

**African Methodist Episcopalian Methodist Church,
Oro-Medonte, Ontario**

1847 - 2014



As I travel south along Old Barrie Road near my home on the 14th Line of Oro-Medonte Township, near Barrie Ontario...there is a small, weathered building standing alone on the southeast corner of Line 3. A simple square structure, minimalist in its design, it captured my curiosity and so, one bright sunny day a number of years ago, my mother and I stopped to check it out. A

monument had been erected on the property near the structure detailing its link to Loyalist History. Surprised and excited, I read about its great heritage, designated as an Historical Site in 2000. A monument detailing its place in Canadian history was erected near the old church. My mother and I took a number of pictures and tried our best to peer through the window panes to see what was inside...hoping to get a glimpse of the past. My vivid imagination was entertaining the thought that there might be some sort of 'time portal' to whisk us back into another era of Canada's History. But there were only shadows and silence, and haunting sense of emptiness and mystery and stories to be told by the ancient grey log walls.

According to local historical information, the old church is the only remaining piece of an African/Canadian community whose 'roots are uniquely anchored deep in the history of United Empire Loyalists'¹. The African Methodist Episcopalian Church is the last standing testament to the important role played by African Canadian Militiamen who fought for the British Crown and defended Upper Canada against the invading American Revolutionaries in the war of 1812.

They fought a two-fold battle, for the British Crown and promises for their freedom and protection from slavery if they joined the Loyalist cause.

The local community 'rallied together in 1947 to preserve the building' and it stands today as a witness to an early African Canadian settlement associated with these brave militiamen from the War of 1812. The official monument of recognition refers to the church and the property that also contains an unmarked burial ground. The building has been prey over the years to vandals and has been restored several times.

The following history of the site is found at '[Historical Places](#)':

Oro African Methodist Episcopal Church was built by African Canadians. The Oro Black settlement was a unique approach to integrating African Canadians into a farming community. The idea for an African Canadian community originated in 1783 with Sir Guy Carleton, Commander-in-Chief of British forces in North America. During the American Revolution, Carleton had promised that the slaves of non-Loyalists who joined the British Army would have their freedom and protection from re-enslavement. Black soldiers not only fought with the British during the American Revolution, but also as the "Coloured Corps", a trusted unit of the Upper Canadian militia during the War of 1812. Between 1819 and 1826, the British granted 25 plots of land in Oro County to Black settlers, eleven of them former soldiers who received their grants in acknowledgement of military service. Although the area had strategic value, the land was both remote and agriculturally poor. Only nine of the original grant recipients took up their plots, settling along an area of the Penatanguishine Road known as Wilberforce Street. In 1829-1831, the settlement was augmented by thirty more families. They built Oro Church in 1847, and it remained active until around 1900 when the community itself faded away. The British Methodist Episcopal Church declared the building abandoned in 1916. Local residents rallied to preserve it in 1947, in 1956, and again after vandalism in 1981.

The heritage value of Oro African Methodist Episcopal Church National Historic Site of Canada resides in its associated history as illustrated by the form and composition of the building, the integrity of the remnant cemetery, and in their site and setting.

Source: Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, Minutes, June 2000



According to a plaque at the site, the church was, “the only government sponsored Black settlement in Upper Canada. The Oro community was established in 1819 to help secure the defense of Upper Canada’s northern frontier. Black veterans of the War of 1812 who could be enlisted to meet hostile forces advancing from Georgian Bay were offered land grants (25 acre

plots) here. By 1831, nine of these had taken up residence along this road called Wilberforce Street after the renowned British abolitionist. Bolstered by other Black settlers who had been attracted to the area, the community soon numbered about 100. The settlement eventually declined, however, as farmers discouraged by the poor soil and harsh climate gradually drifted away.”

