

No “Back Alley Clique”

The campaign to desegregate Chatham’s public schools, 1891-1893

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Article abstract

In 1891, the Kent County Civil Rights League was formed to seek redress in several areas in which the Black community of Chatham felt they were being wronged. The first issue they decided to tackle was the segregated school system. This paper looks at the events and personalities involved in this landmark action which has essentially gone unrecorded and unrecognized in Black Canadian historiography, but which resulted in the opening of all schools to Black children in that town.

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by Adrienne Shadd

“This society, says Dr. Fleming, is a back alley click (sic) Well! Dr. You know now that it has a sting, for you felt it.”

Azrael, Chatham correspondent of the Detroit *Plaindealer* on the alleged comments of Dr. D. Fleming, Chatham school board trustee, Ward 5, regarding the Kent County Civil Rights League.¹

On the eve of the twentieth century, Chatham’s Black citizens had become increasingly angry and impatient. They felt that despite their contributions to the settlement and development of their town, they continued to receive second-class treatment from their White neighbours. Chatham had been a place that attracted the cream of the crop of the Black educated elite and skilled artisan class in the years prior to the American Civil War and the Emancipation of the slaves in 1863. In fact, Chatham had the highest propor-

tion of Black people of any town or city in the entire province.² Indeed, it had come a long way since the days when the remarkable Oneida woman, Sally Ainse, brought her slaves to the region in 1787 and began to tame an uncompromising wilderness of brush and swamp.³

During the community’s mid-nineteenth century heyday, famous African American abolitionists such as Dr. Martin Delany, H. Ford Douglas, the Shadd family, James Madison Bell and Mary Ellen Pleasant had settled in the Chatham area. It was no accident that the great White abolitionist martyr, John Brown, chose Chatham as the location of his secret convention to plan the Harpers Ferry raid to liberate the slaves in America. Chatham and vicinity had the largest population from which to draw and arguably the largest number of skilled

¹ *The Plaindealer*, (Detroit), 12 May 1893.

² Michael Wayne, “The Black Population of Canada West on the Eve of the American Civil War: A Reassessment Based on the Manuscript Census of 1861,” *Social History*, Volume XXVIII No. 56 (November 1995) Appendix.

³ Fred C. Hamil, “Sally Ainse, Fur Trader,” *Historical Bulletin* no. 3, The Algonquin Club, Detroit (January 1939); Fred C. Hamil, *The Valley of the Lower Thames, 1640-1850* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1951), 12-13, 22.

Abstract

In 1891, the Kent County Civil Rights League was formed to seek redress in several areas in which the Black community of Chatham felt they were being wronged. The first issue they decided to tackle was the segregated school system. This paper looks at the events and personalities involved in this landmark action which has essentially gone unrecorded and unrecognized in Black Canadian historiography, but which resulted in the opening of all schools to Black children in that town.

Résumé: En 1891, la Ligue de défense des Droits civils du comté de Kent fut créée afin de redresser les torts dont la communauté noire de Chatham se sentait victime. Le premier problème auquel la Ligue décida de s'attaquer fut celui de la ségrégation dans le système scolaire. Dans l'historiographie consacrée à l'histoire de la population noire au Canada, on ne parle guère de cet acte pourtant historique, puisqu'il a mené à l'ouverture des écoles de cette ville aux enfants noirs. Les événements qui y menèrent, les personnes qui y ont été mêlées, sont le sujet de cette étude.

and educated persons of any African Canadian community in the province. But decades later, Blacks were still being denied opportunities and treated as second-class citizens. By the 1890s, they had had enough.

On 3 August 1891, Chatham's Blacks marked the annual Emancipation Day celebrations. Emancipation Day had been an important day on the African Canadian calendar since 1 August 1834, the year that Britain's great Emancipation Proclamation of 1 August 1833 first took effect. In that year Black slaves were finally legally free across the Empire. Since 1834, Emancipation Day had been commemorated in Black communities across Canada West

as well as in British Columbia after the arrival there of African Americans from California in the late 1850s. It had also been observed in many free African American communities across the United States prior to the issuance of the American Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.⁴

Typically in Canadian communities, Emancipation Day celebrations were a well-organized af-

fair, involving a parade down Main Street, speeches and entertainment, a huge feast or banquet and dancing and partying into the wee hours. Important politicians like the mayor and representatives of the political parties would usually be present to relay greetings and give expression to the glory of British laws and institutions.⁵ However, this year, the events of the day departed from tradition in significant and unmistakable ways.

