

Pieces of Our Past

Little-known Black history comes to light in new documentary series

"Canfield Roots" reveals the now largely forgotten story of how escaped slaves started new lives in rural Niagara

BY BRIAN GREEN
SPECIAL TO THE VOICE

The village of Canfield lies about half an hour due west of Fenwick, out Canborough Road and Highway 3. There is little to distinguish the town these days—a cluster of houses lining the highway for about half a kilometre, no commerce to speak of, no real town centre or significant buildings to warrant a glance. Once it was a bustling community, hub of three rail lines, with hotels, banks, stores, a blacksmith shop, and many churches. At one time, it was also home to a large and vibrant Black community known as "Freedom Seekers," escaped slaves from the United States, who settled there and made lives for themselves and their families. The 1851 census reveals that the Canfield population included 137 Black citizens; today there is not a single Black person left in the town.

However, the Black history of Canfield has not been forgotten. A film series called "Canfield Roots," produced and directed by Graeme Bachiu of Windecker Road Films, has recently debuted on Bell Fibe TV. The six-part documentary series traces the roots of the Black families who came north on the Underground Railroad and settled in and near Canfield, and through their descendants, now scattered across North America, recalls the community of Freedom Seekers and their families.

Spencer Martin kneels beside a fallen gravestone in an overgrown cluster of trees in the middle of a farm field just outside of Canfield. He brushes away the leaves and debris that obscure the stone and when the name Street is revealed, he murmurs, "This is my family. This is where I come from." A direct descendant of the first escaped slaves to settle in Canfield, Martin is a retired civil servant who now lives in Toronto and has come to Canfield at the invitation of Graeme Bachiu to see the abandoned cemetery that forms the central metaphor in the "Canfield Roots" documentary. As the debris is scraped away, the full engraving on the stone is revealed: "David Street. Born October 20, 1850." He is Martin's great-great-grandfather, and the son of escaped slaves Stepaney and Lucy Street.

In 1841 at the age of 19, with her three children, Lucy Street fled her home in West Virginia and made her way north on the Underground Railroad, crossing Lake Erie to Port Abino and eventually making her way to St. Catharines. The Black community in St. Catharines was well established under the leadership of the famous Harriet Tubman, and Lucy was taken into that community until she could locate her husband. Stepaney Street was owned by a different farmer in West Virginia and had escaped a few weeks be-



fore Lucy, when he found he was about to be sold and moved away from his family. He crossed the border in Windsor and came to St. Catharines when he learned that the Streets eventually moved to Canfield, had 13 children, and became stalwarts of the Black community there, building a church on their property and providing the land for the small cemetery. The Harper and Barnes, Duncan and Williams families joined and intermarried with the Streets and all are represented on the broken and sunken gravestones in the little derelict graveyard. Asked why Canfield became a destination for escaped slaves, Spencer Martin has a ready explanation.

"Close to the border the bounty hunters and slave catchers operated," he says. "Many fled inland to find safety and cheaper land."

Martin and his relatives, though now scattered across North America, have been aware of their connection to Canfield all their lives. Martin's cousin, Aileen Duncan, recalls driving with her grandfather out to Canfield from their home in Hamilton to visit relatives and some of the properties that were important to the Black community of the area. Her grandfather's great-grandmother was Lucy Street. The cemetery where Lucy and her children and relatives are buried has become a rallying point for their descendants, and Graeme Bachiu's video documents their concerns and recent efforts to have it recognized and preserved.

Like many early cemeteries, this one is on private land and depends on the landowner to provide access and upkeep. While the Bereavement Authority of Ontario legally requires landowners to maintain such graveyards and provide reasonable access to relatives of those buried there, there are literally hundreds of such forgotten and abandoned cemeteries

in rural parts of Ontario. Many landowners are concerned about trespassing and liability, so are happy to let the gravestones gradually sink into the ground and the plots disappear into the brush. Some have even destroyed or moved the gravestones to prevent any recognition of the site. Now that the historical importance of this cemetery is being recognized, Lucy Street's descendants are hopeful that Haldimand County will acquire the property from the farmer who presently owns it and make provision for it to be recognized as historically significant. Martin echoes the feelings of many of the descendants when he says, "I'd like to see it somewhat restored and preserved within a natural setting, a peaceful place to remember our ancestors." Others have suggested that a plaque outlining its importance as a historic site be erected, but that the site be set aside as a quiet place for contemplation and reflection.

