

Teaching Difficult Histories:

Teaching the Grade 8 topics in this resource can feel challenging, especially when they are not part of our own lived experience. Ontario's stories of freedom seeking, settlement, community building, and school segregation ask us to hold more than one truth at once. People sought safety and opportunity in Ontario but also faced barriers after arrival. Approaching this material with care, accuracy, and respect helps students see how the past shapes daily life across the province.

These histories are often underrepresented in textbooks or taught in simplified ways. The Grade 8 content highlights the work of families, congregations, teachers, editors, and advocates across Ontario who built communities like Chatham-Kent, Windsor–Essex, St. Catharines, Owen Sound, Hamilton, and Toronto. It also names the realities of segregation and discrimination in schooling and the strategies people used to resist them. Bringing these stories into the classroom widens students' understanding of Canadian history and shows them that Black communities in Ontario were active agents in their own futures.

It is natural to feel some discomfort when teaching histories that are not your own. You are not expected to have every answer. A respectful classroom invites questions, careful listening, and clear language that avoids myths and generalizations. Primary sources can anchor discussion: petitions, church and school records, photographs, city directories, newspapers like the *Provincial Freeman*, and commemorations from sites across Ontario. Working with these materials helps students practice historical thinking, connect local places to broader events, and understand how policies and choices affected everyday people.

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 Students will work with replicas of historical documents to develop critical thinking skills, explore multiple perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of the past through the voices and records of those who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: Freedom Seekers & the Underground Railroad, Building Black Communities, and Schooling, Segregation and Advocacy. Each theme includes a selection of primary sources such as photographs, newspaper articles and personal letters, along with background context for teachers to assist in guiding classroom discussion and analysis.

Related Curriculum Expectations

A3. Identify some key events across Canada between 1850 and 1890 that shaped the experiences of Black people in Canada and explain the impact on Black individuals and communities and on the broader Canadian society

B3. Identify factors contributing to some key issues, events, and/or developments that specifically affected Black individuals and communities in Canada between 1890 and 1914 and explain the historical significance of some of these issues, events, and/or developments for various Black individuals and/or communities across Canada

Black History Timeline

1812-1815	Thousands of Black volunteers fought for the British during the War of 1812
1815-1860	The Underground Railroad. Canada's reputation as a safe haven grew during the War of 1812. Between 1815-1860 thousands of African Americans made their way along the Underground Railroad to seek refuge in Canada.
Aug 28, 1833	British Parliament Abolishes Slavery. The Imperial Act abolished slavery throughout the British Colonies. Many Canadians continue to celebrate August 1 st at Emancipation Day.
Sept 18, 1850	Fugitive Slave Act. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was enacted in the United States. The Act influenced the migration of African-Americans into Canada
Feb 28, 1851	The Formation of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada to "aid in the extinction of Slavery all over the world"
1851-1864	In 1851, James Douglas became the first appointed Black politician in Canada and then took over as the governor of the colony British Columbia. African-Americans invited in by James Douglas emigrated from California to Victoria to become Canada's first and only all-Black police force
Nov16, 1857	William Neilson Hall wins the Victoria Cross. He was the first Canadian naval recipient, the first Black Person and the first Nova Scotian to win the Victoria Cross
Feb 1911	By 1909, hundreds of Black people from Oklahoma moved to the Canadian Prairies, where they met severe discrimination. In 1911, a few newspapers in Winnipeg predicted that the Dominion Government would move to exclude "Negro immigrants"

Theme 1: Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Ontario

Thousands of African Americans fled enslavement and racial violence in the United States by seeking refuge in British North America in the mid 1800s. They relied on a network of conductors, churches, local newspapers, and communities that reached into Ontario. Historians estimate that 30,000 to 40,000 people fled to British North America, with many choosing Ontario. Canada's role in the Underground Railroad was more than just the "end of the line." Ontarians helped with transit, reception, and long-term settlement in places where churches, schools, and mutual aid groups helped sustain daily life.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 increased the risk to free African Americans in the northern States by allowing slave catchers to operate anywhere in the United States and by criminalizing assistance to escapees. Slave catchers often collected free citizens rather than escaped southern slaves. Many African Americans moved along the Detroit River corridor into Windsor and Sandwich (later Kitchener) and along the Niagara corridor into St. Catharines. Ontario offered stronger legal protections than the United States. However, refugees met with new challenges, such as finding work, housing, and schooling after arrival.