The morning saw many people of African descent come in from all parts of the county by train, horse and buggy – all manner of conveyance. They gathered in the streets and in Tecumseh Park, named after the famous Shawnee Chief

⁴ Daniel G. Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (Agincourt, Ont: The Book Society of Canada, 1981) 182-84; Adrienne Shadd, "Emancipation Day: An African Canadian Tradition," *Revue Noire* (Paris, France) no. 25 (Juin, Juil. Aout 1997); Adrienne Shadd, "The Original Caribana: Walt Perry's Party Was the Prototype," *Word Up* (newsletter of the Canadian Artists Network: Black Artists In Action), April/May 1997; Colin McFarquhar, "A Difference of Perspective: Blacks, Whites, and Emancipation Day Celebrations in Ontario, 1865-1919," *Ontario History*, vol XCII, no. 2 (Autumn 2000).

⁵ Emancipation Day continues to be celebrated today in communities across Ontario, e.g. Dresden, Owen Sound, Amherstburg and Toronto.

for his valour and heroism in the Battle of the Thames during the War of 1812. A noon hour feast was served in the drill shed. Hundreds sat down for dinner there, while many others had their lunch picnic style under the shade trees in the park. A Black band from Dover serenaded the revellers in the morning and during the luncheon, the City Band, a local Chatham ensemble, performed.⁶

After dinner, the day's speakers ascended to the platform. J.C. Richards chaired the podium proceedings. Richards, who would later become a highly-esteemed minister of the British Methodist Episcopal (BME) Church, was one of the leaders of a new organization called the Kent County Civil Rights League. In his capacity as chair of the Emancipation Day ceremonies, Richards had forbidden the speakers to offer the usual platitudes and affirmations of the occasion. Rather, he had instructed them to talk about the formation and aims of the Civil Rights League.⁷

R.L. Holden of Chatham was the first speaker called to the podium. Elected vice-president of the organization earlier that year, Robert, or R.L. Holden as he was known, was a house painter by trade, originally from the United States, who was soon to embark on a career in

the ministry of the B.M.E. Church.⁸ He explained that the Kent County Civil Rights League had grown out of the Chatham Literary Association, which had been active for a number of years. The League wished to build on the success of the Literary Association by finding the means to redress the grievances of the "colored people." The first grievance was that the community did not enjoy the educational privileges that it should. Black children were forced to attend the one separate school set aside for them in the far east end of town when all schools should have been open to them. Second, Blacks were rarely allowed to serve on juries. Holden joked that he could just as quickly send a man to the penitentiary as anyone, to laughter from the crowd. In particular, Holden argued that Black men should be allowed to have a say in the sentencing of people of their own colour. Third, Black men and women were denied hotel accommodation except at the bar, where a man could drink all the whiskey he pleased. There was even a fountain in town that denied their wives and daughters a drink of water. It was totally unacceptable that public places should discriminate in this manner. Finally, he argued, Black men were just as patriotic and willing to die

⁶ "Colored People Congregate," *Chatham Tri-Weekly Planet*, 3 August 1891.

⁷ "Colored People Congregate," *Chatham Tri-Weekly Planet*, 3 August 1891; Gwendolyn Robinson and John Robinson, *Seek the Truth: A Story of Chatham's Black Community* (Chatham, 1989), 81-82, 110.

