

Teaching Difficult Histories:

Teaching difficult histories, such as the history of slavery, racism and resistance in Ontario, can be challenging. It can be especially challenging if these stories aren't part of our own lived experience. Educators might feel uncertain about how to approach these topics with care, accuracy, and respect. Still, engaging with these histories is essential to building a more inclusive understanding of the past and present.

Difficult histories are often underrepresented in textbooks and classroom discussions. The histories of Black communities in Ontario, including the realities of enslavement, discrimination, and resilience, are a crucial part of Canadian history. We can help students see the complexity of the past and recognize the contributions and struggles of people who have often been left out of the narrative by bringing these stories into the classroom.

It is important to acknowledge that teaching histories that are not your own can feel uncomfortable. This discomfort is a natural part of learning and growth. Educators are not expected to have all the answers. A respectful and supportive classroom environment allows students to ask questions, reflect critically and connect historical events to contemporary issues. Using primary sources can help ground these conversations in real voices and lived experiences. Students will use these materials to engage directly with the past, develop historical thinking skills and better understand how regular people were impacted by historical events.

Content Warning:

The materials included in this document box contain historical content that may be upsetting or distressing. Many of the documents reflect the language, attitudes, and beliefs of the time in which they were created, particularly during the period of slavery in Ontario and across North America.

Some documents use outdated and offensive terms to describe Black individuals and communities. These terms were commonly used by enslavers and others in positions of power to reinforce the deeply racist and dehumanizing views that supported the institution of slavery. In many cases, the documents come from the perspective of enslavers, government officials, or others who treated enslaved people as property rather than as human beings.

We include these documents to help students and educators understand and confront the realities of the past. These sources show both the oppressive ideologies which supported systems of oppression, and the way in which those systems were resisted.

We encourage educators to approach these materials with care and to create a supportive classroom environment where students can process and discuss difficult content. It is important to prepare students for what they may encounter and to provide space for reflection and respectful dialogue.

If you or your students find any of the content distressing, please take time to pause, reflect and seek support as needed. Teaching and learning about difficult histories is challenging, but it is essential to building an informed understanding of the past and its impact on the present.

Related Curriculum Expectations

A3 describe some significant events and developments, including, but not limited to enslavement, that had an impact on the lived experiences and settlement of various Black individuals and communities in Canada, up to and including this time period

B3 describe various experiences, realities, challenges, and perspectives of members of Black settlements and communities across Canada and explore how the people in these settlements fostered a sense of belonging and pride in community

Approach to Document

This document is designed to bring the experience of archival research into the classroom by allowing students to directly engage with primary source materials related to Black history in Ontario. Students will work with replicas of historical documents to develop critical thinking skills, explore multiple perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of the past through the voices and records of those who lived it.

The document supports educators in teaching the Ontario Black History curriculum by providing curated resources that highlight underrepresented stories and experiences. It is organized into three key themes: Slavery in Upper Canada, Abolition, and Post-Abolition. Each theme includes a selection of primary sources such as legal documents, newspaper ads and government records, along with background context for teachers to assist in guiding classroom discussion and analysis.

Slavery & Abolition Timeline

1760	The British conquered New France and slavery was expanded and institutionalized under British regimes
1793	The Act to Limit Slavery in Upper Canada confirmed slavery as a legal practice and introduced gradual abolition, the first anti-slavery legislation in the British colonies
1812	The Coloured Corps was initiated by Richard Pierdpoint to support the War of 1812. Raised in Upper Canada (Ontario), it was composed of free and enslaved Black men.
1815-1865	Canada's reputation as a safe haven for Black people grew and thousands of African-Americans sought refuge in Upper (Ontario) and Lower (Quebec) Canada through the Underground Railroad
1834	The Slavery Abolition Act came into effect, abolishing slavery throughout the British Empire, including British North America. Black Canadians began to celebrate Emancipation Day in present day Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia.

Theme 1: Slavery In Upper Canada:

Slavery is a lesser-known part of Canada's past, yet it played a significant role during the colonial era. It began in the 1600s under French rule in New France and continued after the British took control in 1760.