Ontario's corridors and "terminals" make the network visible. Salem Chapel British Methodist Episcopal Church (BME) in St. Catharines provided worship, organizing, and mutual support services and is closely associated with Harriet Tubman's residence in the 1850s. Owen Sound developed as a northern terminus and has marked this heritage through an Emancipation celebration dating to the 1860s and with a Black History Cairn unveiled in 2004. These places show how freedom depended on institutions as well as movement.

Leaders tied education and civic life together. Mary Ann Shadd Cary opened an integrated school in Windsor in 1851 and launched a newspaper called the Provincial Freeman in 1853 to advocate for education, self-reliance, and civil rights for African Americans. Shadd's work, and Tubman's organizing in St. Catharines, help students see the Underground Railroad as a movement and settlement, as activism in classrooms and newspapers, and not only as an escape.

Discussion Questions

- How did Ontario's churches, newspapers, and local committees make freedom possible after people crossed the border?
- What challenges did freedom seekers face after arrival in Ontario, and who helped them meet those challenges?

Theme 2: Building Black Communities and Local Economies

After arrival, Black settlers and their descendants built communities to support their families, elders, and children. Farms, mills, barbershops, print shops, and boarding houses acted as community hubs, places to learn news, find jobs, organize meetings, and raise funds for schools and churches.

Many newcomers pursued land ownership. The Elgin (Buxton) Settlement in Chatham-Kent paired land ownership with schooling and church life. The settlement includes the preserved S. S. Number 13 schoolhouse, built in 1861, and the settlement's mills, cooperages, and shops. These buildings show how a planned local economy funded teachers and pastors while giving families stability.

Other rural colonies followed similar principles. The Dawn Settlement near Dresden and the Refugee Home Society near Windsor offered lots on affordable terms, established schools and churches, and developed local governance. The Refugee Home Society was organized by Henry and Mary Bibb and supported by donors on both sides of the border. It acquired about 2,000 acres of land for Black Ontarian families in Maidstone and Sandwich townships, with churches and a school active by the early 1860s.

Cities offered different paths. In Hamilton, early Black neighbourhoods clustered around BME and AME churches and Black owned small businesses. In Toronto's Ward, Black residents worked across trades and services, opened shops, and petitioned City Council on civic issues. Jobs spanned hairdressing, barbering, seamstressing, cooking, carpentry, bricklaying, and masonry. Others worked on Great Lakes ships and in regional hospitality.

Like many families in nineteenth century cities, some Black households supplemented income with youth labour. Records of Black working children are limited, but local sources show families engaged in urban trades and services. Churches in the Ward ran Sabbath schools and literacy classes, often teaching adults alongside children. In Toronto, Black students generally attended public schools, while church-based learning supplemented instruction after long work weeks.

By the early 1900s, more Black Ontarians entered professional roles such as law, medicine, and teaching, though discrimination persisted. Enterprise remained a strategy to claim space, support schooling, and build institutions that could withstand prejudice. Anderson Ruffin Abbott studied at University College and the Toronto School of Medicine and became the first Canadian born Black physician. Alexander T. Augusta trained at Trinity Medical College. James T. Rapier earned a teaching credential in Toronto before teaching in Buxton and later serving in the United States Congress during Reconstruction.

Discussion Questions

- How did opportunities in cities differ from those in rural settlements? What stayed the same across both settings?
- How did black owned businesses also act as community hubs?
- Many people moved between Ontario and nearby U.S. cities. What benefits and challenges came with those cross-border ties?

