



WELLNESS WORKS....

at Brain Injury Community Re-entry (Niagara) Inc.

A Publication from Brain Injury Community Re-entry Niagara's Wellness Works Committee

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February – Black History Month



Black History Month provides an opportunity to share and learn about the experiences, contributions and achievements of peoples of African ancestry. It was initiated in Canada by the Ontario Black History Society, which was founded in 1978.

Before we had Black History Month in Canada, there was a movement to recognize North Americans of African descent. In 1926, African American historian, Carter G. Woodson conceived of the idea to declare Negro History Week (which became Black History Month) to coincide with the birth month of President Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist and former enslaved person, Frederick Douglass. Later, sleeping car porters brought the idea north across the border into Canada.

Stanley G. Grizzle organized the first celebration of February as Black History Month at Toronto's African Canadian "Shaw Street" British Methodist Episcopal Church in 1950. At the time, no one could have imagined that it would grow to encompass the imagination of the entire country. The efforts of the Canadian Negro Women's Association kept it alive over the years.

Finally, through the efforts of the founders of the Ontario Black History Society, including Dr. Daniel G. Hill and Wilson O. Brooks, a petition was presented to the City of Toronto to have February formally proclaimed as Black History Month. In 1979, the first-ever Canadian proclamation was issued by Toronto. In 1993, the Ontario Black History Society successfully filed a petition in Ontario to proclaim February as Black History Month.



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The Underground Railroad

Between 1840 and 1860, before the American Civil War, enslaved Africans followed the North Star on the Underground Railroad to find freedom in Canada. It was not an actual railroad but a secret network of routes and safe houses that helped people escape slavery and reach free states or Canada. Sometimes there were guides available to help people find their way to the next stop along the way. Travelling on the Underground Railroad was dangerous and required luck as much as a guide.

The "railroad" actually began operating in the 1780s, but became known as the Underground Railroad in the 1830s. The organization used railroad terms as code words. Those who helped people move from place to place were known as "conductors" and the fleeing refugees were called "passengers" or "cargo." Safe places to stop to rest were called "stations." Conductors were also abolitionists—people who wanted slavery abolished. They were Blacks and Whites, men and women. Many of them were Quakers or Methodists.

Places had code names to help keep the routes secret. Detroit, from which most left the United States, was known as "Midnight." The Detroit River was called "Jordan," a biblical reference to the river that led to the promised land. The end of the journey also had a code name, such as "Dawn." People could communicate without being specific: "Take the railroad from Midnight to Dawn." The refugees arrived all across Canada, from Nova Scotia to British Columbia, but most came to what is now southwestern Ontario, to places such as Windsor, Fort Erie, Chatham and Owen Sound.

The Underground Railroad has been the subject of a certain amount of myth-making. Because of the secrecy required for its success, there hasn't been much documentation to describe its role in our history. It is impossible to know for certain how many slaves found freedom by way of the railroad, but it may have been as many as 30 000. The railroad's traffic reached its peak between 1840 and 1860, especially after the US passed its Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. The new law allowed slave hunters to pursue and capture enslaved persons in places where they would legally be free. It resulted in several attempts to kidnap escapees in Canada and return them to former owners in the Southern States.

Some of the conductors and others associated with the railroad became famous for their efforts; Harriet Tubman, Mary Ann Shadd and Josiah Henson are but a few.

Modern Era Black History Makers

There are countless Black history makers from the modern era that may not be as familiar as those from the early periods of Black history. It would be impossible to recognize all of them in this space. However, below is a small representative group of outstanding African Americans, from very diverse backgrounds, to represent all of the Black history makers from the modern era.

Colonel Guion S. Bluford - Former NASA Astronaut He attended pilot training at Williams Air Force Base, Arizona, and received his pilot wings in January 1966. He flew 144 combat missions, 65 of which were over North Vietnam.

Dr. Benjamin S. Carson, Sr. - Pediatric Neurosurgeon Ben Carson had a childhood dream of becoming a physician. Growing up in a single parent home with dire poverty, poor grades, a horrible temper, and low self-esteem appeared to preclude the realization of that dream until his mother, with only a third-grade education, challenged her sons to strive for excellence.

Berry Gordy, Jr. - Founder Motown Record Corporation Founder and owner of the Tamla-Motown family record labels, Berry Gordy, Jr. established Motown Records as one of the most important independent labels in the early '60s.

Barack Hussein Obama - President of the United States Barack H. Obama is the 44th President of the United States. His story is the American story --- values from the heartland, a middle-class upbringing in a strong family, hard work and education as the means of getting ahead, and the conviction that a life so blessed should be lived in service to others.

Resources: blackhistorycanada.ca cwrmaonline.com