

# Historical Society of St. Catharines **NEWSLETTER**

P.O. Box 24123, 145 St. Paul St., St. Catharines, ON L2R 7P7 905/682-6053 DECEMBER 1995

## **"... THE CHURCH AT ST. CATHARINES": THE BICENTENNIAL, 1796-1996:**

In St. Catharines there is a church at 81 Church Street -- St. George's Anglican. In the basement of that church there is a vault. In that vault there is a sturdy cardboard file box. In that box are some very ordinary file folders. ~~Among those file folders is one~~ <sup>one of them</sup> marked "1796." And in that folder is a very extraordinary document, tattered, discoloured, and stained though it is. That document will be responsible for a year of special events related to the history of the City of St. Catharines. Let ~~me~~ <sup>me</sup> explain.

In the last one or two issues of the newsletter we have ~~talked about the fact~~ <sup>MENTIONED</sup> that 1996 would be a bicentennial year for the city of St. Catharines, and explained why ~~it would be~~ -- because of the 1796 document which is the first document known to have referred to this community as "St. Catharines."

The good news is that Jon Jouppien had presence of mind enough to notice that the 200th anniversary of that document was about to be observed. The bad news is that he became aware of this so late, and that the event itself happens to fall early rather than late in the year. The result ~~of this~~ is that the preparations to make the bicentennial happen are going to be a bit of a scramble, and further that very little detailed information can be offered at this time. The following is a mix of events, some of which are solidly scheduled, others of which are only in their formative stages:

### BICENTENNIAL DAY:

On the bicentennial date itself - February 17 -- there will be a special celebration held at the St. Catharines Museum at Lock 3. ~~Both St. George's Church and the~~ <sup>HAS</sup> Museum ~~have agreed to~~ put the Bicentennial Document on display ~~at the~~ <sup>MUSEUM</sup> for an extended period of time. With the help of paper preservation experts it is hoped that the document can be "conserved," treated to arrest the deterioration that it has suffered thus far and to possibly repair the damage it has already suffered.

### ART EXHIBIT OF ST. CATHARINES ART:

Plans are being made for a display of art relating to St. Catharines, to be held in the fall at the Rodman Hall Arts Centre (~~to this writer~~ <sup>SINCE</sup> this plan is particularly exciting, offering ~~as it does~~ a chance for the general public to see significant works of art normally held in private collections here, ~~and~~ throughout Niagara and beyond); Included would be the work of artists of national repute like Robert

AS WELL AS  
Whale ~~and~~ such little known St. Catharines artists as C. B. Millner, Marion Hooker, and W. E. Wright. It also offers the possibility of seeing painted views of our city unlike any of those available in the form of photographs.

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Preliminary discussions are on-going about ways to beautify downtown, whether by brightening some vacant downtown walls with murals (whether as a project for high school students or as a competition with prizes funded by corporate donations ~~is as yet unsure~~);

OTHER

There are discussions also of a plaquing of the site of "the church at St. Catharines," possibly accompanied by an archaeological exploration of the surrounding area.

Finally, local historians and genealogists, led by Al Holden and Corlene Taylor, are now preparing short biographies of the 44 persons whose names appear on the "assignment." It is hoped to publish a book that would include those biographies along with what is known of the history of that first church building here in St. Catharines. Initial discussions with the Ontario Heritage Foundation about funding for this ~~are~~ encouraging.

HAVE BEEN

Discussion of these and other worthy ideas are going on apace, with monthly meetings of an umbrella group centennial committee chaired by Jon Jouppien, supplemented by continuous subcommittee meetings relating to the activities outlined above.

To have these events take place, and to have simultaneously the city's attention focused on its heritage in this way will surely be a welcome outcome of these bicentennial activities. For further details on the February 17th activities, watch the pages of the Standard, and the March and subsequent issues of this newsletter will likewise keep you posted on what is planned.