⁸ R.L. Holden was ordained a minister in the B.M.E. Church 12 July 1892 at the annual conference in Windsor, "The B.M.E. Conference," *Chatham Daily Planet*, 16 July 1892. He was listed as a painter in the Chatham Assessment Rolls for 1891, Assessment Rolls, Chatham, 1891, Ward 4, 14, G.S. 130, Ontario Archives. On his election as vice-president of the Kent County Civil Rights League, see *The Plain-dealer*, 1 May 1891.

for their country as white men, and their citizenship rights should be just as fully recognized.⁹

Garrison Shadd, of Raleigh, was the next speaker. A farmer originally from West Chester, Pennsylvania, he was a member of the well-known Shadd family of abolitionists who had moved to Canada in the early 1850s. It was their belief – at least their hope – that, as British subjects, they would be treated equally under the law. He was the son of Abraham D. Shadd, abolitionist and a leader of the Black convention movement of the 1830s and 1840s. This movement was organized by African Americans living in the free states to deal with the increasingly restricted and oppressive situation in which they found themselves there. He was the younger brother of Mary Ann and Isaac Shadd, publishers of the *Provincial Freeman* newspaper of the 1850s that first published in Toronto before moving to Chatham in 1855. He was also the father of Alfred S. Shadd, principal of the King Street School in 1891.¹⁰

True to the reputation of his outspoken family, Shadd did not sugar-coat his message. He was opposed to these yearly Emancipation celebrations because, he said, they gave thanks for nothing. Blacks should stop the begging, unite and make themselves felt. They should demand equal rights. Although centuries of oppression and contemporary policy had

been imposed to keep his people ignorant, it was their responsibility to educate themselves and assume an aggressive stance. No people had attained greatness or their rights without a struggle. The Kent County Civil Rights League was established on these principles and was poised to do just that – stand up for the Africans' rights and demand justice.¹¹

Finally, the third speaker was Reverend Josephus O'Banyoun. O'Banyoun was the minister of the A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) church. He was born in Brantford and was perhaps best known for his O'Banyoun Jubilee singers, a choral group that performed around the province. Instead of celebrating the past, the good reverend argued, let the "colored people" celebrate what they should be and expect to be in the future. The race wanted only fair play and no favours and he hoped that the League would accomplish all it proposed.¹²

The Kent County Civil Rights League had officially made its call to arms. The first item on the agenda was the insulting separate school policy to which the Chatham Board of Education continued to cling so tenaciously. The League used the proceeds from the Emancipation celebrations and additional fundraising to wage a campaign to desegregate Chatham schools. However, it would be another year and four months

⁹ "Colored People Congregate," *Chatham Tri-Weekly Planet*, 3 August 1891.

¹⁰ Shadd family tree, Buxton National Historic Site and Museum, North Buxton, Ontario; "Death of Garrison Shadd," *Chatham Daily Planet*, 23 July 1892.

¹¹ "Colored People Congregate," *Chatham Tri-Weekly Planet*, 3 August 1891.

¹² *Ibid.*

of meetings, fundraising and strategy sessions before it made its first move. In the meantime, the League, which according to one source numbered 600 members, continued to meet weekly.¹³

On 6 December 1892, the Civil Rights League submitted a petition for hearing by the school board trustees at the monthly board meeting that evening. The petition stated that the town's children of colour laboured under a particular hardship because they were barred from all but one of the public schools in Chatham. They were forced to travel to the far east end of town to the King Street School. This school was the only public school that would admit them. Therefore, the petition requested that Black children be allowed to attend the school in the ward in which they resided. In other words, it called for the complete desegregation of the Chatham public school system.¹⁴

The petition was signed by eleven of the leading men of African descent in the town: J.C. Richards, President, R.W.S. Johnston, J.C. Wilmore, J.W. Montgomery, W.J. Davis, Nelson Rob-

inson, Littleton Johnson, W.H. Bazie, C.M. Cooper, Perry F. Chase, and John W. Taylor. At the time of this campaign, President J.C. Richards, was a painter in his early thirties, although he would later go on to become a respected minister of the British Methodist Episcopal (B.M.E.) Church, Victoria Chapel, in Chatham. He had emigrated from the United States in 1883 and was married to 36-year-old Mary L. (Levere) Richards. This was his first term as president of the organization.¹⁵

R.W.S. Johnston, recently elected Secretary at the 3 November 1892 meeting of the Kent County Civil Rights League, was a 26-year-old mail clerk who had formerly been a teacher at the King Street School. Although no longer teaching in the "public" school system, he continued his role of educator as Superintendent of the B.M.E. Sunday school. With a staff of eight teachers and an enrollment of 120 students, he stood at the helm of what was described as the largest enrollment of the Sunday school in many years.¹⁶

Bishop James C. Wilmore was a 60-

¹³ "Reminiscences of J. W. Montgomery," undated letter from J. W. Montgomery to the editor of a newspaper, Heritage Room files, W.I.S.H. Centre, Chatham. Notices of meetings can be found in *Chatham Daily Planet* from 23 February 1892 through 12 November 1892, usually in a column entitled "King St. East Notes."

