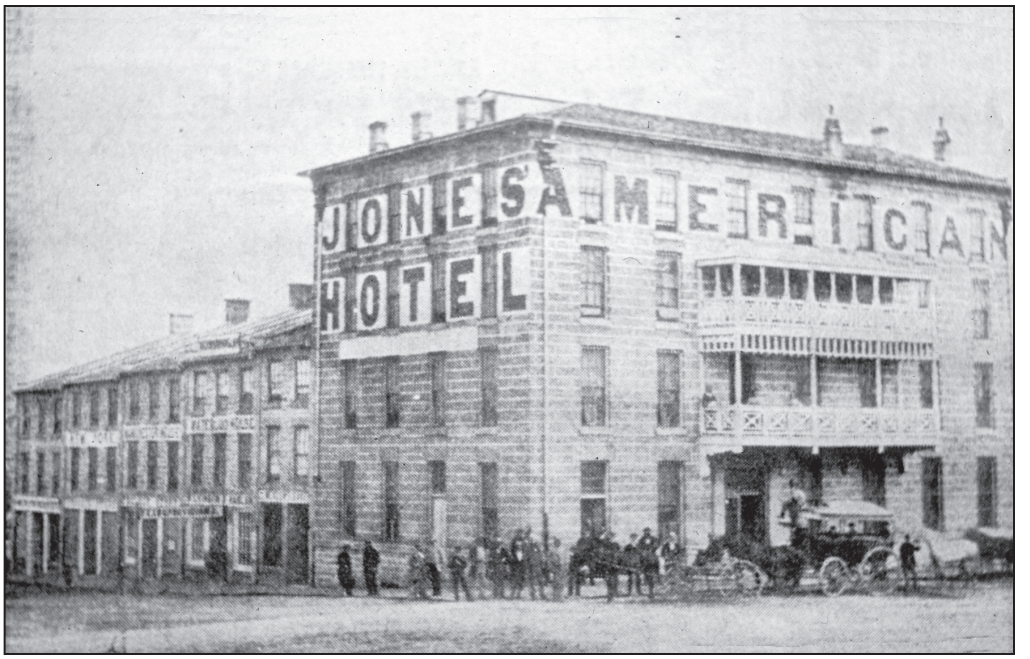
Francis Henderson, who had fled from Washington, D.C. in 1841, noted that in London, "there is much prejudice here against us" and recounted examples in which he'd experienced targeted inconvenience and discrimination, and otherwise found himself shut out of the city's predominantly White society. Despite such prejudice, which was widespread in Ontario, schools were not segregated and many churches welcomed those of all backgrounds, though Black congregations also existed. Kentuckian Aby Jones explained to Drew that they experienced London as a city of opportunity, where those who had arrived as penniless refugees had, through hard work, found little difficulty earning a living. Another former Kentuckian, Alfred Jones, who ran an apothecary in London, explained that, "there are coloured people employed in this city in almost all the mechanic arts; also in grocery and provision stores etc. Many are succeeding well, are buying houses, speculating in lands, and some are living on the interest of their money."[27]

With the circumstances ripe for work in London, it is unknown what prompted Samuel Venerable to leave that city for Guelph, though he was likely following an opportunity or personal contact. There were connections between Black communities throughout southwestern Ontario, and word of opportunities would have spread from one to the next. Though literacy rates were low, visits between family, friends, and business associates were one way news spread between communities, and there were social opportunities to gather from afar, such as for Emancipation Day celebrations held each August since 1834. With gaps in surviving records, the specifics of Venerable's motivations and movements during his early years in the province remain unknown; this leaves lacking an understanding of how long he remained in Toronto and London, and with whom he developed relationships. His obituary made clear, however, that he moved to Wellington County's Guelph around 1861. Once there, he called the 'Royal City' home for the rest of his life.

Having spent his early life enslaved, Samuel Venerable had both witnessed his fair share of violence, and experienced it directly. As much is suggested in his obituary. Each person's resilience is different but the impacts of trauma can at times last generations.[28] Like others in Ontario who left loved ones behind when they escaped bondage (or whose parents had before them), Venerable would have had his

[27] Alfred T. Jones, as quoted in Drew, *The Refugee*, 152.

[28] The Truth and Reconciliation Report that documented the experiences of many of Canada's Indigenous people makes this clear. It notes that for survivors of Residential Schools, beyond the suffering and trauma experienced by the student, also impacted were, "the Survivor's partners, their children, their grandchildren, their extended communities, and their families." Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," 2015, 135-36, <trc.ca> (accessed on 4 June 2021).



Few nineteenth-century photographs have survived of Guelph's South Ward. This one shows Jones' American Hotel at the junction of Essex Street, Waterloo Avenue, and Gordon Street, ca. 1870. Wellington County Museum and Archives, 6731.

fair share of grief and anger to process, alongside the gratitude he no doubt felt for opportunities north of the border. But even with freedom in hand, violence continued to touch Samuel's life, and the lives of those most close to him. This becomes clear when examining his Guelph relationships.

Sophia Walden

At the beginning of the 1860s, Samuel may have been close to seventy years old when he met and began living with a young woman who was closer to twenty. Her name was Sophia Walden and their relationship might have begun as an arrangement of convenience. Samuel worked as a tradesman, in later years as a whitewasher, and he needed a housekeeper to cook and clean for him. Having left his family in Kentucky, he also might have been looking for companionship. Sophia was a young Black woman who may have welcomed the security of a position with a man who was steadily employed. With few opportunities for well-paid work, accepting a live-in housekeeping position with a much older man had by that time become a time-tested survival strategy for women living an otherwise precarious existence.[29] Details of how they met are not recorded, but it

[29] Historian, Constance Backhouse, explained that, "Domestic service was the largest single occu-

is clear that Venerable and Walden lived together for at least a decade.