Theme 3: Schooling, Segregation, and Advocacy

Education sat at the centre of community hopes, but access to it differed across Ontario. In 1850, the Common Schools Act gained a “separate schools” clause. It allowed school Trustees in Southwestern Ontario to segregate Black children by teaching them in separate buildings from the White students, segregating them by teaching Black students at different times, or inferior “designated seating” for Black students in mixed classrooms. Courts often upheld these decisions. Application of the law varied locally. Toronto’s public schools were generally integrated, though racism still shaped experiences, while several Southwestern districts maintained segregated practices, with the last segregated school not closing until 1965.

Black parents and leaders as well as supporters fought for inclusion. In Hamilton, campaigns against segregation drew on church networks and local advocacy. AME and BME congregations in many communities offered literacy classes, Sabbath schools, and meeting spaces for organizing, while petitions and newspapers argued for equal schooling. When public provision faltered, churches and mutual aid societies kept instruction going and prepared children for advancement.

Community run schooling showed what excellence looked like. In Buxton, education was a cornerstone of settlement. In Buxton, schooling was treated as the cornerstone of community, and by 1914 you can find Black teachers like John H. Alexander on the payroll in Anderdon Township (recorded at \$600/year), a reminder of both progress and inequity. Over time, segregated schools closed in many districts, but change was gradual and uneven. The long struggle built legal literacy, community organization, and teacher leadership, skills that later supported broader civil rights efforts in Ontario.

Discussion Questions

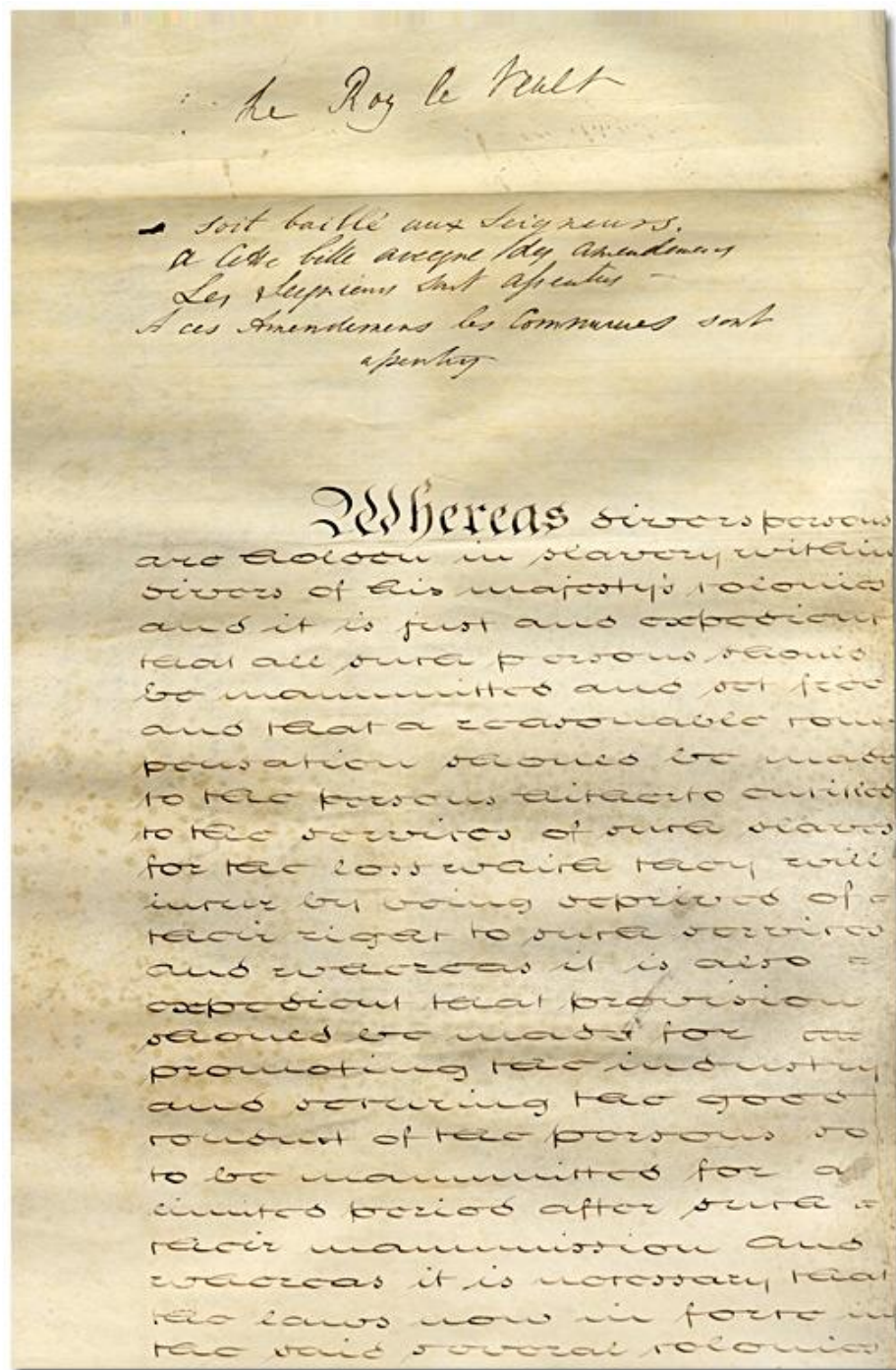
- How did parents, churches, and community leaders challenge exclusion in places like schools?
- What signs show progress by the early 1900s, and what signs show the inequality that remained?