¹⁴ "The Vexing Color Line: Will It Be Drawn at Co-Education in the Public Schools," *Chatham Daily Planet*, 8 December 1892; Minute Book, Chatham Public School Board, September 1889–November 1896, #04 00 01 08 Box 008, 141–43, W. G. McGeorge Building, Municipality of Chatham-Kent, Chatham, Ontario.

¹⁵ Assessment Rolls, Chatham, 1892, Ward 1, 30; Census of Canada, Chatham City, Kent County, 1901; Robinson and Robinson, *Seek the Truth*, 42.

¹⁶ *Chatham Directory and County Gazetteer, 1885–6* (Chatham, Ontario: James Soutar, 1886); Assessment Rolls, Chatham, 1892 – Ward 4, 15; Walter Grayson to Editor, *Chatham Tri-Weekly Planet*, 28 July 1884; 'Little Local Links,' *Chatham Daily Planet*, 15 September 1892; 'King-St. East Notes,' *Chatham Daily Planet*, 11 March 1892; 'Little Local Links,' *Chatham Daily Planet*, 12 November 1892.

year-old founder of the African United Methodist Episcopal Church (A.U.M.E.) on 218 Forest Street. He was an outstanding community leader, joining the St. John's Lodge and the Provincial Commandery of the Knights Templar. He later was involved in the establishment of the Woodstock Industrial School, an educational facility designed to teach skills needed in the labour force, and was one of its trustees. This school was founded in 1908. He became a bishop in 1871 and served the Chatham community for over forty years until his death in 1913.¹⁷

J.W. Montgomery, elected First Vice President of the League, was a 21-year-old barber who rented an expensive location on King Street with another barber, G.A. Taylor. Montgomery was single and lived with his sister, Sarah, a dressmaker, and grandmother, Sarah Hawkins, a laundress. Described as a "brilliant and popular young man," he also served as President of the Sunday School Convention of the Amherstburg Baptist Association, the umbrella group for Black Baptists in Southwestern Ontario.¹⁸

These men held jobs as ministers,

firemen, plasterers, barbers, labourers, stationary engineers and so forth. Some owned their own businesses: J.W. Taylor owned a barbershop on King Street West, a three-man operation, and C.M. Cooper employed hired help in his plastering business. Perry F. Chase, re-elected treasurer of the League, was listed as a "Gentleman" in the 1891 Chatham census and lived in a home easily valued at three times that of the average home in town (\$1,400). A number of others owned their own homes and several owned more than one property, which they rented out to other families, both Black and White.¹⁹

The members of the Civil Rights League had different origins in the sense that some had come to Chatham fleeing slavery or as free Blacks seeking a more secure existence in Canada, especially after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.²⁰ Bishop Wilmore and John W. Taylor probably fell into this category. Some of these men, such as J.C. Richards, had come to Chatham years after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued in 1863 and the last of the Civil War combatants

¹⁷ Census of Canada, Chatham City, 1901; Robinson and Robinson, *Seek the Truth*, 74.

¹⁸ Census of Canada, Chatham Town, 1891; Assessment Rolls, Chatham, 1892, Ward 3, 39; 'Little Local Links, *Chatham Daily Planet*, 12 November 1892; 'King Street East Notes,' *Chatham Weekly Planet*, 25 May 1893; "In Brotherhood's Bonds," *Chatham Daily Planet*, 18 November 1893.