In New France, most enslaved people were Indigenous, often referred to as "Panis," a term used by French colonists. About one-third of the enslaved population was of African descent. The first documented Black enslaved person in Canada was a young boy, given the name Olivier LeJeune by his enslavers, who was brought to Quebec in 1628.

When the British took over, they allowed slavery to continue. The Articles of Capitulation, signed in 1760, protected the rights of French colonists to retain their enslaved people. This legal support for slavery carried into the British colonial period.

In colonial Canadian society, enslaved people were treated as property. The enslavement of both Black and Indigenous individuals was supported by law and custom. Their forced labour contributed to the growth of the colonial economy.

After the American Revolution, many Loyalists (those who had supported Britain) migrated to Upper Canada (now Ontario), bringing enslaved African people with them. This migration significantly increased the enslaved population in the region.

Between the 1770s and 1834, more than 600 Black individuals were enslaved in Upper Canada. Although this number was smaller than in the United States, the conditions were still harsh. Enslaved people were denied basic rights, lived under constant surveillance, and had little to no freedom.

A common misconception is that slavery in Canada was less brutal due to its smaller scale. However, this view ignores the violence, control, and dehumanization that defined the system. Slavery in Canada was not only about labour, it was also about power, wealth, and racial inequality.

Nearly one-quarter of the enslaved population in Upper Canada were children. According to law and custom, Black children inherited their enslaved status from their mothers. These children were considered financial assets. From a young age, they were expected to work, often alongside their mothers, and their lives revolved around labour. As they grew older, their monetary value increased. Boys were trained in farming and skilled trades, while girls were taught domestic and agricultural tasks.

Despite the harsh conditions, enslaved people resisted in many ways. They asserted their humanity, refused to work, escaped bondage, and helped others seek freedom. Even daring to dream of a different life was an act of resistance.

Discussion Questions

- How did slavery shape power and wealth in Colonial Canadian Society?
- What does the fact that nearly one-quarter of enslaved people were children tell us about the nature of slavery in Upper Canada?
- How might resistance, such as refusing to work or escaping, reveal about the lives and agency of enslaved people?

Theme 2: Abolition In Upper Canada:

Slavery in Upper Canada was not only a social practice but a legally sanctioned institution, deeply embedded in colonial law and custom. Racial chattel slavery, which primarily targeted Black individuals, was distinct from other forms of forced labor due to its legal permanence and hereditary nature. Enslaved people were considered property, not persons, and their status was passed down through generations via the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which dictated that children inherited the status of their enslaved mothers.

The legal system in Upper Canada supported slavery through property and contract laws. Enslaved individuals could be bought, sold, gifted, or included in wills. This legal recognition was solidified in 1793 with the passage of the Act to Prevent the Further Introduction of Slaves, and to Limit the Term of Contracts for Servitude, commonly known as the 1793 Act to Limit Slavery. While this Act did not abolish slavery outright, it

was the first legislation in the British colonies to restrict the slave trade and marked the beginning of gradual abolition.

The immediate catalyst for the Act was the Chloe Cooley incident. On March 14, 1793, Chloe Cooley, a Black woman enslaved in Queenston, was violently bound and transported across the Niagara River to be sold in New York. Her resistance and the eyewitness accounts of Peter Martin, a Black Loyalist, and William Grisley, a white laborer, brought the incident to the attention of Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe. Simcoe used the event to push for legislative change.

On June 19, 1793, Attorney General John White introduced the abolition bill. Despite opposition from politicians who were themselves enslavers, the bill passed. However, it was a compromise: it banned the importation of new enslaved people into Upper Canada but allowed those already enslaved to remain in bondage for life unless freed by their owners. Children born to enslaved women after the Act would be freed at age 25, and their children would be born free. This structure aimed to phase out slavery over a generation.

The Act also required enslavers to provide basic necessities to enslaved children and to ensure that newly freed individuals were supported, often through indentured servitude contracts lasting up to nine years. This provision was intended to prevent freed individuals from becoming public charges.