Sophia Walden and her siblings were free-born Ontarians but there is evidence that her family faced emotional struggles; both she and her younger sister, Rachel, dealt with alcoholism from an early age. Sophia's mother, Lucy, was also native to Ontario, but her father, Thomas Walden, had been born in the United States around 1788. His story has been lost to time, but it's very possible that he carried the trauma of slavery with him to Canada. In January of 1852, the family was living just south of Guelph in Puslinch Township, with Sophia having not long before left their household for nearby Eramosa. With whom Sophia was living at that time isn't known but by the end of the decade, her younger sister, Rachel, had followed her to that township.

In late 1858 or early 1859, Sophia's sister, Rachel, barely a teenager at the time, began living with George Harris, a Black man in his mid-forties. George and Rachel made their home in rural Eramosa Township, not far from Duffield's Tavern on the Eramosa Road, near the Guelph Township boundary. It wasn't a glorious existence. By George's own account, their home there was a small, leaky shanty roofed with tree bark. In their eighteen months together, both had become heavy drinkers and it was suspected by neighbours and Rachel's family that George was prone to beating her. The courts later summed up her young life with him as 'wretched.' Rachel came to her end after fleeing into the woods to escape one of his outbursts, only to be caught and hauled back to their shanty. George Harris was later tried for having bludgeoned Rachel in a drunken fit of rage. He maintained his innocence but was found guilty and publicly hanged outside Guelph's Wellington County Court House in December of 1860. Hangings in Guelph were rare and a large crowd turned out to witness the spectacle.[30]

Sophia Walden had not been shielded from the violence done to her younger sister. Immediately after the murder, Harris had taken Sophia and her mother to the shanty to deal with Rachel's bloodied body. He then took Sophia with him to buy her sister's coffin. Sophia was called as a witness at the ensuing murder trial, and both she and her mother testified to their awareness that Rachel lived with Harris' bouts of jealous violence.[31] By the time Samuel Venerable met her, Sophia Walden's name had become known

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pational category for Canadian women at this time... Many servants came from families where poverty was so acute that they placed themselves out simply to be fed. These women worked for room and board alone... When the scarcity of female labour forced employers to pay cash, wages were generally half those paid to male servants." She also noted that at this time it was all too common, to the point of expectation, for the master of the house to take sexual advantage of his access to, and power over, female, live-in servants. Constance Backhouse, *Petticoats & Prejudice: Women and Law in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: The Osgoode Society, 1991), 59-61.

[30] "Murder Case," *Elora Observer*, 24 August 1860; "Execution of George Harris: His Dying Statements!" *Elora Observer*, 24 December 1860.

[31] "Wellington Fall Assizes," *Elora Observer*, 23 November 1860.

to the people of Guelph through her involvement in the sensationalized murder trial and subsequent public hanging. Such notoriety would not have made her life any easier.

When Sophia met Samuel, she may have been grateful for the stability his situation offered. It was clear, however, that while he was seeking household assistance and possibly the romantic companionship of a woman, he wasn't looking to get married. Jerry Prager was likely correct in his suggestion that Samuel Venerable's reason for eventually marrying much later in life, "probably had to do with the concern of his having a living wife," noting that many fugitives to Canada had done the same, with several returning to spouses in the U.S. after the Civil War.[32] Prager explained that by mid-century, the issue had become such that church ministers who unwittingly performed bigamous ceremonies risked losing their position as a result, while the couples involved faced an essential excommunication. Though disreputable by the standards of the day, cohabitating was undoubtedly less fraught than bigamy for couples in Ontario who still had spouses stateside.

It is difficult to place Samuel and Sophia's household within Guelph during this period; newspapers refer to it only as being in the South Ward where the bulk of Guelph's Black population lived. A planned town founded by the Canada Company in 1827, Guelph boasted just over five thousand inhabitants by 1861. Though growing, by 1871, the entire population of the Royal City had not quite reached seven thousand. A few dozen people of African descent were recorded living in Guelph by 1861, but after the founding of the British Methodist Episcopal Church on Essex Street in 1870, those numbers climbed, with over a hundred recorded by 1881.[33] According to research conducted by historian, Debra Nash-Chambers,

> An enclave of Black households emerged on the blocks surrounding the church property on Essex Street.... By 1861, a Black neighbourhood was forming, and over the next two decades households headed chiefly by men employed as labourers or whitewashers were evident on streets such as Essex, Devonshire, Manchester, and Durham. Others gravitated toward the central business district and elsewhere in working class areas of town, but most Black Guelphites lived in modest dwellings near the BME church.[34]

Samuel Venerable does not appear on most tax assessments of the early 1860s. This means only that for much of that time he didn't own property and wasn't a primary renter, which would be the case if he and Sophia were living with other adults. Assessments also listed men eligible for statute labour and militia duty but Samuel's advanced age would have excluded him from both. The first time

[32] Prager, *Blood in the Mortar*, 171.

[33] Rosaleen Heffernan, "The Black Society of Victorian Guelph," unpublished essay, 1996, Wellington County Museum and Archives, A1994.27, Black History – Wellington County.

[34] Debra Nash-Chambers, introduction to Melba Jewell, "Recollections of the BME Church in Guelph: 83 Essex Street," *Historic Guelph* 45 (2006).

FIRST-CLASS

FAMILY GROCERIES, LIQUORS

&c., purchased for CASH in the Montreal and New York markets, which they are determined to offer as low as any house in the trade. Their stock of

Foreign Wines and Liquors

IS VERY COMPLETE,

Consisting of genuine Port, Sherry and Claret Wines Pale and Dark Brandies, Rums, Gins, &c.

