

ARMOURY STREET DIG

BLACK HISTORY IN THE WARD

Toronto's African Canadian community has deep roots in the city's history. The 1861 census shows that over half of Toronto's Black community resided in St. John's Ward; among them were formerly enslaved African Americans who had sought freedom in Toronto, as well as African Canadian migrants. A number of Black families lived on the site of the new Toronto courthouse during the 19th century. On Centre Street, Cecelia Jane Reynolds lived with her husband, Benjamin Pollard Holmes, an Underground Railroad conductor. Enslaved since birth in Kentucky, Cecelia had escaped to freedom in Canada while her slaveholding family vacationed in Niagara Falls. The Holmes family built two houses on Centre Street, one of which became the home of Black community leader Francis Griffin Simpson. While excavated leather scraps recall his occupation as a shoemaker, Simpson was also active in Toronto's abolitionist and community-building circles.

The artifacts in this case were recovered from residential lots on Centre Avenue and Chestnut Street, and speak to the political activism and anti-slavery resistance that flourished within the Black community in St. John's Ward.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) quickly became a bestseller. Although criticized for perpetuating stereotypes, the story of enslaved persons Tom and Eliza energized the North American abolitionist movement. In Toronto, activists discussed the book at anti-slavery meetings, and audiences flocked to theatrical versions. The novel's popularity spurred the sale of related products, such as puzzles, dolls, vases, and plates.

Nineteenth-century Black dolls generally took two forms: racist caricatures marketed to White families; or Black-painted dolls made from the molds for White dolls. This rare doll, which may have been manufactured in Germany, was made from a mold designed to depict a Black person.

"I had the privilege to view the 19th century Black doll's head, recovered from a pit feature on Centre Avenue. I was moved by the doll's piercing eyes, her beautiful black features and hair. I was left wanting to know more about the child who owned this doll and also the parents who saw the importance of giving their child a doll that reflected those of a darker hue."

Kathy Grant,
Vice-President, Ontario Black History Society

"We are well at present and arrived safe in Toronto... Toronto is a very extensive place. We have plenty of pork, beef and mutton. There are five market houses and many churches. Female wages is 62-1/2 cents per day, men's wages is \$1 and York shilling. We are now boarding at Mr. George Blunt's on Centre street, two doors from Elm..."

James Monroe, Peter Heines, Henry James Morris, and Matthew Bodame, formerly enslaved African Americans in Toronto, writing to William Still, an Underground Railroad conductor in Philadelphia, June 1857.

"I must say that, leaving the law out of the question, I find that prejudice here is equally strong as on the other side. The law is the only thing that sustains us in this country."

Francis Griffin Simpson, a past resident of 31 Centre Street, as interviewed by Samuel Gridley Howe, who investigated the conditions of African American freedom-seekers in Canada for the U.S. government, September 1863.

"What a privilege it is to see tangible evidence of years gone by from the Ward excavation. I marvel at the masterful artistry of plates, figurines, and toys. We are so fortunate to have these artifacts for all communities to witness and share their impressions. From this exhibit, we can learn from our past to enhance our future."

Nikki Clarke,
President, Ontario Black History Society



This exhibit is presented in partnership between Infrastructure Ontario, on behalf of the Ministry of the Attorney General, and the City of Toronto.



This exhibit shares a selection of the artifacts and stories unearthed in the archaeological assessment of the new Toronto courthouse site on Armoury Street, originally part of The Ward and just steps from City Hall. With thanks to the New Toronto Courthouse Heritage Interpretation Working Group, Timmins Martelle Heritage Consultants, ERA Architects.