Map entitled: "Southwestern Counties of Canada West" - showing the principal stations of the free colored population In: Mission to the free colored population in Canada.

PAMPH 1855 #41

Archives of Ontario Library



When the British Imperial Act of 1833 was passed in Britain, it ended the enslavement of Africans in the British Empire which included Canada. Effective August 1st, 1834, it was the first global human rights legislation impacting the situation of Africans and other enslaved peoples.

1833 British Imperial Act, Courtesy of Parliamentary Archives, U. K.

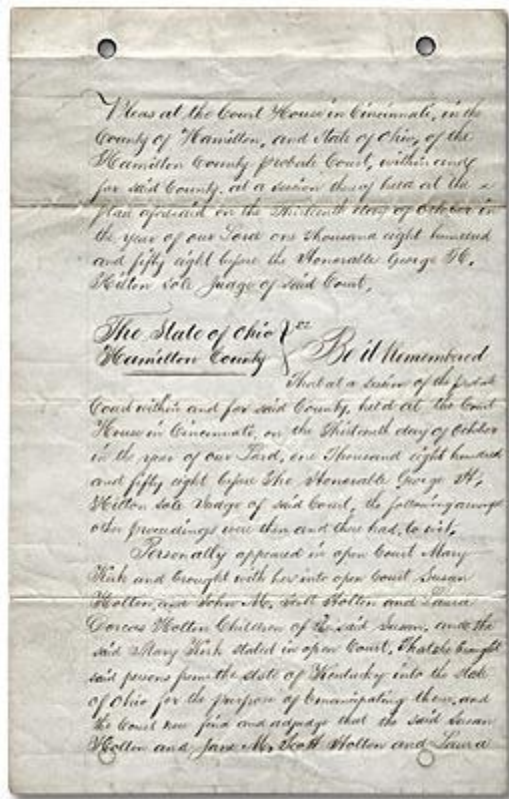


Remains of Old Mission House, Sandwich, 1895

Alvin D. McCurdy fonds

Reference Code: F 2076, Box D-4

Archives of Ontario, I0027877



Excerpt from the emancipation papers of
Susan Holton, Ohio, 1848

Fonds Alvin D. McCurdy

Reference Code: F 2076-1-0-15

Archives of Ontario

The arguments heard in the court-house at Cincinnati, Hamilton County, State of Ohio, of the Probate Court for Hamilton County, within and for the benefit of the said county, at a hearing held at the places aforesaid, on this thirteenth day of October in the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty-eight, in the presence of the Honourable George H. Hilton, sole judge of the said Court.