IN DOMESTIC LIQUORS

Their stock of pure Chippawa, Old Rye and Toddy Whiskeys. Dow's Pale Ale, in wood and bottle, will be found equally cheap and well selected.

GROCERY DEPARTMENT!

In the Grocery Department a large stock of First-class Young Hyson, Black and Japanese

TEAS,

Raw and Refined Sugars, Fruits, Pickles, &c., very cheap. Remember the Address,

KIERAN BROTHERS,

Sign of the Big Tea Chest, Wyndham-St

Guelph, Jan 29, 1864. 537

Alcohol in this period was inexpensive and easy to come by. Kieran Brothers' "family groceries" business, seen here ca. 1860, was Located on Guelph's Wyndham Street, around the corner from City Hall. Its ad published in the Guelph Weekly Mercury in May of 1864 makes it clear that a good part of their business involved the sale of alcohol. Wellington County Museum and Archives, 12187.

he appeared on a Guelph assessment roll was in 1864. Recorded mysteriously as Gloster Venerable, he was the only man by that surname in town and, at fifty-five years old, was close enough to the right age to be Samuel.[35]

Though Sophia Walden may have found some stability in her new relationship with Samuel Venerable, it is ironic that in many ways her domestic situation mirrored that of her late sister, Rachel. Both were very young women living with and reliant upon, but not married to, much older men. Both households also wrestled with domestic violence. In 1860, that in Rachel Walden's home ended in her death. Five years later, Samuel Venerable almost met the same fate.

The *Guelph Mercury* reported in July of 1864 that "Samuel Venables [*sic*], for a breach of the peace, was fined 50c and costs."[36] The reporter on the police beat didn't elaborate as to how, exactly, Samuel had breached the peace but implicit in the charge was violence against a person or the threat of it. It could have involved anything from drunken threats to a common fist fight. It may very well have related to domestic violence within his household, for when Samuel next made the news, the report left little room to doubt the volatility of his home life.

[35] That record noted that Venerable was living at "Mrs. Oliver's house, Waterloo St." Catherine Oliver owned a few properties in Guelph. There was one on Surrey Street, a few on Queen Street, but only one on Waterloo, located just west of Edinburgh Road between Roland and what is at time of publication, St. Arnaud Street. Wellington County Museum and Archives, Guelph Town municipal records, A1991.114, Series 3, File 2, assessment roll, 1864.

[36] "Police Court," *Guelph Weekly Mercury*, 15 July 1864.

Almost a year to the day after Samuel was charged with breach of the peace, the same paper described the argument that almost ended his life,

> On Monday evening another shooting affray took place among the colored people of the South Ward. It appears a woman named Sophia Waldren [*sic*] who has been keeping house for a man of color named Venerable, attempted to do that individual bodily harm by throwing stones and others missiles at him, but this mode of punishment not suiting Sophia's ideas, she went in the house and armed herself with a gun, which had previously been loaded with large sized shot, and putting it to her shoulder tried to discharge it, but not having raised the lock, of course it would not go off. Discovering her mistake, she instantly raised the lock and replaced the gun to her shoulder and fired at Venerable but missed him. She was arrested and tried before the Mayor on Wednesday when the evidence being strong against her, 'Soph' was sent up for trial.[37]

Though the reporter was flippant in his telling of another episode in the lives of Guelph's Black Community, in actuality, much of Guelph's White population, and society at large during this period, was riddled with domestic and community violence.[38] Liquor was cheap and easily obtainable and, as a result, alcoholism became a widespread issue. Firearms were ubiquitous, men ruled their households how they chose, life could change quickly, and a vigilante mentality operated in tandem with more official rule of law. For people experiencing difficultly at home, there were no government programmes where one could seek help for mistreatment or addiction. Gaols offered a reprieve of sorts by way of shelter but just as often presented a situation that was as unpleasant in other ways. Throughout the 1860s, the Wellington County Gaol in downtown Guelph housed criminals while they awaited trial or served short sentences, but it also doubled as a drunk tank, insane asylum, orphanage, home for unwed mothers, and a place to temporarily house the homeless.[39] The bulk of these inmates were White but, for newspapermen and their readers, reports of violence within the Black community may have served to reinforce Eurocentric inner narratives.

Looking past the reporter's tone, the events related by the newspaper reveal the volatility of Samuel Venerable and Sophia Walden's relationship: they argued, it escalated, Sophia took a shot at him. Had she hit her mark, the story of Samuel's incredibly long life would never have been told. As they had lived together for many years, it is unlikely that this was the first time that an argument in their household had turned violent. The case was deemed exceptional enough,

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[37] "Shooting Affray," *Guelph Weekly Mercury*, 13 July 1865.

[38] In examining cases of domestic violence in nineteenth-century Canada, Constance Backhouse found that, "Case after case revealed women brutalized by vicious husbands. They were strangled, beaten with the handles of brooms, scalded with boiling water, threatened with loaded revolvers, kicked, bloodied, bruised, blackened and blistered." Backhouse, *Petticoats & Prejudice*, 175-77.

[39] Susan Dunlop, "From English Workhouse to County Poor House: The Journeys of Charlotte Hawes and Priscilla Kedge," *Wellington County History* 34 (2021), 93-94.

however, that Sophia was charged.

After her arrest on 10 July 1865, Sophia Walden was confined to the local gaol to await trial that September. There was a long docket at the Court of Quarter Sessions and Sophia's case wasn't heard until the second day, Wednesday, 13 September 1865. She appeared in the courtroom before Judge MacDonald and the men of the Grand Jury.[40] It was the same place where she'd appeared five years earlier as a witness in her sister's murder trial.