[Photos:

[The Bicentennial Document: a list of persons who have donated money toward the upkeep of the newly-built (1795) church at St. Catharines. The list is dated February 17, 1796.]

[From left to right, Corlene Taylor, Al Holden, and Jon Jouppien scrutinize the bicentennial document, trying to decipher the sometimes not very legible handwriting. ↩

↩ In the upper left is the logo chosen for the St. Catharines Bicentennial. [perhaps superimpose the logo over corner of another photo]

[the Bicentennial logo (perhaps superimposed over an open space in the Corlene/Al/Jon photo)]

**THE SOCIETY PAGE** (news of the Historical Society of St. Catharines)

**AN OUTING TO HAMILTON: OR, WE HAD A WHALE OF A TIME!**

(TOO LATE TO INCLUDE IN LAST NUMBERS)

We are afraid it may come as a surprise to some of you, but in late November the Historical Society organized its first bus trip in some years. We became aware that the Art Gallery of Hamilton was playing host to a significant display of the art of Robert Whale, a distinguished 19th century Canadian painter. One thing led to another, and the decision was made to see if there was enough interest in the Society and in the general public to be able to organize a bus trip over to Hamilton to see taht show. A little investigation of downtown Hamilton revealed that quite near the Art Gallery was Whitehern, the mansion belonging to the McQuesten family, an interesting mansiñ to visit at any time of the year, but by the time of our trip it would be nicely decorated for the Christmas season. ←

So, advertising the attractio<sup>s</sup> of the Robert Whale art exhibit and the visit to Whitehern, and suggesting that some of our spare time in dowotnwo Hamilton might be spent dong some Christmas shoping, drew the attention of some 18 people who finally signed on to the trip. Their tickets (\$18 a piece for the trip over and bakk, plus admission and guided tours at the Gallery and Whitehern) resulted in a slight profit for the Society. *and, it seems, a very pleasant experience for the participants.*

Photo

In the photo above we see the partiipants in the <sup>bus</sup> trip being guided through the Whale exhibit and standing in front of an old fiend, Robet Whale's portrait of William Hamilton Merritt, which was on loan by the St. Cathariens Museum.

The general reaction to the trip seemed to be "When do we do it again?" The executive will certainly keep the success of this trip in mind and see what can be worked out by way of another bus adventure.

HSSC

**PLEASE NOTE: CHANGE OF LOCATION FOR FEBRUARY MEETING:**

For the second time in recent years the St. Catharines Museum has invited the Historical Society to hold one of its meetings out at the Museum at Lock 3. The Society has accepted this invitation and therefore its February 1 meeting will be held at the Museum. Please note this so that out of force of habit you do not go to our usual meeting place in the Library. Note also that several memebtrs of our executive have volunteered to give rides to those of you who cannot conveniently go out to the Museum by yourselves. Please call the Society at 682-6053 if you would like a ride to the February 1 meeting.

IN CONJUNCTION WITH the Museum's display of black history.

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# **~~BLACK HISTORY~~ IN ST. CATHARINES: WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY:**

Nancy Butler was co-author of the 1992 book Slavery and Freedom in Niagara, about the experiences of Black refugees from slavery after their arrival in the Niagara region, and former president of the Niagara Historical Society, Niagara-on-the-Lake. In this article Ms. Butler describes a project that she is now working on, an attempt to build up a significant data base of information about the Black population of St. Catharines and Niagara, a valuable resource for persons researching the important story of Blacks from the United States who rode the "Underground Railroad" to freedom here. She also shares with us some of her preliminary conclusions based on the information that she has collected.

To prepare the exhibit on black history at the St. Catharines Museum, Arden Phair asked me to research the local community. I willingly accepted, hoping that the data I collect will be useful for future projects, be it exhibits, books or family trees. The work has been painstakingly slow and I think it will take my lifetime (and a few others) to record the data available in the surviving municipal records.

