

Slaves who fled north lie buried in obscurity

SUMMARY: A teacher battles indifference as he fights to dedicate a burial ground for slaves who traveled the Underground Railroad.

By COLIN NICKERSON
of The Boston Globe

SAINT-ARMAND-STATION, Quebec — North meant freedom, so they followed the "drinking gourd," dodging slave catchers, sleeping in woodsheds and basement hide-oholes of the Underground Railroad.

canada Finally, the luckiest crossed the border into the promised land, Canada.

Thousands of slaves in pre-Civil War America fled the plantations of the South for the snowbound sanctuary of Canada.

The runaways were guided by the North Star at the end of the Little Dipper, the "drinking gourd" celebrated in black spirituals. Canada was sung of as "Canaan."

A few settled in the Quebec hamlet of Saint-Armand-Station, making lives of purpose, if not great prosperity, as hired hands, log hewers, horse drovers. They died there, too. A century-and-a-half later, their skeletons lie unmarked, unmourned beneath a frozen patch of pasture.

Now, an American-born schoolteacher, Hank Avery, is seeking to consecrate Saint-Armand's almost-forgotten burial ground for former slaves, one of only a few such sites in Canada. But his attempt has run hard into a wall of official indifference.

"There should be some marker, some fence, something to lend dignity to their memory," said Avery, who is black.

He came to this corner of Quebec to make a new life after fleeing the military draft during the Vietnam War.

"They deserve their place of pride in Canadian history," Avery said of the former slaves.

The Pennsylvanian-turned-Quebecer said the closest thing to historical recognition of the burial site is the local nickname, recorded in archives, for a big granite cliff rising nearby: "Nigger Rock."

"There might be a better way of commemorating these people who worked the land, pulled the stones, and found in Canada the first home to call their own," he said.

DISTURBED BY RUMORS that the farm's owner recently excavated sections of the graveyard for dirt to buttress a barn foundation, Avery has mounted a campaign to prevent desecration of a site he believes should be sacred to the tiny community of black freedmen and escaped slaves that briefly flourished in Saint-Armand's in the mid-1800s.

The controversy generated by Avery's quest has split along linguistic lines, with support for preserving the site coming mainly

from the English-descended families of the so-called Eastern Townships region — lying just north of Vermont. Many French-speaking residents shrug off the effort as one more example of Anglo folly.

"Why is he talking about these long-deceased slaves?" asked Rejean Benoit, who owns the farm where the presumed graveyard is located and is cool to the historical site proposal. "There are no markers, no stones, nothing to suggest it was ever a place important to anyone. Just old stories."

Provincial and town officials plead a lack of authority to guard a cemetery that has never been formally designated.

Local lore has long held that the old farm is the site of a burial ground for blacks who escaped their servitude by way of the Underground Railroad.

"It's part of the community's history; people have always recognized the site," said Avery, who teaches third grade in the nearby town of Bedford.

A 1908 PUBLICATION of the Missisquoi Historical Society refers to "the St. Armand Negro Burying Ground." Other records refer to the cemetery as lying on the farm.

The Underground Railroad was the abolitionist-run system of midnight wagon rides, dark forest trails and safe houses that fleeing slaves followed to Canada, which banned the ownership of human beings decades before the United States.

Even northern states that outlawed slavery could not legally prevent escaped slaves from being captured by bounty hunters and returned to the South.

Estimates vary wildly, but from 10,000 to 60,000 slaves reached sanctuary in Canada from the beginning of the century until the end of the Civil War in 1865.

The best-known was Josiah Henderson, an escaped slave from Maryland who lived out his days in southern Ontario and whose harrowing tale inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

THE VERMONT-QUEBEC border was one of the important crossing points. The Eastern Townships region was settled by British Loyalists unwilling to pledge allegiance to the revolutionary American republic.

Among the first to start farming near Saint-Armand was Philip Luke, a Loyalist whose hatred for slavery was strong enough that he would make annual trips to the South to buy eight slaves at a time, setting them free upon returning to Canada.

Saint-Armand's population of blacks dissipated before the turn of this century. Most went off to the cities in search of better opportunities.