Women of this period notoriously had a more difficult time than men in the courtroom, as their reputations, intellect, and reliability were often questioned, and the word of male accusers or abusers was routinely taken over that of female victims and witnesses.[41] A young woman of colour entering the courtroom to face the authority of a sea of White, male faces, Sophia's hopes can't have been high for a fair and careful appreciation of her circumstances. Not only was she Black, she was a single woman living with a man outside of wedlock. She also had connections to a notorious murder trial and, by the charges against her, had breached gender expectations through her intemperance and violence towards the man of the house, who was also her employer. For the men of the courtroom, Sophia's only asset, her reputation, wouldn't have held much value to begin with.

According to a summation of the testimony, Sophia Walden was a hopeless alcoholic and layabout who became violent with Samuel Venerable after he complained that she wasn't holding up her end of their arrangement by cooking for him. It is clear that for reporters and readers, the couple's Blackness was key to the story. The *Guelph Mercury* reported that,

> The prisoner (coloured) was charged with shooting at one Samuel Venerable (coloured) with intent to kill or do serious bodily harm. From the evidence of the prosecutor, it appears that the prisoner had been keeping house for him for some years. On the 10th July, Venerable was working at Mr. Hough's. He went home to dinner [i.e., lunch] but found on his arrival no meal ready and Sophy drunk. On going home at night, he found her still drunk. They had some rough words when she got hold of a scythe, which she flourished in a threatening manner. He took it from her. She then got hold of a gun with a small charge of buckshot in it. She fired at him, the charge passing over his head.[42]

This description makes clear that al-

[40] The jurors were Richard Allen, Alex Campbell, William Dixon, Thomas Johnson, William Lennox, George Loree, Hugh Maxwell, William H. Mills, John Macdonald, Allan McIntyre, John McLean, Andrew Nodwell, George Park, William Parsons, John Peters, George Scott, John Swan, William Tindal, Joseph Truman, Archibald Thompson, John Thompson, Thomas Watson, and Richard Young. James Simpson acted as foreman. "County Court and Quarter Sessions," *Guelph Weekly Mercury*, 14 September 1865.

[41] In their studies, both Constance Backhouse and Karen Dubinsky made clear that the Canadian justice system in this period was routinely skewed against not only women generally, but in particular those who were Irish Catholics or people of colour: Backhouse, *Petticoats & Prejudice*, 3, 6, 221, 228-29, 240-41; Karen Dubinsky, *Improper Advances: Rape and Heterosexual Conflict in Ontario, 1880-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 93-94, 140, 142, 163.

[42] *Guelph Weekly Mercury*, 14 September 1865.

though the altercation was emotionally charged and could have ended badly, no physical harm came to either of them. Despite that outcome and a witness, unnamed in the paper, who refused to testify that Walden intended to harm Venerable when she fired the gun, and "other evidence [that] corroborated this testimony," the Grand Jury found Sophia guilty of shooting with intent to do bodily harm. At the same time, the jury also provided the judge with a report of a recent tour they had taken of the local gaol. It recommended that prisoners be put to work in order to defray the costs associated with housing them. Perhaps with that recommendation in mind, Judge MacDonald passed sentence on Sophia Walden. She would spend the next six months at hard labour in the Wellington County Gaol. It can't have been an outcome that pleased Sophia or Samuel.

Their relationship may have been tense at times, but they were mutually reliant and likely cared for one another despite the volatility of their home life, for Sophia returned to Samuel after her release from gaol. Several years later, in 1871, when Charles Knowles visited their home in fulfillment of his duties as census taker, the couple was still together. Though unwed, by their demeanor or how they answered his questions, Knowles took them for a married couple. He recorded Samuel's age as seventy and Sophia's as thirty-two.

What became of Sophia Walden after that census is uncertain. She may have moved, married, or died an early death. What is clear is that after over a decade living with Sophia Walden, Samuel Venerable was about to find a different woman to share his home. That woman was Mary Ann Pope.

Mary Ann Pope

Initially a large community of Black American refugees some fifty families in size, the Queen's Bush settlement was only about forty kilometers northwest of Guelph, and maintained connections with that town. The settlement had developed organically from 1833 in a remote forested area in what became Wellington County's Peel and Waterloo County's Wellesley Townships. By 1847, it boasted a population of around fifteen-hundred settlers.[43] After the area was surveyed in 1848, many of those with cleared farms to which they held no legal claim felt that they should cut and run before their lands were sold out from beneath them. As Queen's Bush settler, William Jackson, explained in 1855, "the coloured people might have held their lands still, but they were afraid they would not be able to pay when pay-day came. Under these circumstances, many of them sold out cheap."[44] By the mid-nineteenth century, most of the community had dispersed for other settlements to the north in Grey County, or had

[43] Based on information about the Wellington District's Queen's Bush settlement provided by Paola Brown on behalf of "the Coloured inhabitants of Hamilton" in an address sent to the Earl of Elgin in 1847, and published, along with the reply he later received, in the *Guelph Herald*, 2 November 1847.

[44] William Jackson in Drew, *The Refugee,* 182.

made the move to urban life in Guelph. Despite this dispersal, some chose to remain on their farms.

Born in Pennsylvania in the first years of the nineteenth century, Mary Ann Silby and her husband, Moses Pope had lived in Toronto until the mid-1840s when they made the move to the Queen's Bush settlement.[45] A few years later the couple was well into middle age, farming in that area of Peel Township with the help of their six children. It wasn't an easy life. The family of eight worked the land while living in a simple log shanty. The proximity of friends and family within the settlement provided support and a social network, as did those in Guelph.

Moses Pope, died some time in the 1850s, when only in his fifties. As a widow, Mary Ann remained on the farm which, by 1861, had been taken over by their eldest son, Moses Jr. By then he was married with two young sons. Also living with the family were two of Mary Ann's children, Henrietta and Sylvester, both of whom were still in their teens.