There is an historic plaque in the Canfield Community Cemetery that recognizes the presence of the Black Freedom Seekers and their descendants. It reads in part, "This small community was a safe haven which welcomed the Blacks with respect, compassion and acceptance."

While this seems to have been true for the most part, and there are Black children among the photos taken through the years at local schools, the last Black person to live in Canfield left for Toronto and eventually the United States to escape a childhood that left her scarred. Betty Ann Newman says that growing up in Canfield she and her brother were the only two Black students in their schools and their road was not easy.

"When I left Canfield, I took off those labels and threw them out the door," she says, referring to the "coloured" and "Negro" terms that were common. "I became Heinz 57."



Far left, Spencer Martin, at right, a direct descendant of the former slaves buried in a hidden and abandoned cemetery uncovers one of the stones that mark the resting place of his ancestors. Filmmaker Graeme Bachiu points to the marker. **Centre**, this 1921 image shows the women of the Williams family, descendants of the original escaped slaves who came to Canfield on the Underground Railroad. Described as strong and resilient, the women of the community were the rock on which the Black community was formed. Spencer Martin's grandmother stands second from right, pregnant with Martin's mother. **Lower left**, this cairn and plaque in the Canfield Community Cemetery commemorates the Black families who settled in Canfield. **Lower right**, Spencer Martin, a direct descendant of the escaped slaves who came to Canfield in the mid-1800s, examines one of his ancestor's tombstones in the abandoned cemetery. **Bottom right**, Graeme Bachiu, Director and Producer; Bill Douglas, Williams and Street family descendant; Brian Marleau, Director of Photography. **Below**, David Street was the son of Lucy and Stepaney Street, escaped slaves who made their way to Canfield from West Virginia in 1841.

BRIAN GREEN/SUPPLIED



The road adjacent to the cemetery is marked on old maps and is still known among older residents of Canfield as "Darkey Road." For many of the offspring of the Freedom Seekers, the hardest part of growing up in small Ontario communities was being ashamed of who they were. The descendants of Lucy Street and the other Black settlers in and around Canfield are now in the process of reclaiming pride in their heritage.

Graeme Bachiu became interested in Canfield's Black history when he bought a decommissioned church nearby and asked the local historian, Sylvia Weaver, about the history of his new home. "She came over and we talked about the church for about 20 minutes," he recalls. "But then she told me about the history of the Black community, and we talked for two hours." The video project has taken three years to research, script, shoot, and edit, and the six-part production is clearly a labour of love for Bachiu. "Taking an empathetic point of view and getting close to the subjects takes time," he says.

Bachiu is a graduate of the Broadcast: Radio, Television, Film Program at Niagara College. He worked for CHCH-TV in Hamilton until 2015, when he decided to launch Windecker Road Films and produce documentaries and "branded docs" (promotional films) that help to pay his bills. He intends to produce a one-hour version of Canfield Roots for other media outlets and to enter film festivals.

In the course of researching "Canfield Roots," Bachiu says, "I came across enough material, enough stories for a dozen documentaries."

For example, one of those buried in the little cemetery is the niece of Harriet Tubman, Carrie Stevens. She married William Harper and their son was William A. Harper, a renowned artist whose

paintings hang in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. The only Black student at the Chicago School of Art, he put himself through school by working as the school janitor. Another Canfield descendant, Harry Lee, was the last man to be hanged at Hamilton's Barton Street jail. Executed for the murder of his girlfriend, a member of the synagogue where he was a caretaker, he protested his innocence to the end. Subsequent investigative articles in the Hamilton Spectator give credence to his claims and reveal that racism was certainly a factor in the rush to find him guilty. Bachiu says there are many other untold stories that are gradually being discovered as the Canfield community begins to recall its past.