State of Ohio, Hamilton County

Be it noted that a hearing of the Probate Court within and in the interest of the said county was held at the courthouse at Cincinnati, on this thirteenth day of October in the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty-eight, in the presence of the Honourable George H. Hilton, sole judge of the said Court, and that the following events occurred, These include:

Mary Kirk, accompanied by Susan Holton, John M. Scott Holton, and Laura Dorcas Holton, children of the aforesaid Susan, appeared in open court, and that the said Mary Kirk stated in open court that she had brought these persons from the State of Kentucky

to the State of Ohio for the purpose of enabling them to emancipate themselves, and that she now hoped that the Court would decide and hold that the said Susan Holton, Jan M. Scott Holton and Laura . . .



Unidentified Black family portrait
Tintype
Alvin D. McCurdy fonds
Reference Code: F 2076-16-4-8
Archives of Ontario, I0024785

Oswego October 12th 1850

Mr Stevenson I write these few lines to inform you and all my old friend friends that those few lines leaves me in good health and hoping those will find all my acquaintances in the same please give my love to my aunt Dinah Caty and Jane bennet tell them I say they must not come to the states but stay in the land of freedom I smile they have good homes for the law is so now all through the united states that the slave holder can take their slaves were ever they can find them and since that law passed here has been several Colored people taken some of which was borned free but they had not their free papers and would not be allowed proper time to send for them neither a friend I expect to leave the states the last of boating for no Colored person in safe in any parts of the states my advice to all colored people to stay in Canada whether they are free or fugitives.

Mr Stevenson please send this within letter to Mr Wm W Cunningham by some trusty person for I have sent several letters and received no answer

Respectfully yours from S. Wickham

please excuse my bad pen

Letter dated Oct. 12, 1850 from S. Wickham warning of slave-catchers in the United States

D. B. Stevenson fonds

Correspondence for 1850, letter from S. Wickham to D. B. Stevenson October 12, 1850

Reference Code: F 499 MU 2885

Archives of Ontario

Oswego October 12th 1850

Mr Stevenson I rite these few lines to inform you and all my old picton friends that these few lines leaves me in good health and hoping these will find all my acquaintences in the same pleas sir give my love to my aunt Dinah Caty and Jane bennet tell them I say they must not come to the States but stay in the land of freedom [if] wile they have good homes for the law is so [now] all through the united States that the slave holders can take their slaves were ever they can find them and since that law pased here has bin several colard people taken some of wich was borned free but they had not their free papers and would not be allould proper time to send for them neither a friend I expect to leave the States the last of [boating] for no colard person is safte in any part of the States my advice to all colard people to stay in canada wither they are free or fugatives.

Mr Stevenson pleas send this within letter to Mr Wm. W. Cunningham by some trusty person for I have sent several letters and received no answer

Respectfully yours from S. Wickham

pleas excuse my bad pen



Marble Village Coloured School
Alvin D. McCurdy fonds
Reference Code: F 2076-16-5-2
Archives of Ontario, I00024783



The Riot at Niagara Court House 1837

Solomon Moseby (or Mosely) stole a horse to flee Kentucky. Arriving in Niagara, he was jailed, but the local Black community surrounded the courthouse to prevent his transfer. When he was taken out under armed guard, shots were fired, resulting in the deaths of 2 Black people, the arrest of 20 others and Moseby's escape. He later returned to the area.