Further investigation noted in [Wikipedia](#), History of Oro Medonte, Ontario, under ‘Black History’, supports that:

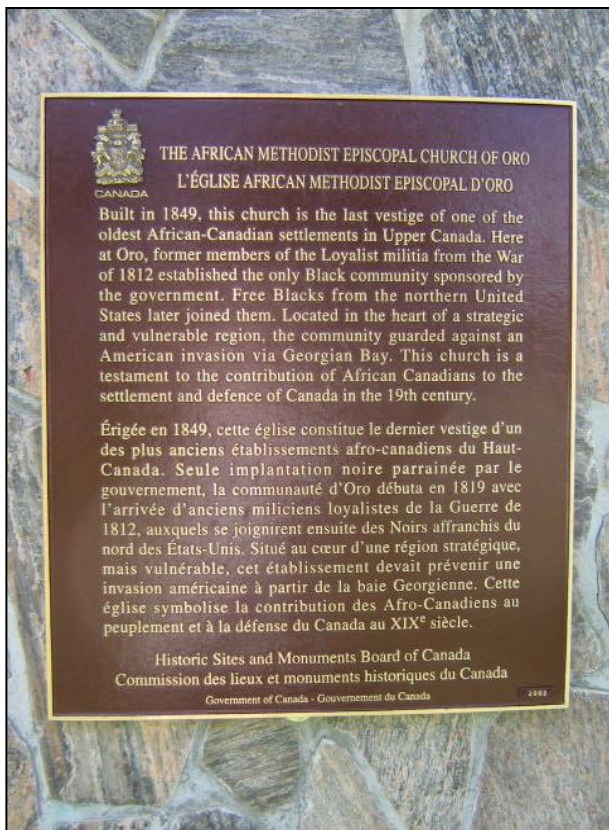
“In 1819, a landmark decision was made in Fort York (now Toronto) to “grant land to Black militiamen of Capt. Runchey’s ‘Company of Coloured Men’ on an equal basis as it would be granted to Whites.” [Legend of the Drinking Gourd,

W. Allen Fisher, 1973, W. A. and M. W. Fisher, publisher] The land designated for Black settlement was in Oro Township. Within a few years all Blacks of any origin could

acquire land in Oro Township on an equal basis as any other settler. [Men of Colour, Gary French, 1978, Kaste Books, Stroud Ontario Canada, publishers]

There was a military strategy behind the decision. Settlers would provide support for the fort at Penetanguishene by providing food and other local supplies, and, if the war with the U.S. again broke out, the trained militiamen could be armed to defend the region.

Although for years folklore suggested that the Oro Black Settlement was populated by escaped slaves coming to Oro via the underground railroad (UGRR),



documentation suggests all Black settlers were freemen. Further, the 1819 settlement *preceded by about a decade what is commonly considered the beginning of the UGRR.*

The blocks of land on the Penetanguishene Road, were at the time being granted to settlers of European origin. In that one or more Blacks had already established successful farms further east, a road called “Wilberforce Street” was surveyed parallel to that road. The name of the road was in honour of the British parliamentarian who worked so hard to abolish slavery. The Blacks were settled along this new road.

The Oro Black Settlement grew to about 90 families, then diminished as the settlers found steady income elsewhere (mainly on railway trains and ships on the Great Lakes). The last Oro Black retired to Barrie in the 1940s, and when he died, he was buried in the cemetery beside the Oro African Church. [Wikipedia citation needed]

The Oro Methodist Episcopal African Church was built out of logs by the Oro Black Settlers and was finished in 1849. It is possibly the **oldest log African Church still standing in North America.** In 2003, it was designated as a Canadian national historic site, due mainly to the link the Oro settlers for their part in the War of 1812.” (Wikipedia.ca)

Additional Black History links:

http://www.ontarioplaques.com/Subjects/Subject_PeopleBlackHistory.html

CURRENT RESTORATION 2013-2014



The historical old church is currently undergoing another restoration started in 2013, to preserve this valuable and precious part of our history. It is being stripped down to its original log composition and the township hopes to have it reopened as soon as possible to the public.

[\(Orillia Packet and Times\)](#)

To quote the above article recently posted in the Orillia Packet and Times, and of great interest is the fact that the township of 'Oro' itself was named by the African Canadian Loyalist Settlers. According to Mayor Hughes of Oro-Medonte, "The name 'Oro' came from the African settlers. "The blacks who came to Oro originally came from 'Río de Oro' on the African coast," Hughes states. "The fact it has that name has been maintained, is significant."

Rather than segregate from the African settlers, the Oro community welcomed them. Both races attended school together and celebrated events in the church together..."

In my searching for information on the old Church, I found this excerpt known as 'Drury's Poem' from the 'Drury's Essays'. It is a poignant reminder of the plight of slaves in the 1800's and reminds us of the unmarked graves at the site of the old church. The original poem inspired the local community to begin a restoration of the church and the cairn that lists the names of the settlers buried there:

“Dark skinned and sorrow laden,
Yet their souls to God were dear.
Made pure and bright and glorious,
When they left their bodies here.