Despite the Act, slavery persisted. Enslaved people continued to be sold within the province and across the border into the United States. One of the last recorded sales of an enslaved person in Upper Canada took place in March 1824 when Eli Keeler of Colborne sold 15-year-old Tom to William Bell in Thurlow (now Belleville, Ontario). It wasn't until 1834, with the British Empire's Slavery Abolition Act, that slavery was formally abolished throughout Canada.

Discussion Questions

- What was the purpose of the 1793 Act to Limit Slavery, and why was it considered a compromise?
- How did the Chloe Cooley Incident influence the passage of the 1793 Act?
- How did the 1793 Act change the lives of enslaved people and their children? Was it truly fair?

Theme 3: Post- Abolition:

Due to the 1793 Act to Limit Slavery, slavery began to decline by 1810 in Upper Canada and the labour relationship between enslavers and the enslaved transitioned to indentured servitude and wage labour. Enslavement in British colonies, including those in Canada, was abolished August 1st, 1834 with the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act. Both pieces of legislation made Canada free land for enslaved African Americans.

The image of Canada as a place of freedom for enslaved African Americans in the nineteenth century was born, and thousands of freedom seekers and free African Americans would arrive on Canadian soil between 1834 and the early 1860s.

Slavery existed in Canada for over 200 years. The history of enslaved Black people in Upper Canada explains how both slavery and freedom unfolded in Upper Canada, in all of their complexities, how people of African descent experienced and challenged degrees of unfreedom while also pursuing the promise of freedom in the same space.

Discussion Questions

- What challenges did Black communities face in Canada after abolition? Why do you think these challenges persisted?

54
Schmida Dy May 3 1790

Sir

My desire to support my self as free
man and enjoy all the benefits which
may result from my being free in a
country where a blackman is defended
by the laws as much as a ~~white~~ white
man induces me to make you an
offer of purchasing myself. I am a
black man and am not so able to pay you
all the money down because which you may
ask for me but upon these conditions
I will purchase myself. ten pounds this
year and every ~~other~~ ^{after} year sixteen pounds
untill the whole sum is payed. I should
wish to pay the money to Joseph Yates the
black Man of this city because he is the
most proper man that I can think
of at present. the reason why I left your
house is this ^{your} ~~the~~ woman vexed ^{me} to so high
a degree that it was far beyond the
power of man to support it it is
true and I will say in all company
that I allways lived as well in your
house as I should wish.

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• Please to write to Joseph Yates what you will
take in cash for me and let him be the man
to whom I shall pay the money yearly.

• In a suppliant manner I beg your
pardon ~~ten thousand times~~ and beg
that you would be so kind as to permit
me to purchase myself and at as a low
a rate as any other person. My mistress
I also wish ~~ten thousand pardons~~ long life
and good health and please to tell her I
beg her pardon ~~ten thousand times~~
my mistress I shall always remember
on account of her great kindness to me
I remain your affectionate servant
Thos Lewis

Henry Lewis letter to William Jarvis, 1798

William Jarvis Papers

Reference Code: S109 B55 PP. 56-57

Toronto Public Library (TRL)

Special Collections, Archive & Digital Collections, Baldwin Room

My desired to support my self as free man and enjoy all the benefits which may result from my being free in a country whear a Blackman is defended by the laws as much as a white man is induce me to make you an offer of purchasing myself....

the reason why I left your house is this your [Jarvis' wife Hannah] vexed me to so high a degree that it was far beyond the power of man to support it is true and I will say in all company that I always lived as well in your house as I should wish.

A NORTH-SIDE VIEW OF SLAVERY.

THE REFUGEE:

OR THE

NARRATIVES OF FUGITIVE SLAVES IN CANADA.

RELATED BY THEMSELVES,

84488
WITH

AN ACCOUNT OF THE HISTORY AND CONDITION OF THE
COLORED POPULATION OF UPPER CANADA.

BY

BENJAMIN DREW.

BOSTON:

PUBLISHED BY JOHN P. JEWETT AND COMPANY.

CLEVELAND, OHIO:

JEWETT, PROCTOR AND WORTHINGTON.

NEW YORK: SHELDON, LAMPORT AND BLAKEMAN.