¹⁹ In looking at the background and socio-economic status of the activists who signed the petition, the following documents were consulted: Census of Canada, Chatham Town, Kent County, Ontario, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, and Census of Canada, Chatham City, Kent County, Ontario, 1901; Assessment Rolls for Chatham, 1891 and 1892, Ontario Archives, G.S. 130; *Kent County Directory, 1880* (Chatham, Ontario: J.D. Carr & Co, 1880); *Chatham Directory and County Gazeteer, 1885-6* (Chatham, Ontario: James Soutar, 1886) and *The Chatham Directory, 1892* (Chatham, Ontario: S. Stephenson at The Planet Publishing House, 1892).

²⁰ This Act made it far easier than previously for escaped slaves to be hunted down, arrested, and taken back to their owners without the benefit of jury trials. Even those who had escaped long ago and were living in freedom for years had reason to fear for their liberty.

had laid down their arms. Still others had been born in Canada of parents or grandparents who had made the gruelling trek on the Underground Railroad, but who had not personally experienced it themselves. However, all came from the same background of American slavery and racism, and all formed a bond in Chatham, where they forged a life for themselves, determined to take advantage of any and all opportunities that came their way.

Beyond the commonalities of background and community, the Chatham petitioners also had close ties stemming from their common membership in the churches, clubs and lodges that Black residents initiated. Virtually all of the signatories to the petition belonged to one or more of the Masonic orders of St. John's Lodge #9 A. F. & A. M., the Grand Commandery of Knights Templar, or the United Order of Oddfellows.²¹

A deputation of four of the signers—J.C. Richards, J.C. Wilmore, J.W. Montgomery and R.W.S. Johnston – requested to appear before the board on the evening of 6 December 1892. Mr. Johnston spoke on behalf of the petitioners. He stated that there were 400 Black children of school age in Chatham. However, the average attendance at the King Street School was only 51 out of an enrollment of 123. What was the reason for this low attendance rate, he asked? Johnston answered his own question by informing trustees that it

was a great hardship for children of other wards to walk so far to the King Street School and pass by other schools that were much closer to them. Some of the children did not have boots and umbrellas or warm overcoats, thereby making it even more difficult in inclement weather to make the trek to and from school.

"Gentlemen," the speaker continued,

... We are all citizens of Chatham and we wish to live amicably together; but I may inform you that we have got the money to go to the law with. It was to promulgate this that we formed the Civil Rights League. We have ample funds in the Treasury, and they can be used to satisfy the wants – I may say the rights – of these poor children.... I hope, gentlemen, you will treat this matter in the right way; we don't want any unpleasantness between the two races. ("hear, hear.") Place yourself in the position of these poor children and I think it would enlighten you as to what your duty is..."²²

Johnston was respectful but firm, although one observer worried that he had tipped his hand by letting it slip that the League intended to pursue legal action.²³ Regardless, the petition sparked intense debate at the meeting. Trustees John Holmes, William Singer and Robert Cooper were in favour of admitting Black children into the regular school system, thus voting to support the Black community in its bid to desegregate the schools. However, the majority of trustees, in a 7 to 3 vote, opted to establish a committee to study the request and all its implications.²⁴ This was

²¹ *Chatham Daily Planet*, 23 December 1891; 20 August 1892; 8 October 1892; Robinson and Robinson, *Seek the Truth*, 115.

²² "The Vexing Color Line," *Chatham Daily Planet*, 8 December 1892.

²³ "Chatham Cullings," *The Plaindealer*, 16 December 1892.

²⁴ "The Vexing Color Line," *Chatham Daily Planet*, 8 December 1892.

obviously a stalling tactic meant to buy time.

The Kent County Civil Rights League was under no illusion that its polite hearing in front of the board would bring any immediate results. For as long as Chatham had existed on the map, Black children had been excluded from the town's public schools. They had been forced to attend separate schools, sometimes under appalling conditions. When Bishop Strachan of the Anglican Church visited Chatham in 1828, he commented that while there were no legal restrictions against their attending the Common Schools at that time, the prejudice against the children of African descent prevented them from doing so.²⁵ Five years later, Patrick Shirreff found Black children still excluded from the schools. He reported that none of butcher Israel Williams and his wife Julianna's six children were attending school because the teacher refused to admit them for fear of angering his white constituents.²⁶