Life in their log house was not always harmonious, for Moses Jr. and his wife Elizabeth were prone to fighting. The end of their relationship came in 1866 after one such row. The *Berliner Journal* reported that, "owing to a quarrel in his home [Moses Pope] had not eaten anything for several days, devoured six cans of oysters and two pounds of tallow on Friday evening. He soon became very ill and died on Saturday night."[46] The nature of the argument and events leading to Moses Jr.'s death were not noted by the local papers. Given the unusual nature of the items in which he overindulged, Elizabeth may have denied him food until, ravenous to the point of desperation, he feasted on the tallow more often used to make soap and candles. His untimely end left the family without a patriarch.

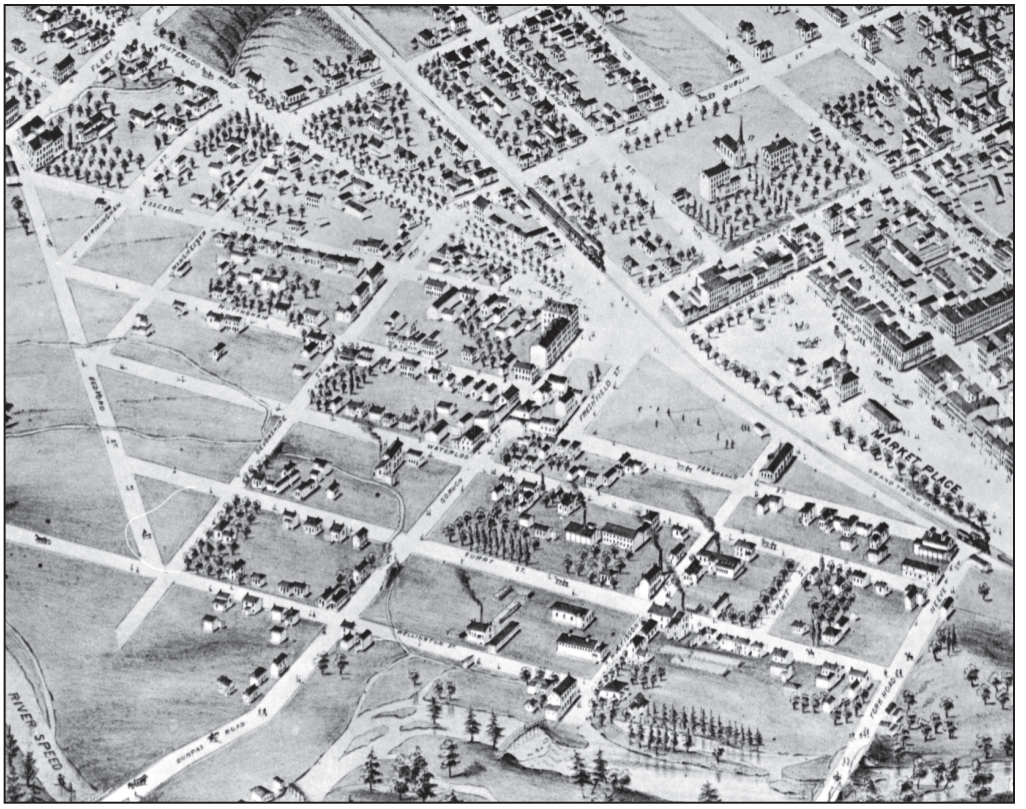
With her husband and eldest son gone, Mary Ann Pope would have been hard-pressed to get by on her own. By 1871, she was living with her daughter, Henrietta, who by then had married a neighbour, Samuel Brown. It must have been a busy household—perhaps too busy, for Mary Ann soon made plans to marry Guelph's Samuel Venerable. He may have been a long-time friend of the Popes, as they had once been part of the same small community in Toronto. It's also possible that both Venerable and Moses Pope Sr. had served together during the Upper Canada Rebellion.[47]

On 12 April 1873, Mary Ann Pope

[45] The date for this move is based on their children's later-recorded places of birth. Linda Brown-Kubisch, *The Queen's Bush Settlement: Black Pioneers 1839-1865* (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2004), 222.

[46] *Berliner Journal*, 15 November 1866, as quoted in Brown-Kubisch, *The Queen's Bush Settlement,* 222.

[47] Evidence for Moses Pope Sr.'s service is suggested by an 1847 petition that he signed, which was sent to the Governor General on behalf of dozens of Black settlers of the Queen's Bush, requesting more time to pay for the land on which they had settled in Peel and Wellesley Townships. It made a point of reminding the Governor General that, "we are loyal subjects to our sovering [*sic*] Queen Victoria, every man, and when the outbreak of '37 took place, we turned out to a man in defence of the Country and done our



The South Ward; detail of an aerial plan of Guelph by Herman Brosius, 1872. Wellington County Museum and Archives, MAP 109.

and Samuel Venerable were married at Samuel Brown's house in Peel Township. She was listed as sixty-nine years old. Though some records purported him to be a good twenty years older than her, Samuel gave his age as only fifty-four. By that time, he had been working as a white-washer in Guelph for many years and, after the wedding, Mary Ann moved into his Essex Street house in Guelph's South Ward. After so many years with Sophia Walden, it must have seemed strange to be sharing his home with a woman of his own generation.

Eight years later the couple was still together with both listed on the 1881 census as pushing eighty. Despite advancing age, Samuel remained fit and strong, continuing to work as a white washer. Living with them was Mary Ann's granddaughter Frances "Fanny" Brown, the daughter of Samuel and Henrietta who,

duty as soldiers and is ready and willing at any time to [do] the same." As reproduced in Brown-Kubisch, *The Queen's Bush Settlement*, 241. That Samuel Venerable could have known the Popes from his time and in Toronto and/or the military was also put forth in Prager, *Blood in the Mortar*, 172.