I began by setting ambitious goals and deadlines. However, to date, I have only recorded the statistics of those labelled mulatto, negro and coloured in the 1861 and 1871 St. Catharines census and several years of assessment records between 1854 and 1962. The information is on a computer data base, which can spit out statistics at will.

The records show that most lived in modest frame houses and "shanties". Pigs and cows were popular animals to own, although some people had horses, but usually as part of a business. Thomas Douglas possessed several horses, but he operated a stage coach service. Nobody had any great wealth. No brick homes nor private carriages. At least they didn't tell the tax man!

In 1871 only 15 children are recorded as attending school and only 4 in 1861. I think this is the result of sloppy reporting rather than actual fact. In any case, the school for "coloureds" must have had few students, especially considering that, in common with white children, most left at 15 to find work. Their parents, if born in the United States, were usually illiterate, which confirms that slaves were never taught to read and write. However, all those born in Upper Canada were literate, which shows that here they did have access to schooling even if segregated.

The principal occupation was that of labourer, and most likely, casual labourer. However, many were servants, working for wealthy households, widows or hotels. "Barber" appears to be a popular occupation with at least 6 or 7 practising at any one

St.

time. Aaron Young was a barber with his own place on Queenston in 1856 and on St. Paul Street in 1858. He later challenged the colour bar at the Stephenson Hotel, where he was working in 1867. (See Niagara's Freedom Trail, p. 48.) I think he had a concession in the hotel, but continued to operate a shop on St. Paul Street.

In the 1861 census, John W. Lindsay is a "labourer". However, in the 1856 assessment record, he is listed as "gentleman". He did own 3 properties in St. Catharines in 1856 and 1861, and, perhaps, being a landowner elevated him to a "gentleman" status. Or again it may have been somebody poking fun.

Many blacks operated businesses. Renix Johnston, Francis Scott, and Nelson Williams were all shoemakers. There were 11 carpenters, 13 joiners, 2 chimney sweeps, 8 masons, 1 watchmaker (Daniel Williams), and 1 jeweller (David T. Williamson on St. Paul Street).

*WAS*

*AS NOTED ABOVE*

Many workers were associated with the resorts. Thomas Douglas was a coach driver, and James Wright, a bus driver. There were 15 waiters and 4 servants, all working in hotels. William Riley was the only porter, but I suspect that the "waiters" and "servants" may have doubled as porters.

The women were usually laundrists (4), dressmakers (2), cooks (1), hairdressers (2), and, of course, servants. Married women as a rule did not list an occupation. I presume "homemaker" was not considered one in those days!

There were a few ministers or preachers. These men may have been lay ministers and had other work that supported them.

*BME PREACHER*

In 1871 three saloonkeepers were black: Charles Burns, George Page and Robert Young. I suspect they had tavern licences and had a bar in their homes. Charles Burns and Robert Young lived together in 1861 and Robert Young was a waiter. Then both he and Charles Burns become saloon keepers in 1871. I think they may have been friends and started the business together.

*(WELLAND?)*

*ALPHABETICAL - HOW ABOUT IT?*

*MATCH IN*

The most common addresses were on Academy, Centre, Cherry, Church, (Concession), Geneva, King, Lake, Niagara, North, Ontario, Queen, Queenston, Somerset, St. Paul, Water, William and Yates. Of course a very few lived on other streets. Most of these were servants with a few exceptions. John Hamshire, a carpenter, probably worked in the shipyards, and lived nearby on Hainer St.

J.P. and W.H. Merritt were the prime property landlords - especially in the North Street neighborhood. Other owners were Robert Leeper, Rufus Wright and D. McGuire. As noted above one landowner was black - John Lindsay. Over half of the blacks owned their own property during this period.

✓

I also read The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada by Benjamin Drew, published in 1856. Several stories were told by St. Catharines residents: James Adams, William

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Johnson, Rev. Alexander Helmsley, Dan Josiah Lockhart, John W. Lindsey, William Grose and David West.

