

PRIDE OF PLACE

Southern Ontario played an important, though little-known, role in the lives of Canada's Black citizens. **HEATHER GREENWOOD DAVIS** travels to the small-town museums, churches, and monuments paying tribute to those who came before.



KAY, CAMERON, CLIMB into the box,” says our tour guide.

My 15-year-old son, tall, Black, and curious, leaves my side and climbs into a six-by-two-by-two-foot suspended wooden bunk. I momentarily look away.

We're three hours south of Toronto in the Buxton National Historic Site & Museum, staring at a display that re-creates the cargo space of the ships that transported Africans into slavery. Our host, curator Shannon Prince, is a sixth-generation Canadian and the descendant of American slaves who fled Virginia and Tennessee to live as free people on this plot of land where we stand. She is asking Cameron to help her make a point. He and his 18-year-old brother can barely fit in the space, but it would have housed as many as six men and women, naked, sick, and hungry, on a 35-to-60-day voyage to generational bondage.

Watching Cameron climb into this box is more painful than I anticipated. But for my boys, touching the yokes and chains of slavery and hearing the stories of resilience marks a turning point. What we discover on this mini road trip from our home in Toronto—stopping at churches, museums, and monuments dedicated to Black stories—is a history of Black Canada that most Canadians don't know. “I had heard about it, but this time I felt it,” Cameron said.

In 1793, Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe passed the Act Against Slavery of Upper Canada (now Ontario), which banned the practice and acted as a door to freedom for American slaves. Over the next few decades, an estimated 30,000 men, women, and children followed the

◀ Tower of Freedom in Windsor, Ontario, which sits along the Detroit River.



North Star and successfully made their way to freedom via the Underground Railroad—that secret network of people and places that transported slaves from the American South. Nearby towns like Amherstburg, Buxton, Dresden, and Windsor still bear their imprint, and the region remains the epicenter of historical Black Canada.

“Most of our visitors come from America,” Prince tells us as we walk the 9,000-acre grounds of what was once the largest Black settlement in Ontario. “And they’re surprised to learn the extent of what happened here.”

We pop into a cream-colored schoolhouse that was built in 1861, and the boys learn that

Clockwise from top left: A first edition of Uncle Tom’s Cabin; curator Shannon Prince tells the author, right, and her family about Buxton National Historic Site; the author’s son Cameron.

when the local white community refused to allow Black settlers into existing schools, the settlement’s founder, Irish minister Reverend William King, encouraged the Buxton community to open its own school. Driven by the opportunity of education, the former slaves achieved incredible success under the guidance of some of the top Black educators in North America. Alumni include prominent political and religious leaders, as well as Anderson Abbott, who would go on to be the first Black doctor in Canada. The school became so renowned that an expansion was implemented to integrate white students, whose parents hoped for similar successes for their own children.

As she takes us around, Prince points out pictures of herself in the class photos on the wall and regales us with stories of growing up in a town where everyone knew one another. At many of the sites we visit (which were open with social-distancing measures in place), guides have personal links to the history and pepper their talks with anecdotes of the hardships and heroics of those who lived there.

At the Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historic Site in Dresden, for example, manager Steven Cook shows us Cook’s Hill, the homestead that’s been in his family for generations. It was another safe haven for fugitive slaves created in part by Josiah Henson, the former slave and abolitionist thought to have been the inspiration for the protagonist in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel.

This collected history is vital for my sons—most Canadian kids don’t learn Black history at school. Outside of Black History



Exploring Southern Ontario

Chatham is about a three-hour drive south of Toronto. The surrounding towns of Amherstburg, Buxton, Dresden, and Windsor are all easily accessible, and a long weekend is ideal to see everything.

We stayed at the **Retro Suites Hotel** (retrosuites.com; doubles from \$138), which occupies a structure built in 1888 in downtown Chatham. Our first stop was the 9,000-acre **Buxton National Historic Site & Museum** (buxtonmuseum.com), the most significant Black settlement in Ontario. The **Black Mecca Museum** (ckbhs.org) has a modest collection of artifacts. In Dresden, **Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site** (heritagetrust.on.ca) is the place to learn about Canada's role in the Underground Railroad, while the open-air **Freedom Museum** (amherstburgfreedom.org), in Amherstburg, houses the 1848 African Methodist Episcopal church. Another significant religious site is the **Sandwich First Baptist Church** (sandwichbaptistchurch.ca), in Windsor, which was built in 1851. It is the oldest active Black church in Canada. — H.G.D.

Month assemblies, which often do little more than name-check American icons, not much is mentioned regarding the contributions Black Canadians have made to the country. Slavery is portrayed as an American institution without a connection to Canada, while Canadian history is dominated by European colonizers. But Prince says she's hopeful the recent Black Lives Matter

protests across the world will change what happens in the classroom to better reflect the Black experience.

THE BUILDINGS WE SEE aren't grand. Funding for most of these places comes in trickles, and even though they're designated National Historic Sites, federal help is minimal. At the Black Mecca Museum run by the Chatham-Kent Black Historical Society, artifacts are relegated to a cramped space inside a community center. So executive director Samantha Meredith makes sure visitors get a more complete picture by taking them on a walking tour through town. Highlights include the meetinghouse where American revolutionary John Brown gathered with other abolitionists in secret to plot a new, antislavery government in the U.S.

At the Freedom Museum in Amherstburg, we're shown the hundreds of different routes that led people to Canada, as well as the original cabin and church that

◀ Cameron in a classroom at the Buxton Mission School, founded in 1861.





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Clockwise from top left: At the chapel of Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site; a historical marker on the property; historian Lana Talbot leads a talk at the Sandwich First Baptist Church, in Windsor.

flank it, offering a glimpse into how escaped slaves lived upon arrival.

In the 1850s and 60s, a third of the population of Chatham and the surrounding towns was Black. Since then that figure has dwindled to about 2 percent. Some original settlers returned to the United States after the Civil War. Some families had children with different ambitions. Prince's relatives are the only Black

farming family that remains on the settlement surrounding the Buxton historic site. Though most of the people are gone, the pride remains—it's palpable, and those who have stayed are determined to preserve it.

For my family, the trip firmly dispels the myth that Black people are new to Canada. We've been here—creating, building, educating, and contributing—since long before Canada as we know it today was born.

As we make our way home, the car is alive with chatter. We flip through the books we've gathered along the way, already making plans to visit more of the places important to our history. Places like the Sheffield Park Black History Museum in Clarksburg, north of Toronto, which documents the town's Black settlement. Or the Nathaniel Dett Memorial Chapel, in Niagara Falls, which was constructed in 1836 by escaped slaves and named after the prominent Black Canadian composer who was born there.

Before leaving Chatham, we drive through the charming downtown district, with its low-slung brick buildings and historic theater. The boys are quick to point out Simcoe Lane, named after the man who first opened the doors to this country for so many formerly enslaved people. Days before it would've been just another forgotten street name. Now it has meaning. ●