The fragment of Mary Ann Venerable's tombstone at the Methodist Episcopal Cemetery in Peel Township as it appeared in 2005; photo by Stephen Bowley. Wellington County Museum and Archives, A2006.235.

by this time, had become their Guelph neighbours. At eleven years old, Fanny would have helped her grandmother with chores around the house.

This snapshot of family life was soon to change as Mary Ann Venerable passed away only a few months later on 10 October 1881.[48] Samuel arranged for her to be buried in the British Methodist Episcopal Cemetery in Peel Township where so many of the Black settlers in her former neighbourhood had been put to rest. She was interred beside the elderly minister who had years earlier performed her marriage to Samuel Venerable. A few years later, the minister's wife was buried on the other side of Mary Ann's grave.[49]

The tombstone erected at the head of Mary Ann's grave featured an encircled hand pointing upwards to heaven, flanked by two carved roses. It began with the inscription, "In Memory of Mary A. Venerable..." By 1979, when the Ontario Genealogical Society first transcribed the stone, it had broken and the bulk of the inscription had been lost.[50] The section bearing her name had likewise disappeared by 2005, leaving only the upper portion with its carved hand and roses. Sadly, that stone fragment is all that remains in the graveyard to indicate

[48] Reports published in May of 1882 noted that Mary Ann Venerable had died "about six months ago." *Guelph Herald*, as republished in *The Grey Review* (Durham), 18 May 1882. Her death wasn't registered with the province, but that she died on 10 October 1881 at the age of 79 years, five months, is provided in a partial transcription of her tombstone from 1934. Mennonite Archives of Ontario, University of Waterloo, Eldon D. Weber fonds, Hist. Mss. 1.187, Series 7, File 5, Angus S. Bauman, "Records of Martins, North Woolwich, and the 'Coloured' Graveyard on Lot 17, Concession 4, Peel Township, Wellington County," 1934. I extend thanks to Jerry Prager for directing me to the source of this transcription.

[49] From plan of the cemetery, Mennonite Archives of Ontario, Bauman, "Records of Martins," 1934.

[50] Wellington County Branch Ontario Genealogical Society, *British Methodist Episcopal [African] Cemetery transcriptions* (Guelph: Ontario Genealogical Society, 1979, revised 2005), 4. This cemetery had been earlier transcribed by Angus S. Bauman in 1934: see footnote 48.

that she was ever there.

She had died in the fall of 1881 but it wasn't until the following spring that anyone noticed anything amiss. Burials rarely took place in the new year when the ground was frozen, so it wasn't until 23 April 1882 that another funeral took place at the B.M.E. burial ground. Being a small cemetery, funeral attendees soon noticed that the soil appeared curiously disturbed around Mary Ann Venerable's grave. Fearing the worst, attendees notified Samuel in Guelph. One can only imagine the distress that the thought of anyone desecrating her grave evoked. Samuel couldn't, or chose not to, make the trip to investigate. Instead, the *Guelph Herald* reported that, "Mrs. Brown, of Guelph, a daughter of the deceased, accompanied with her cousin, visited the burying ground. They had the grave opened when it was found that the coffin had been opened and the body stolen therefrom. It was suspected that the body has been stolen by medical students."[51]

It's difficult to comprehend the grief, anguish, and anger that the family must have felt at this discovery. The idea filled Victorians with horror, and those who could afford to took what steps they could to prevent such thefts, but body-snatching was considered a necessary evil, and had been practiced in western countries for centuries.[52] It was taken for granted that the only way medical knowledge could advance, and students could develop enough familiarity with human anatomy to successfully perform surgeries, for example, was through the dissection of cadavers. Many medical schools stipulated that students provide their own specimens, much as they did their notebooks and pencils, but cadavers, legally acquired or otherwise, were costly, leaving cash-strapped students with little recourse but to engage in the distasteful practice of unearthing them themselves. In 1843 the Legislative Assembly promoted the Anatomy Act which made it legal to obtain bodies from institutions like prisons and asylums; it legislated the sending of unclaimed bodies to medical schools for dissection.[53] In addition, some people chose to sell their bodies to science, receiving payment while still alive to spend it. Despite these options, demand often outstripped supply creating a thriving black market. Reports of body-snatching in Ontario were at their highest in the 1880s when Mary Ann Venerable died.[54]

Body-snatching didn't plague Wellington County the way it did areas closer to Toronto and Kingston which had medical schools, but it did occasionally make the news. Alarm was raised in Guelph in 1864 when a partially-decomposed

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[51] *Guelph Herald*, as reported in *The Grey Review* (Durham), 18 May 1882.

[52] The term "necessary evil" was used in reference to the practice in the *Daily News*, 29 October 1888, as quoted in Scott Belyea, "A Century of Snatching: Grave Robbing in Kingston, Ontario," *Ontario History* 108:1 (Spring 2016), 31.

[53] Royce MacGillivray, "Body-Snatching in Ontario," *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History* 5 (1988), 54 and 59.

[54] Belyea, "A Century of Snatching," 29.

body was found cached in a shed by the Grand Trunk Railway station. Medical students claimed to have pooled their resources to acquire it from Toronto but it's just as likely that they had come by it through other means and, as a lucrative sideline, intended to sell it to students in that city.[55] In 1879, Dr. Abraham Groves of Fergus was initially suspected of being behind the disappearance of the body of an inmate from the Wellington County House of Industry who perished in the cold after having fled the institution. It wasn't the only time that Dr. Groves and his associates would be implicated in such activities.[56] And only a year before Mary Ann Venerable's grave was found desecrated, young teacher, Eli Bailey, shocked his coworkers at Mount Forest Central Public School when they caught him locking away human body parts in an unused classroom. An aspiring doctor, he had unearthed a recently-deceased farmer in order to further his self-education after hours.[57] Once discovered by his colleagues, Bailey left Ontario for good, high-tailing it to Michigan where he later did indeed become a doctor. The above are reports of known incidents; presumably others went successfully undetected.[58] Mary Ann Venerable's case was certainly not the last incident of this kind in the Guelph area to come to light.