For some, I was able to follow their stories in the St. Catharines records. James Adams rented a house on North St. from Merritt. Born in 1808, he married Jane, and was a labourer. William Johnson, also a labourer and married to Martha, lived on North Street. Elizabeth Helmsley, who took in laundry, might have been the widow of the Rev. Helmsley. Dan Josiah Lockhart, another labourer, rented a place on North Street, owned by William Merritt. Born in 1812, he was married to Laura. John Lindsey or Lindsay, born in 1806, and his wife, Harriet, had a large family according to the 1861 census. His land holdings are mentioned above. William Grose or Gross, born in 1839, worked as a waiter and servant and rented on Geneva Street from Joseph Wilkins. David West became a joiner and rented a house on Geneva Street from Joseph Wilkins. It appeared that few owned property, most worked as labourers and all married (or were already married to) women who had also escaped from slavery.

One slave, who ended his life in St. Catharines, was the Rev. Anthony Burns. I have not been able to find any documentation on him in the records in St. Catharines, but I unearthed some contemporary documents in the Boston Public Library concerning his childhood, his escape to Boston, his arrest there, his subsequent trial, and finally his return to Virginia to his master.

DOCUMENTS

ALSO

These helped to explain how some slaves managed to escape.

In the 1840s and 1850s, the large number of slaves in Virginia made it more profitable for slave owners to hire their slaves out than to sell them. Burns was hired out from the age of seven, always on a one year contract to different employers. As he grew older, he became responsible for getting his own annual work contracts, and giving his wages to his master. This struck me as giving an incredible responsibility as well as freedom to a slave. But it gave Burns experience in job hunting, working for different employers, and in different fields. Also his short term contracts meant that nobody could identify him easily. His last employer couldn't pay the contracted annual fee to the master, so he and Burns negotiated a deal where Burns would look for day work and pay the employer every month. Burns found work unloading and loading boats in Richmond. In this way, his escape to Boston by boat was not noted until his next "pay" day, and he, with his considerable work experience, easily found employment in Boston. His subsequent recapture and extradition trial roused abolitionists to riot in Boston. A few years later, when he came to St. Catharines, he was already well known, although still not yet thirty years old. He died young and was buried in Victoria Lawn cemetery in St. Catharines.

CUT?

I still intend to keep searching for more documentation on the life of Anthony Burns and other blacks in St. Catharines and I welcome any information a reader can contribute. I hope that by February 1996, the results of my research will aid the designers of the Black History exhibit at the St. Catharines museum, and I will be depositing my notes and data base in the museum for future projects.

Nancy Butler

## Heritage Organization Development Grant:

Each year for the past three years this Society has applied for support through the Heritage Organization Development Grant program of the Ontario Ministry of Culture. In the first year, we were happy to receive a grant of \$365. Last year, we were surprised to see our grant jump to \$965. This year we applied once more for a grant, but our expectations were not high. Since the change of the provincial government and the budget cutting that followed it, we knew that the grant would be cut, if indeed the grant program was continued at all. A two month delay in the announcement of the grants confirmed our worst fears.

FROM OCTOBER TO DECEMBER DID

The long expected letter from the Ministry finally arrived in early December. The Society president, ~~not wanting to get the bad news~~, actually let the letter sit on his desk for a day before opening it. The letter, signed by Minister of Culture Marilyn Muchinski, began as follows: "I am pleased to approve a 1995-96 grant in the amount of \$1,512 to Historical Society of St. Catharines. . . ."

TRYING TO AVOID

EXCITINGLY

MINISTRY

Huh? The President read it again and then ~~giddily~~ telephoned his vice president to share the good news. Why did the grant not only survive but even increase by half? Is it a last fling for the Culture Ministry? Is it a matter of this grant in the large scheme of things being so inconsequential that it won't be affected at all? We're not going to ask, since they might write back saying that the grant was actually supposed to be \$15.12! We will just be grateful to have received it and will try to make the very best use possible of that sum.