Niagara Court House and Jail, [ca. 1905]

Postcard

Reference Code: Item X 984.5.128

Courtesy of Niagara Historical Society & Museum



Settlers in their Sunday best, possibly Essex County, [ca. 1900]

Alvin D. McCurdy fonds

Reference Code: F 2076-16-3-4

Archives of Ontario



Ara Wilson, Henry Banks Jr., Roy Banks, Fremont
Nelson: cooks aboard a steamboat, [ca. 1890]
Alvin D. McCurdy fonds
Reference Code: F 2076-16-3-9
Archives of Ontario, I0024829

Collegiate Institutes and High Schools of Ontario.



It is hereby Certified

That May Alexander

has passed the ENTRANCE EXAMINATION required by the Education Department for admission to a Collegiate Institute or High School.

Dated at Windsor

July 25th 1899.

D. Maxwell B.A., LL.B., Ph.D.
Inspector of Public Schools

FORM 175.
50,000—23rd April, 1896.

May Alexander was awarded this certificate for successfully passing her high school entrance exam in 1899
Alvin D. McCurdy fonds
Reference Code: F 2076-11-0-16
Archives of Ontario



ANNO DECIMO TERTIO ET DECIMO QUARTO
VICTORIÆ REGINÆ.

CAP. XLVIII.

An Act for the better Establishment and Maintenance of
Common Schools in Upper Canada.

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[24th July, 1850.]

WHEREAS it is expedient to make provision for
the better establishment and maintenance of Com-
mon Schools in the several Villages, Towns, Cities, Townships and
Counties of Upper Canada : Be it therefore enacted, by the Queen's
Most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the
Legislative Council and of the Legislative Assembly of the Province

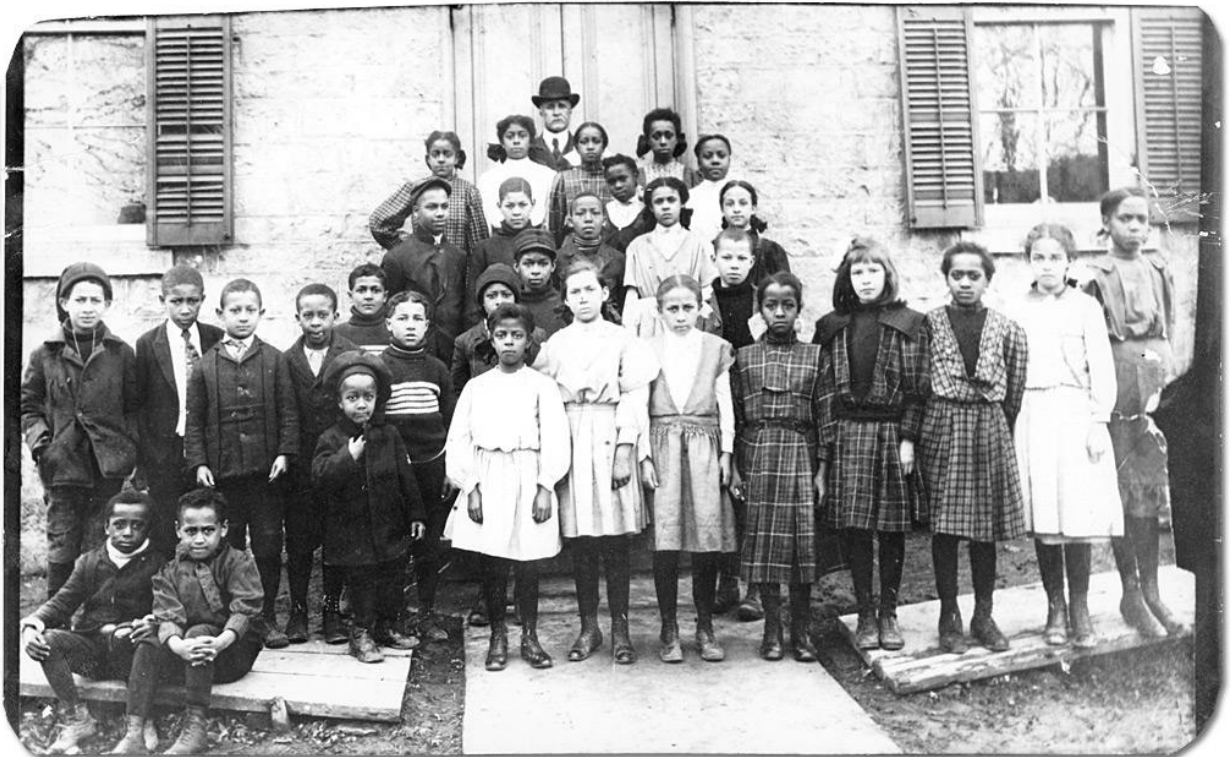
Preamble.