Students, and those looking to profit from the sale of cadavers, tended to target cemeteries that were remote—quiet places where they could complete their work undisturbed. Popular were the graves of the marginalized: the poor, the insane, the institutionalized, and people of colour. Violations of these graves were viewed by wider society as lesser crimes than those against deceased people of higher social standing. American writer, Allison Meier, found that in the United States, Black bodies had long been targets of violence in death, as they had been in life, and for grave robbers, Black cemeteries proved a source of plunder.[59] Edward Halperin likewise found evidence that that country's enslaved population provided the overwhelming bulk of dissection specimens for schools in the south as well as in the north. Even after the Civil War, Black cemeteries and those of other marginalized groups remained the preferred targets of body snatchers.[60] Both Meier and Halperin revealed that, "public outrage mainly arose when grave robbing targeted white bodies" forcing

[55] "Body Found," *Guelph Weekly Mercury*, 17 June 1864.

[56] Ross D. Fair, "The Controversial Dr. Groves," *Wellington County History* 16 (2003), 93-106.

[57] Stephen Thorning, "Teacher dug up a body for 1881 anatomy lesson," *Wellington Advertiser*, 22 April 2005.

[58] Royce MacGillivray noted that "Body-snatching was likely to be detected only if the culprits were found at their work in the cemetery, or if they left behind them an unfilled grave, or other clear evidence that the grave had been reopened. The more professionally-minded body-snatchers appear to have prided themselves on the skill with which they restored the grave to its original condition. For these reasons, most cases of body-snatching probably passed undetected." MacGillivray, "Body-Snatching in Ontario," 53.

[59] Allison C. Meier, "Grave Robbing, Black Cemeteries, and the American Medical School," *JSTOR Daily* (24 August 2018), <daily.jstor.org> (accessed on 15 March 2021).

[60] Edward C. Halperin, "The Poor, the Black, and the Marginalized as the Source of Cadavers in

doctors and medical students to recognize a social hierarchy among corpses that mimicked that of the living.[61]

The B.M.E. Cemetery on the Fourth Line of Peel checked more than one box. The resting place of Black settlers and their descendants, it was small, rural, remote, and unlit. Samuel Venerable had spent the last eight years of his life with Mary Ann Pope. For a man who had endured more than his share of hardship, it's difficult to imagine how, so late in life and in the so-called promised land, he coped with yet another act of violence and violation, this time against his wife's body.

Elizabeth Smith

It took Samuel Venerable a full year before he married again. His new bride was Elizabeth Smith, a thirty-three-year-old originally from Richmond, Virginia, who was living in Hamilton. A spinster, it was unusual in this period for women to wait until their thirties to marry. A first marriage that late in life often suggested a mark against a woman's reputation, such as her having had a child out of wedlock. Interestingly, Samuel, who was listed as nearly eighty-years-old on the 1881 census, told the minister at his wedding two years later that he was only fifty-three. That he was taken at his word reveals just how healthy he must have appeared. It was the first time since coming to Guelph that Venerable would join with someone outside of his church, for Elizabeth was Baptist and continued that affiliation after their marriage.

Samuel Venerable's strong involvement with Guelph's British Methodist Episcopal Church makes clear that he was a religious man, and his great age may have begun to suggest to some—himself included—that he'd been blessed by divine protection. After all, he had survived enslavement, a perilous journey to Canada, active military service, countless epidemics, and the violence and uncertainty that was part and parcel of life in nineteenth-century Ontario. This may explain his courage and compassion in visiting the city's sick and terminally ill when others were fearful to go near them. The specifics of these visits have yet to come to light, but it appears that in his later years, Venerable's willingness to risk contagion by bringing comfort to the sick and dying of all cultural backgrounds made him stand out from the rest of society, and endeared him to the hearts of many in the Royal City.

Directories show that throughout the course of their marriage, Samuel and Elizabeth Venerable lived in rented accommodation on Dublin Street in Guelph's South Ward. On 28 April 1891, Edward Connor paid the home a visit to enumerate the couple for the census. Connor noted that Elizabeth was forty-one and bringing in a meager income as a washwoman. He also recorded that they lived in a four-room, two-storey wooden house, and that Samuel was ninety years old. The census doesn't say so, but by that time he looked

United States Anatomical Education," *Clinical Anatomy* 20 (2007), 490-93.

[61] Meier, "Grave Robbing, Black Cemeteries...,"; Halperin, "The Poor, the Black, and the Marginalized...," 491-92, 494.

Carden Street across from City Hall, Guelph, ca. 1890. Wellington County Museum and Archives, 12059.

it. Venerable had become so frail over the past three years that he'd been left unable to work. Elizabeth likely provided Connor with the information he needed that day for Samuel was also confined to bed. Only two days earlier, he'd come down with a bad case of the flu and was finding it increasingly hard to breathe.

Three days after Connor's visit, Samuel Venerable, with some difficulty, drew his last breath. Relying on the calculations and authority of the Rev. Minter, Dr. McGuire recorded Samuel's age at time of death as 109. That raised an eyebrow for local registrar, Richard Mitchell. Suspicious of such a great age, he endeavoured to do in May of 1891 what historians have since done with equally head-scratching results: he checked Samuel Venerable's age against those recorded in municipal records. Mitchell explained his findings in an accompanying note, "Has been on assessment Roll for many years with ages ranging from 60 to 80 yrs, was married about 10 years ago, think he called himself about 60 then. He was probably about 90."[62] It was as good a guess as any.

