

While researching a totally different topic, I came across an interesting story and photograph on page 3 of the August 28, 1931 edition of The St. Catharines Standard. I decided instead that I would research this article further and present it to you. The story and photograph of “Auntie” Deveaux was about her celebrating her 100th birthday that week. She is quoted in the story as saying “Work hard if you would live long.” Mrs. Katherine Deveaux was born into slavery on a plantation in Charlottetown, South Carolina on August 24, 1831. Katherine was only five when her mother was sold and left the plantation. Later her father committed suicide rather than be sold. She married Dennis Deveaux, who was also a slave and they had eight children. At age 31 (1862), she became a free woman, and her husband became free near the conclusion of the Civil War. Not sure that freedom would last, they left the plantation and made their way to St. Catharines in 1863, making their first home on Niagara Street. She voluntarily worked day and night and was a devoted early riser. They later moved to Geneva Street and then a third time, to the east side of Lake Street, two doors north of Albert Street, where “Auntie” lived for 37 years. Her husband Dennis died at the Lake Street home. This house was destroyed, along with her meagre belongings, by a rare cyclone on August 2, 1902. She also lost a sheepskin on which was inscribed her date of birth. She was left destitute, but continued to work day and night, and managed to buy a home of her own at 146 Dufferin Street. She grew a vegetable garden, and depended upon the produce to sell door to door to supplement her earnings from cleaning and doing laundry. She was a member of the Queen Street Baptist Church and regularly attended services there. In politics, she was a Liberal and relished the opportunity to vote. At the time of her 100th birthday, she was living alone at 146 Dufferin Street and surviving on an old age pension. Almost three years later, “Auntie” Katherine Deveux died on June 25, 1934, just days before her 103rd birthday. The news of her early morning death “spread throughout the city this morning as citizens of all walks of life halted in their day’s activities to pay sincere tribute to this district’s oldest resident, who died from suffocation when her small home at 146 Dufferin Street was

destroyed by flames.” The newspaper report continues: “Auntie Deveaux is dead, said one resident to the other, and there was great depth of feeling in the mere statement of fact. The tragic surroundings of the death of this far famed Negro women, in the home which she had struggled for years to pay for, cast a pall of gloom over the city. “Auntie” who always responded with a cheery smile and a kind word to greetings from residents had been one of St. Catharines’ best known residents “ The fire call had come into the Central fire hall at 5:55 a.m. and the firemen found the house in engulfed in flames upon arrival. The cause of the fire was not immediately known, but she did used coal oil on the wood to start fires in the stove, and there was a can of coal oil in front of the charred kitchen stove. The story indicates that the stove likely overheated and in turn ignited the kitchen and “the timbers burnt like matchwood.” Katherine was found lying across her bed in the adjoining bedroom and had suffocated. Katherine was survived by one daughter, Mrs. Harry West, and two sons, Fred Deveaux and Dennis Deveaux, all of St. Catharines. Funeral services were held the following Wednesday from Butler and Son Funeral Home to the B.M.E. Church and then to Victoria Lawn Cemetery. Auntie Deveaux was buried in Grave #3, Row 128, Section F of the New Cemetery, near the back (north) property line of the cemetery. No marker or monument marks “Auntie’s” plot.