Graeme Bachiu's video series has shed light on the little-known part the Black Freedom Seekers played in rural Niagara history, and it has already had impact. The little abandoned cemetery in a farm field on the outskirts of Canfield is now in the process of being acquired by Haldimand County, so there is a sense of hope that the site will become a memorial to the brave men and women who endured incredible hardship to escape slavery, made their way to Canada, settled in Canfield, and provided their families and descendants with a heritage worthy of remembrance. ♦

POSTSCRIPT

After this story was written, further investigation at the abandoned cemetery near Canfield uncovered the grave of Stepaney Street, the first person to be buried in the cemetery located on land that he and his family donated for the remains of the Black residents of the community. Lucy Street's grave has not yet been located, but descendants are hopeful that the discovery of Stepaney's headstone will lead them to find her resting place as well.

Canfield hosts premiere

Documentary traces routes of Black freedom seekers who settled in west Niagara

BY BRIAN GREEN
SPECIAL TO THE VOICE

There was no red carpet, no posing starlets, no swarming paparazzi, but the debut showing of Graeme Bachiu's documentary "Canfield Roots" in the Canfield Community Centre was met with all the emotion, enthusiasm, and applause deserving of a world premiere. The documentary traces the history of the once vibrant Black community of escaped slaves and their descendants in and around Canfield, a small community about half an hour due west of Fenwick.

Local historian Sylvia Weaver has been compiling the history of the Black community in Canfield and area for six years. Three years ago she met Graeme Bachiu, the principal filmmaker of Windecker Road Films and a resident of Canfield, who became equally fasci-



From left, Graeme Bachiu, Spencer Martin, Sylvia Weaver, Aileen Duncan, Bill Douglas, and Karen Springer.

BRIAN GREEN

nated by the little-known history of the Black community. Relying on Weaver's exhaustive research, Bachiu launched into a project to tell the story of the Freedom Seekers and their descendants on film,

and along the way has become a passionate advocate for the preservation of their history.

"Canfield Roots" is the result of their collaboration and enthusiasm. Originally a six-part televi-

sion series that has aired on Bell Vibe and across the US on PBS, it has been painstakingly edited and restructured to become a 75-minute documentary for theatrical release. Bachiu chose the Canfield

Community Centre for the premiere of his documentary as the most appropriate venue for its first public showing. Like any director

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PREMIERE

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about to show his "labour of love" for the first time publicly, Bachiu was nervous.

"I'll probably hide for the first 15 minutes, but gradually I'll calm down and come out," he said.

At the end, he was happy with both the film and the reaction, "But I spent the whole time doing mental revisions and re-edits."

The documentary tells the story of how, beginning in 1836 and continuing through the 1840s and '50s, escaped slaves made their way north on the Underground Railroad, a se-

cret chain of safe-houses and pathways, to Canada and freedom. Many settled in St. Catharines, where the famous Harriet Tubman led a large community of former slaves and actively assisted their escape across the border, making 19 trips into the US herself to shepherd them north. With bounty hunters active in the border towns, many moved inland and settled in the largely unpopulated areas along the Talbot Trail (now Highway 3). About 20 families settled in and around Canfield.

Recognized as the father of the Black community, Stepaney Street, learning he was about to be sold by

his West Virginia owner and separated from his family, escaped in 1840 and crossed into Canada near Windsor. His wife Lucy and her three children, enslaved at a different plantation in West Virginia, escaped three weeks later and made their way on the Underground Railroad to cross Lake Erie at Point Abino and find shelter in St. Catharines. The two were reunited shortly after and moved to Canfield, where they established a farm and a community, built a home and a church, and raised 13 children. There they were joined by other fugitive slaves and by 1851 the census revealed 137 Black settlers in Canfield. The Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War in the United States opened the door for many to return, while others moved on from the hard-scrabble farms of Haldimand into the cities. By 1911 only 52 remained, and the last of the descendants of the Black Freedom Seekers left Canfield in 1998.