After Samuel Venerable died, the *Guelph Mercury* published a lengthy obituary based on information provided by the Rev. Minter of the B.M.E. Church in Guelph that Samuel had long attended.[63] To demonstrate how far the aged man had

[62] Ontario Vital Statistics: Death Registrations, Guelph, County of Wellington, 1891.

[63] Jennifer Harris noted in her exploration of nineteenth-century newspapers published for a Black

come in life, it noted that, "His parents were slaves, he was a slave himself, he married a slave, and his children were slaves." And despite that lowly, desperate state of existence, Samuel Venerable had not only survived, but had lived to become "the most aged and patriarchal of the inhabitants of the Royal City... a very kindly, upright old man, much respected." The *Mercury* reported of his funeral that,

> ...a number of the most prominent citizens went to the house to take a look at the aged patriarch, whose name was so well known and respected also, amongst all classes. The church was crowded to its utmost capacity. ...at the close of the service a large number of persons followed the remains to the cemetery where the body was interred.[64]

At least four women had called Samuel Venerable their long-time partner: his first wife in Kentucky, Sophia Walden, Mary Ann Pope, and Elizabeth Smith. Despite a life often-touched with more than its share of violence, he had lived long and ministered to Guelph's sick when no one else would go near them. Respected for his great age and selfless deeds, Samuel Venerable had in old age very much lived up to his surname.

For his wife, Elizabeth, whom he left behind, life may not have been easy. Eight months after Samuel's death, in January 1892, Elizabeth conceived a child who was born in Guelph that October. Though raising a child as a single mother poses challenges in any time period, choosing to abort in this period was riskier. Aside from potential injury or death to the mother, abortion could lead to criminal prosecution. In 1880, after fifteen-year-old Clara Russell was impregnated by a married member of Guelph's B.M.E. Church, her mother, Sarah Hart, attempted to induce miscarriage via an operation which left Clara injured. Both were members of Guelph's Black community and lived in the South Ward. For their respective roles in procuring and performing the abortion, each woman was sentenced to two months in gaol.[65] Putting a child up for adoption also would have been no easy task. Religious groups at times arranged private adoptions but a Guelph branch of the Children's Aid Society would not be founded until 1893.[66]

After her child was born, Elizabeth passed her own name to her daughter, Elizabeth Venerable. She declined to provide the registrar with the identity of the

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audience that, "Little to nothing is known about the U.S.-born William T. Minter, author of *The Doctrine and Discipline of the British Methodist Episcopal Church*, published in Toronto in 1892 – though it is possible he fled to Canada after being charged with seducing a congregant in Kansas and concealing their infant, another incident preserved only in the popular press." Jennifer Harris, "Locating Black Canada in the U.S. Periodical Press: A 19th-Century Network of Affiliations," *Readex Report* 11:2 (April 2016) <https://www.readex.com> (accessed on 8 June 2021).

[64] "Funeral of Mr. Venerable," *Guelph Daily Mercury & Advertiser*, 4 May 1891.

[65] "Abortion Case in Guelph: Two Coloured Women Arrested for Foul Play," *Fergus News-Record*, 12 August 1880.

[66] Elysia DeLaurentis, "Forsaken: the Orangeville Road Foundling," *Wellington County History* 33 (2020), 20-21.

baby's father so he simply noted, "Illegitimate." After the birth, Elizabeth returned to Hamilton where she may have stayed with family who could help her with the newborn. Connections between Black communities mean that some in Hamilton may have been aware of the circumstances of the birth. In June of 1893, Elizabeth married fellow Hamiltonian, Frank Jefferson, whose wife had died two years earlier. Like Samuel Venerable, Jefferson worked as a whitewasher, and like Elizabeth, he was a native of Richmond, Virginia. Their family life came to an end when Frank died in 1900 at the age of seventy-eight. How Elizabeth and her daughter got on after that remains a subject for future exploration.

Conclusion

The marginalized often appear in the historical record only in passing. Unless they died in an unexpected way, reports of their deaths tend to be even shorter, if published at all. Those who belonged to Ontario's nineteenth-century Black communities were often overlooked in the histories later written by their White counterparts. More-recent historians bring an awareness of this disparity to their work and seek to rectify it, to acknowledge and explore their lives, and to recognize their importance to the history of the wider community and province.

It is clear that Samuel Venerable touched the lives of others: the family he left behind in Kentucky, friends and colleagues, Sophia Walden, Mary Ann Pope, Elizabeth Smith, and the people of Guelph where he made his home for a good thirty years. Despite the clandestine networks that passed word from the freed in Ontario to Kentucky relatives in bondage, Samuel's obituary made clear that when he "came by 'the underground railway' to Canada, he left behind him a wife and seven children, word of which he never got from that day to this." His American descendants may still call the United States home, though how much was passed to them of their forefather remains unknown. Samuel Venerable produced no known offspring in Ontario to further his name.

Though recognized as an exceptional man when he died, only more recently has Samuel Venerable's legacy become apparent. Like many refugees who found a safe haven in early nineteenth-century Ontario, Venerable was both Black and illiterate. The latter tend not to leave lengthy records of their lives but through chats with his pastor, Samuel managed to do just that. Sifting through the historical record in a determined way reveals additional pieces to the puzzle. Samuel Venerable lived and worked in Ontario, walked Guelph's streets, and affected the lives of those around him. He succeeded in overcoming great odds to live an at-times violent and uneasy, but overall, successful life. He contributed, often selflessly, to his community. Other members of Ontario's nineteenth-century Black communities would have found many elements of his life experiences familiar. These autobiographical details have since become Samuel Vener-

able's legacy to the history of Ontario. This may have been what he intended when he chose to share his experiences with those who could record them.[67]

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