VERY GENEROUS

## History of the Grantham Academy:

The photo above shows Society guest speaker Prof. James Love chatting and enjoying refreshments with Society member John Willson of Thorold following Prof. Love's interesting December 7 talk to the Society on the history of the Grantham Academy.

IMPRESSIVE

AT THE SOCIETY'S DECEMBER 7 MEETING.

EXECUTIVE MEMBER

One comment about the accompanying photo: newsletter readers can expect to see more such photos here in future. We are happy to say that Joyce DeForest, in addition to providing each one of our meetings with refreshments, has also volunteered to serve as our "staff photographer", usefully documenting each of our speakers. So if during future meetings you attend you see the occasional flash of a flash bulb, you will know that it's just Joyce doing her job. Many thanks to Joyce for undertaking both those activities on behalf of the Society! (Photo courtesy of Joyce DeForest)

NOTE ON BUILDING NAME CONTEST

NOTE ON CANADIAN SOCIETY TALK

*INTERESTED IN*  
**Postscript:** persons who are fascinated with the history of Blacks in Niagara might be interested to know that Nancy Butler will be talking twice in the next month on that subject: on Monday, January 29, she will address the Thorold and Beavertams Historical Society on the subject of the Rev. Anthony Burns; on Thursday, February 1, she will address the Niagara Historical Society about new findings in the Solomon Moseby affair, an instance in the late 1830s when a former slave was almost returned to his slave masters in the United States. For further details regarding the time and place of those talks, please consult the Upcoming Heritage Events listing on page ten of this newsletter. *LIKE TO*

## BOOKS, 1995:

a review of the books of 1995: relatively short references to books already featured in the newsletter (Sincerely Lamented, Battle of Queenston Heights, longer notes about books not previously mentioned (Colin Duquemin's drivers' guides to the War of 1812 and the Welland Canal, etc.), and brief mentions of other books still available -- Morningstar Mill. *9*

## THE 1996 HISTORICAL CALENDAR:

The calendar sales are going well. As we go to press we have sold slightly more than 300 of the 400 we printed, putting us well past the break-even point and even surpassing the profit on last year's calendar, when we printed only 250. If you would like to purchase one (or more!) as last minute stocking stuffers, please call the Society at 682-6053. The calendars consist of historic photos of our city, and cost only \$6 (no tax is charged). And we make home deliveries!

## UPCOMING HERITAGE EVENTS:

January 4 (Thursday):  
7:30 p.m.:

Prof. Alun Hughes talks about "The Mapping of St. Catharines" (Historical Society of St. Catharines, at the St. Catharines Centennial Library, 54 Church Street - 682-6053). *10*

January 29 (Monday):  
7:30 p.m.:

The Annual General Meeting of the Thorold and Beavertams Historical Society (see above for details). *↓*

February 1 (Thursday):



7:30 p.m.: The showing of **excerpts from the PBS video documentary "Flight to Freedom," about the Underground Railroad** that brought slaves to freedom in Canada, followed by a discussion featuring the producer and local persons involved in the production (Historical Society of St. Catharines, St. Catharines Museum at Lock 3 -- 682-6053).

**February 17 (Saturday):**

**(Time T.B.A.)** Ceremonies marking the **bicentennial of the community of St. Catharines** (planned for the St. Catharines Museum, Lock 3;682-6053).

10 a.m.-4p.m. The **sixth annual Niagara Heritage Showcase, with exhibits by Heritage groups from throughout the Niagara Peninsula** (Pelham Library, Fonthill -- 682-6053).

**March 7 (Thursday):**

7:30 p.m.: Margaret Glassford speaks about **the history of women in business in St. Catharines** (Historical Society of St. Catharines, St. Catharines Public Library, 54 Church St. -- 682-6053).

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## Merry Christmas and Happy New Year

*From the*

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Newsletter editor: Dennis Gannon

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[at the bottom of the page -- CHRISTMAS GREETINGS GRAPHIC --- taken from turn-of-the-century Standard.]