The proclamation of the Ontario Common Schools Act in 1851 was interpreted in many ways. It led to the creation not only of separate Catholic schools but also segregated Black schools, particularly west of Toronto.

Black parents fought against this through writing petitions demanding the inclusion of their children or by holding protest meetings.

An Act for the better establishment and maintenance of common schools in Upper Canada. PAMPH 1850 #24

Archives of Ontario



In smaller towns or farming areas, Black children often had to travel very far to attend all-Black schools. One, established in Buxton, produced such highly trained students that non-Black students wanted to go there, and many graduates proceeded to the University of Toronto.

Students of King Street School in Amherstburg,
Ontario with their teacher, J. H. Alexander, [ca. 1890s]

Alvin D. McCurdy fonds

Reference Code: F 2076-16-7-4

Archives of Ontario, I0027815

Rev. E. Ryerson. d.d.

Tacoma Mills C. V. Nov. 22nd 1852

you will please pardon me for the liberty I have taken in appealing to you for redress, for the bad treatment I have received from the majority of the trustees of School Section No. 3 in the Township of Camden County of Kent. I have ^{used} every respectful effort in my power with them, to have my son eleven years of age admitted into the above named school, but all to no purpose. They say, that I am a Black man and that it would be presumption in me to contend for my son to go to school among white children though I am among the largest tax payers in the said School Section. The amt of taxes that I am charged with and have paid this year, was \$17.00 less a few pence besides 12 days Statute Labour. I am the owner three hundred acres of land of which between 80 & 90^{acres} under Cultivation situated nearly in the center of said School Section, and to ^{be} debarred from my rights of School privilege for no other crime than that my skin is a few shades darker than some of my neighbours. I do think it unfair.

Rev. E. Ryerson d.d.