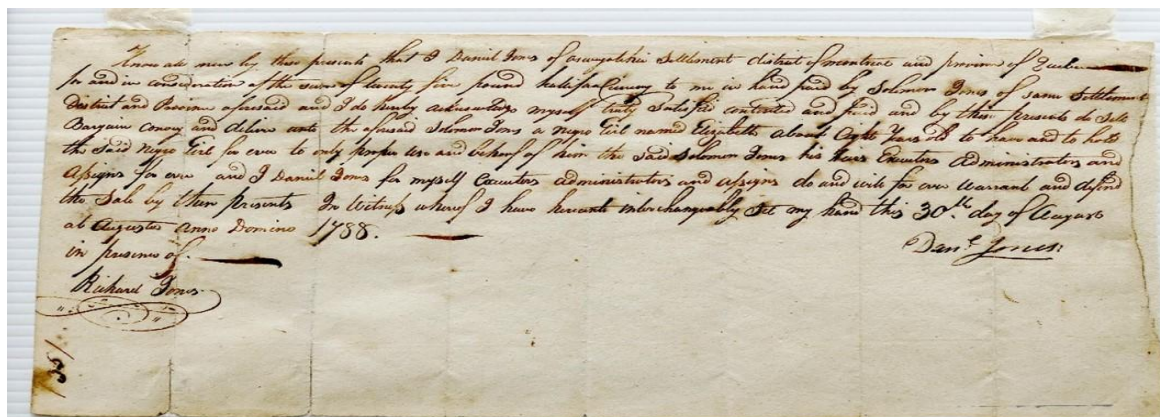
LONDON: TRÜBNER AND CO.

1856.

Title page, Benjamin Drew, A North-Side view of slavery.
The Refugee: or the Narratives of the Fugitive
Slaves in Canada, Boston: John P. Jewett, 1856

Provincial Freeman, November 11, 1854 (Vol. 1, No. 34), p. 1. Microfilm reel N 040.
Archives of Ontario

The Provincial Freeman was a weekly abolitionist newspaper founded in 1853 by Mary Ann Shadd Cary, making her the first Black woman in North America to publish and edit a newspaper, and the *first woman in Canada* to do so. The paper promoted anti-slavery, civil rights, Black self-reliance, and emigration to Canada as a path to safety and opportunity. Published in Windsor, Toronto, and later Chatham, it served Black communities in Canada and the northern United States until it ceased in 1857



Bill of Sale for a Slave Girl named Elizabeth, 1788: Ontario Heritage Trust: 983.18.9

"...that I Daniel Jones of Oswegatchie Settlement district of Montreal Province of Quebec in consideration of the sum of twenty five pound Halifax currency to me in hand paid by Solomon Jones in same Settlement District and Province aforesaid and I do hereby acknowledge myself truly satisfied contented and paid by this presents do sell bargain convey and deliver unto the aforesaid Solomon Jones a negro girl named Elizabeth about eight years old to have and to hold the said negro girl forever to only proper use and behalf of him the said Solomon Jones his heirs Executors Administrators and Assigns forever and I Daniel Jones for myself Executors Administrators and Assigns do and will for ever warrant and defend the sale by their presents In witness whereof I have here with interchangeably set my hand this 30th day of August at Augusta Anno Domini 1788"

Daniel Jones in presence of Richard Jones

Ran away from the subscriber a few
weeks ago,
A Negro Wench,
named SUE:—this is therefore to fore-
warn all manner of persons from harbor-
ing said wench under the penalties of
the laws.
JAMES CLARK, senior.
Niagara, August 17, 1795.

Runaway Slave named Sue, August 19, 1795: Reference Code N31, Archives of Ontario

A slave named Sue described as a 'Negro Wench' is advertised as having ran away, with the newspaper clipping warning anyone against harbouring her under penalty of the law. Supposedly owned by James Clark.

FIVE DOLLARS REWARD:
RAN away from the Subscriber on Wednesday the
25th. of June last, a NEGRO MAN servant named
JOHN, who ever will take up the said negro man and return
him to his Master shall receive the above reward and
all necessary charges.
THOMAS BUTLER.
N. B. All Persons are forbid harbouring the said
Negro man at their peril.—NIAGARA, 3d July, 1793.