Oh God, forgive the blindness,
The cruelty – the sin,
When hearts are black as midnight
What avails tho' white the skin.

Oh Canada, dear Homeland,
That guards these lonely graves,
God keep these still a refuge,
For oppressed and hunted slaves.

Below are lists of the names of those African Canadian Loyalists and Settlers buried at the Church with a link to access more information following them. It is a list from W.A. Fisher's book: 'Military Soldiers and Emigrants, 1816 – 1828. The following Black Veterans are listed along with the dates on which their tickets of location were issued:

Soloman Albert	26 April, 1819
John Jackson Jr.	16 June, 1819
Woodford Mills	30 June, 1819

George A. Darkman	16 June, 1819
John Yatt	20 July, 1819
George Anderson	20 July, 1819
John Call	20 July, 1819
William Davenport	14 July, 1819
James Long	18 May, 1819
William Fraser	19 May, 1819
James Henderson	3 June, 1819
John Long	8 September, 1819
Samuel Edwards	26 April, 1819
William Allen	30 May, 1821
Ephraim Jackson	7 December, 1825
Henry St. Denny	11 March, 1826
Luther Barber	*no date given

Andrew Hunter, in “A History of Simcoe County, Part II” provides another list of Black Settlers and their locations [round bracket entries are in the original.]

Black Settlers	Location in Oro
Luther Barber	lot 6, con. 3, (E. Half)
James Bush	lot 12, con. 5, (W. Half)
John Call	lot 21, con. 2 (1831 Patent)
Daniel Caughly	lot 14, con. 2
George Darkman	lot 15, con. 2
John DeLay	lot E, con. 2
George Eddy	lot 24, con. 2
William Heartwell (Daniel?)	lot 11, con. 2
Caesar Hepburn (Hebron?)	lot 12, con. 4
Samuel Jackson	lot 2, con. 2 (Patent lot 4, 1828)
Benjamin Johnston	lot 27, con. 2
William Leonard	lot 28, con. 2
Jeremiah Munro	lot 10, con. 5
John Neilson Morris	lot 11, con. 4 (E. Half)
Noah Morris	lot 11, con. 4 (W. Half)
Henry Montgomery	lot 29, con. 2 (A carpenter)
Henry St. Denny (St. Dennis?)	lot 26, con. 2
John Smith	lot 11, con. 6
Edward Summer	lot D, con. 2

Dr. Hill commented on the names on the plaque on the cairn and offered these additions:

John Call
Daniel Caughley
John DeLay
Caesar Hepburn
Samuel Jackson
John Jackson

Benjamin Johnston
William Leonard
Henry Montgomery
Henry St. Dennis
John Smith
Edward Summer

Extensive research was carried out by Joanna McEwan for the book 'Kith 'N Kin'. It is reproduced here as originally printed. <http://www.ourroots.ca/e/page.aspx?id=907538>

A detailed and complete list of all the African Canadian Settlers buried at the Oro Church is found at:

<http://www.ourroots.ca/e/page.aspx?id=907538>

As we celebrate Black History Month in Canada, it is imperative that we celebrate African Canadians as an integral part of our Loyalist and Canadian History. We share together a rare, unique and lasting bond in our heritage. The African Methodist Episcopalian Church still standing proudly at the corner of Line 3 and Old Barrie Road is a reminder and testimony of our Black History and Heritage.

Additional Information Sources: (press ctrl + left click to access links)

Our Roots Website:

<http://www.ourroots.ca/e/index.aspx#>

African Church at Oro:

<http://www.oro-medonte.ca/Shared%20Documents/African%20Church%20Brochure.pdf>

E.C.Drury's Essay:

<http://www.ourroots.ca/e/page.aspx?id=907564> (a interesting read of online history: "Drury's Essay" – from the Simcoe County Archives; The Oro African Church : a history of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Edgar, Ontario, Canada – Canada's Local Histories Online: [Our Roots](#)) However, we now know that the African Canadians who built the little Oro church were Loyalists and landowners in their own right. Drury's Essay reflects the knowledge and mind set of that day.

Restoration 2013/2014 – Orillia Packet and Times

<http://www.orilliapacket.com/2013/12/13/mayor-hopes-oro-african-methodist-episcopal-church-will-reopen-next-year>

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