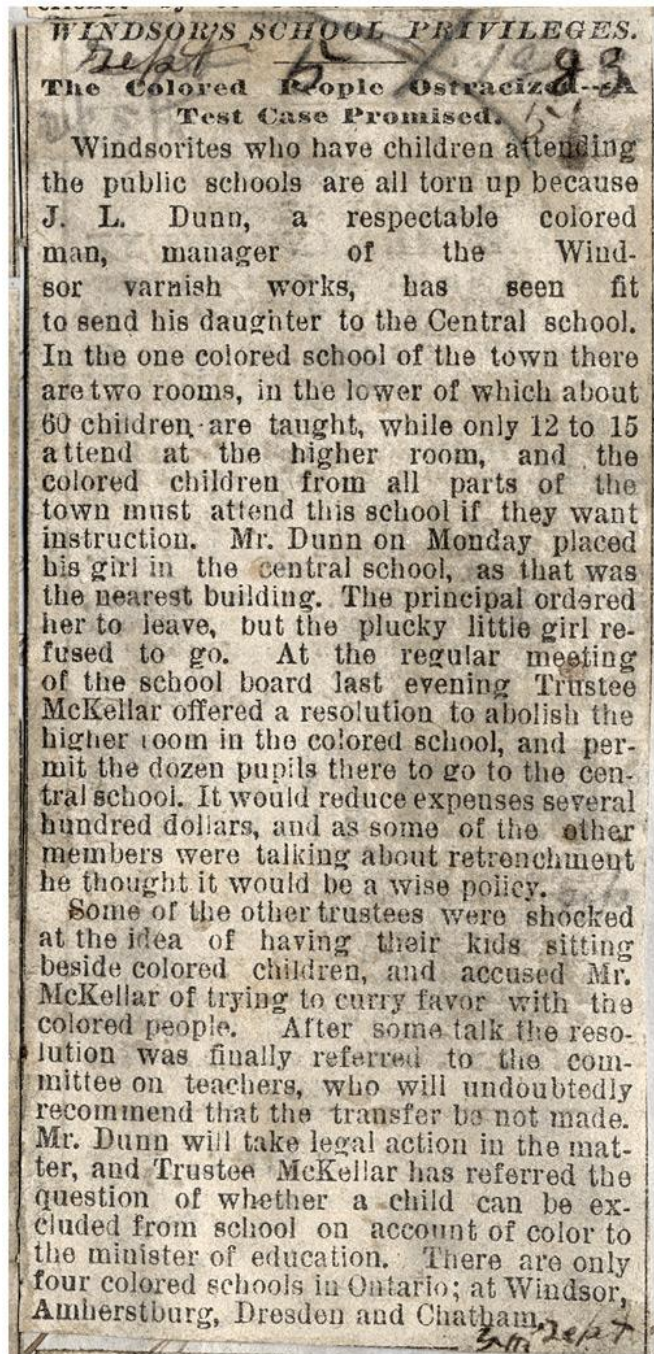
you will please pardon me for the liberty I have taken in appealing to you for redress, for the bad treatment I have received from the majority of the trustees of School Section No. 3 in the Township of Camden County of Kent. I have used every respectful effort in my power with them to have my son eleven years of age admitted into the above named school, but all to no purpose. They say, that I am a Black man and that it would be presumption in me to contend for my son to go to school among white children though I am among the largest tax payers in the said school section. The amt of taxes that I am charged with and have paid this year was \$17.00 less a few pence. Besides 12 days statuted Labour I am the owner three hundred acres of land of which between 80 – 90

acres under cultivation situated nearly in the centre of said school section, and to be debarred from my Rights of school privilege for no other crime than that my skin is a few shades darker than some of my neighbours, I do think it unfair and at the same these same Trustees, have invited white children, out of the Township and they even as far as invite some whites of the adjoining county to attend the said school and so enjoy the privilege of sending as many scholars as they please and the whole of that party put together so pay but a little more taxes than I do the above are facts therefore will you be so kind as to instruct me how to proceed & how I shall arrange matter so as to give my children their education, for I cannot let them grow up in ignorance. Be so good, most Rev (Sir) as to let me hear from you by the earliest opportunity.

your most Humble and obedient ser't
(signed) Dennis Hill

P.S. address Dawn Mills
Canada West

Letter to Chief Superintendent for Education, Egerton Ryerson,
from Dennis Hill, November 22, 1852
Alvin D. McCurdy fonds
Reference Code: RG 2-12
Archives of Ontario



In 1883, a Windsor man, J. L. Dunn, caused quite an uproar when he decided to challenge this segregation by sending his daughter to the local public school

In 1883, J. L. Dunn attempted to send his daughter to a school attended only by white children, causing an uproar
 Alvin D. McCurdy fonds



Dr. Mary Fitzbutler Waring (I0024774) [ca. 1890]
Black and white print, Alvin D. McCurdy fonds



At the barber shop, Essex County 1900, Alvin D. McCurdy Fond. Archives of Ontario
I0015263



Mr. Fred H.A. Davis and Miss Anne Alexander, in his law office on Ramsay Street, Amherstburg

Date: 1914

Creator: Photographer unknown. Alvin D. McCurdy fonds.

Reference Code F 2076-16-3-7-41

Archives of Ontario, I0014679



School group, including Jesse Henderson, Wilfred Simpson, and Florence Kirtty, Essex County, 1923. Alvin D. McCurdy Fond, Archives of Ontario I0024782