Upper Canada Gazette, 4 July 1793 N31, Archives of Ontario

Five Dollar Reward:

Ran away from the subscriber on Wednesday the 25th of June last, a Negro man servant named John, who will take up the said Negro man & return him to his Master shall receive the above reward and all necessary charges.

- Thomas Butler

N.B. All Persons are forbid harboring, the said Negro man at their peril. Niagara 3rd, July, 1793



Moses Brantford Jr. leading an Emancipation Day parade down Dalhousie Street, Amherstburg, Ontario 1894, (10027817)

Dear Sir

York 19th September 1801

My Slave Peggy, whom you were so good to promise to assist me in getting rid of, has remained in Prison ever since you left this (in expectation of your sending for her) at an Expense of above Ten pounds Bailiffs, which I was obliged to pay to the Goaler — and release her last Week by Order of the Chief Justice. She is now at large, being not permitted by my Sister to enter this House, and shows a disposition at Times to be very troublesome, which may perhaps compel me to commit her again to Prison. I shall therefore be glad that you would either take her away immediately, or return to me the Bill of Sale I gave you to enable you to do so. For tho I have received no Money from you for her, my property in her is gone from me while you hold the Bill of Sale; and I cannot consequently give a valid Title to any other who may be inclined to take her off my hands. I beg to hear from you soon, I am very truly
Yours most obedient humble servant.
Capt. Elliott I am Sir W. Dickson Peter Russell
Sandwich

Letter from Peter Russell to Matthew Elliot, 1801: Reference Code: F 46-0-0-2350

"My Slave Peggy, whom you were so good to promise to assist in getting rid of, ... is now at large, being not permitted by my Sister to enter this House, and shows a disposition at Times to be very troublesome, which may perhaps compel me to commit her again to Prison. I shall be glad that you would either take her away immediately, or return to me the Bill of Sale I gave you to enable you to do so."

Peter Russell to Matthew Elliott,

York, 19 September 1801

In the Western Dis-
trict.
Special Session at
Middlebury.
(See 47 Geo III c 11
—55, & 9 Geo III—56, &
1, & 4—58, & 5.)

IV. }
V. } [Repealed by 36th George III c 3, s 1.]

C H A P. VII.

An Act to prevent the further introduction of SLAVES, and to limit the Term of Contracts for SERVITUDE within this Province.

[5th July, 1793.]

Preamble.

WHEREAS it is unjust that a people who enjoy Freedom by Law should encourage the introduction of Slaves, and whereas it is highly expedient to abolish Slavery in this Province, so far as the same may gradually be done without violating private property; Be it enacted by the King's Most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Legislative Council and Assembly of the Province of Upper-Canada, constituted and assembled by virtue of and under the authority of an Act passed in the Parliament of Great-Britain, intituled, "An Act to repeal certain parts of an Act passed in the fourteenth year of His Majesty's Reign, intituled, "An Act for making more effectual provision for the Government of the Province of Quebec, in North America, and to make further provision for the Government of the said Province," and by the authority of the same, That from and after the passing of this Act, so much of a certain Act of the Parliament of Great Britain, passed in the thirtieth year of His present Majesty, intituled, "An Act for encouraging new Settlers in His Majesty's Colonies and Plantations in America," as may enable the Governor or Lieutenant Governor of this Province, heretofore parcel of His Majesty's Province of Quebec, to grant a licence for importing into the same any Negro or Negroes, shall be, and the same is hereby repealed; and that from and after the passing of this Act, it shall not be lawful for the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, or Person administering the Government of this Province, to grant a licence for the importation of any Negro or other person, to be subjected to the condition of a Slave, or to a bounden involuntary service for life, into any part of this Province; nor shall any Negro, or other person who shall come or be brought into this Province after the passing of this Act, be subject to the condition of a Slave, or to such service as aforesaid, within this Province, nor shall any voluntary contract of service or indentures that may be entered into by any parties within this Province, after the passing of this Act, be binding on them or either of them, for a longer time than a term of nine years, from the day of the date of such contract.