In a question period following the screening, Bachiu was joined on stage by historian Silvia Weaver and Canfield Freedom Seeker descendants Spencer Matin, Aileen Duncan, Bill Douglas, and Karen Springer. It was Bill Douglas, the last Black resident of Canfield, who articulated the importance of the film to the descendants, who are now scattered across Canada from New Brunswick to Vancouver Island and throughout the US.

"This has brought us together for the first time and

given us a sense of pride in who we are and where we came from."

Martin Spencer agreed: "Making this film has been an emotional experience for all of us."

He marveled at the strength and determination of his ancestors to escape slavery to freedom and create from nothing a vibrant community.

"This film is a celebration of what people can accomplish," he said.

Aileen Duncan revealed that the documentary had kindled a pride in her extended family, resulting in a planned reunion of the Duncan and Street families from across Canada to be held at the Canfield Community Centre in August.

Pride in their heritage was an important theme for all the descendants, who had experienced some form of discrimination and prejudice.

"I don't blame Canfield," said Bill Douglas's sister, Betty-Ann Newman, on film from her home in Spokane Washington. "We were unaware of our differences through our early years."

It was only when she went to high school, Newman said, that her race became an issue. She left Canfield on her 20th birthday and sought the anonymity of the big city.

"In Toronto I took all those labels and threw them out the door." A happily married mother and grandmother, she has been reluctant to talk about the painful past, but now she proudly shows pictures of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother to her grandchildren, and takes pride in the perseverance, strength, and fortitude of her ancestors.

While the Black community in Canfield is no more,

Bachiu has built his documentary around the metaphor of an abandoned cemetery in a copse of woods in a farm field on the outskirts of town. The cemetery is on land once owned by Stepany and Lucy Street and contains the remains of many of the earliest Black settlers. On repeated visits to the graveyard, Bachiu and some of the descendants gradually uncovered gravestones engraved with the names of the early families. One of the earliest discoveries was the grave of Carrie Harper, niece of Harriet Tubman.

Other discoveries followed, including last year, as descendant Aileen Duncan was sitting on her walker, watching Bachiu's film crew taping in the cemetery, when she noticed the stone under her foot had a straight edge. Assisted by the cameraman, she scraped away the vegetation and moss to reveal the gravestone of her great-great-great-grandfather, Stepaney Street. Since then, more graves have been identified, and records indicate that 11 bodies are buried in the plot, but Sylvia Weaver believes there may be more. According to her research there may be as many as six Black cemeteries hidden away in woods and fields in the Canfield area.

Thanks to the attention brought to the small, derelict graveyard by "Canfield Roots," the County of Haldimand is in the process of acquiring the wooded property and preserving it as a significant historic site. The Bereavement Authority of Ontario, the government's official overseer of cemeteries and burial sites, is expected to formally recognize the site, and negotiations are underway with the Ministry of Transportation to provide access off Haldimand Road 32, once called

SIDEBAR

"Dairy" v. "Darky"

Google Maps identifies Haldimand Road 32 as "Dairy" Side Road. A misreading of an old map? A clumsy attempt to sanitize and forget its original, distasteful name? Maps in the 1920s labeled it Darky or Darkey Side Road and local residents confirm the name was in common usage until relatively recently. Now it's known merely as Haldimand Road 32 and, according to Graeme Bachiu, the only people who actually refer to it as "Dairy Side Road" are out-of-towners who use Google Maps.

"Darky Side Road." A plaque describing the importance of the cemetery is planned, the gravestones will be restored, and the plot cleared while preserving its natural setting.

Graeme Bachiu is very pleased with the success of his six-part television series so far.

"National exposure on PBS in the US was huge," he said, "and the first episode on Vibe got over 10,000 views in Canada."

But he has hopes that the just-released standalone documentary will reach other audiences in schools, theatres, and film festivals. Meanwhile, the cameras were rolling during the screening at the Canfield Community Centre, and as plans to save the cemetery progress and the Black descendants of the early Freedom Seekers reconnect and regain their heritage, he hopes to continue documenting their story and produce more episodes in the series.



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