II. *Provided always*, That nothing herein contained shall extend, or be construed to extend to liberate any Negro, or other person subjected to such service as aforesaid, or to discharge them or any of them from the possession of the owner thereof, his or her executors, administrators or assigns, who shall have come or been brought into this Province, in conformity to the conditions prescribed by any authority for that purpose exercised, or by any Ordinance

Repeal of Act 30 Geo. III.

The same is part re-
pealed.

Provisions against the
further introduction of
slaves.

Term of servitude by
contract limited.

The contract of slaves
at present within the
Province, continued in
their property Statute.

nance or Law of the Province of Quebec, or by Proclamation of any of His Majesty's Governors of the said Province for the time being, or of any Act of the Parliament of Great Britain, or shall have otherwise come into the possession of any person, by gift, bequest or bona fide purchase before the passing of this Act, whose property therein is hereby confirmed, or to vacate or annul any contract for service that may heretofore have been lawfully made and entered into, or to prevent parents or guardians from binding out children until they shall have obtained the age of twenty-one years.

III. And in order to prevent the continuation of Slavery within this Province, *Be it enacted by the authority aforesaid*, That immediately from and after the passing of this Act, every child that shall be born of a Negro mother, or other woman subjected to such service as aforesaid, shall abide and remain with the master or mistress in whose service the mother shall be living at the time of such child's birth, (unless such mother and child shall leave such service, by and with the consent of such master or mistress), and such master or mistress shall, and is hereby required to give proper nourishment and clothing to such child or children, and shall and may put such child or children to work, when he, she or they shall be able so to do, and shall and may retain him or her in their service, until every such child shall have attained the age of twenty-five years, at which time they and each of them shall be entitled to demand his or her discharge from and shall be discharged by such master or mistress, from any further service. And to the end that the age of such child or children may be more easily ascertained, the master or mistress of the mother thereof, shall and is hereby required, to cause the day of the birth of every such child as shall be born of a Negro or other mother, subjected to the condition of a Slave, in their service as aforesaid, to be registered within three months after its birth, by the Clerk of the parish, township or place wherein such master or mistress reside, which Clerk shall be authorized to demand and receive the sum of one shilling, for registering the same. And in case any master or mistress shall refuse or neglect to cause such register to be made, within the time aforesaid, and shall be convicted thereof, either on his or her confession, or by the oath of one or more credible witnesses or witnesses, before any Justice of the Peace, he or she shall, for every such offence, forfeit and pay the sum of five pounds, to the public stock of the District.

IV. And *be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid*, That in case any master or mistress shall detain any such child born in their service as aforesaid, after the passing of this Act, under any pretence whatever, after such Servant shall have attained the age of twenty-five years, except by virtue of a contract of service, or indentures, duly and voluntarily executed, after such discharge as aforesaid, it shall and may be lawful for such Servant to apply for a discharge to any of His Majesty's Justices of the Peace, who shall and is hereby required thereupon to issue a summons to such master or mistress, to appear before him to shew cause, why such Servant should not be discharged, and the proof that such Servant is under the age of twenty-five years, shall first upon and be adduced by the master or mistress of such Servant; otherwise it shall and may be lawful for the said Justice to discharge such Servant from such service as aforesaid, *Provided always*, That in case any issue shall be born of such children, during their infant servitude, or after

Nothing herein to re-
late to children for
service already made,
nor to parents or guar-
dians.

The children that
shall be born of female
slaves, to remain in the
service of the owner of
their mother until the
age of 25 years, when
they shall be discharge-
d.

Birth of the children
of slaves to be re-
corded.

Penalty for neglect-
ing or refusing to re-
cord the same.

Remedy against the
undue detention of such
children.

Provision for the be-
nevolence of slaves
such

1793 Act to Limit Slavery: An Act to Prevent the further Introduction of Slaves and to limit the Term of Contracts for Servitude Statutes of Upper Canada 33 George III, Cap. 7, 1793 Archives of Ontario



Levi Veney, 1898:

Alvin D. McCurdy fonds, Archives of Ontario, I0024830

Levi Veney is an Ex-slave who lived in Amherstburg, Ontario. He found refuge in a home that was established to provide shelter to those crossing the border.