When his pleas for a school for his children went unheeded, Williams apparently took matters into his own hands. He built the log structure that became the Princess Street School.²⁷ In

a letter to Henry Bibb's *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper dated 5 April 1851, teacher James E. Grant outlined in some detail the state of schools and churches in Chatham. He noted that the Princess Street School where he taught was established in 1839, and that he had taught there since 1849. It had a total of eighty-six "scholars" in 1851. Years later, when a newer frame structure was constructed in its place, it became the King Street School because it now faced on King Street. However, this school had a chequered history. It came under criticism for not being central enough and for being overcrowded.²⁸

With the establishment of the Princess Street School, therefore, segregated education for its Black citizens had become a reality. In 1850, the provincial legislature passed the *Common School Act*, which stated, in part, that any group of twelve Protestants, Roman Catholics or "coloured" heads of families might apply to set up a separate school for their children, and, as with all "government schools," the province would match the funds obtained from local property taxes to pay for their manage-

²⁵ Archdeacon J. Strachan, *Journal of a Tour through Upper Canada*, 19 August – 23 October 1828, Strachan Papers, Ontario Archives, F 983 Vol. I, MS35 Reel 2, 13. Strachan pledged a sum of £12.10 per annum for a several years to get a school for Black children going. However, Mr. Morley, the missionary at Chatham, would not entertain less than £25 per annum, a sum which Strachan did not feel he could raise.

²⁶ Patrick Shirreff, *A Tour Through North America*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Oliver and Boyd, 1835), 202; Fred Hamil, "Fugitive Slaves in Western Canada Prior to 1850," *Bulletin of the Detroit Historical Society*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (October 1945) 3.

²⁷ Robinson and John Robinson, *Seek the Truth*, 88.

²⁸ John K. A. Farrell, "The History of the Negro Community in Chatham, Ontario: 1787-1865," (Ph. D. diss., University of Ottawa, 1955), 124.

ment. Even though this section of the Act was worded in such a way as to suggest that it was strictly voluntary, it had the effect of entrenching segregated education. In Chatham, as in most localities in Southwestern Ontario, the Niagara District and elsewhere, *de facto* segregation became segregation *de jure*.

The impact of the law can be seen in this letter sent to Egerton Ryerson, Superintendent of Education, from a "Committee of the Col[oured] Cit[izens] of Chatham" dated 7 March 1852:

We are taxed in common with our white fellow citizens for school purposes & have paid them. Yet our children are denied the benefits of the gov. School of the town. The large and commodious School House here is closed against us. We are not allowed even a room in it. There are no provisions made for our children – being left without the benefits of gov. School, & we may add, that we have requested no separate school for our pupils, & yet the Trustees seem determined to set off to ourselves & to give us a School at their convenience – such is the case in *no* school section east of this place in this province. We have waited on the local Superintendant, Trustees, & Teacher of the Gov. School, & they all alike refuse to give us satisfaction, other than reference to the School Act. There are about one hundred col. Children in Chatham, many of whom are the offspring of loyal & legal British Subjects.²⁹

Blacks made it clear that they were against segregated education but by the same token, until the situation could successfully be remedied, they made every effort to obtain quality education for their children in separate schools. In that regard, as the Black population grew, a number of private schools sprang up in Chatham.

In 1850, the Baptist Free Mission School was established for Black children, presided over by a Miss Huntingdon. In 1852, Alfred Whipper, a freeborn Black man from Philadelphia and brother of noted businessman and abolitionist William Whipper, came to Canada West and taught there. He transferred to the government school (Princess Street School) in 1855 and was replaced by Aaron Highgate at the Mission school. At this time, the school was no more than a room rented from noted poet and abolitionist James Madison Bell for \$3.50 a month.³⁰

In 1858, the Baptist Mission School was taken over by the school board and became a second separate public school for Black children. However, a year later, Highgate's school was closed and the children were once again crowded into the Princess Street School, which was enlarged in 1861.³¹ Sarah Armstrong, a highly-respected teacher and community activist

²⁹ A John Davis was one of seven signers of this letter. J. C. Brown et al. to Egerton Ryerson, 7 March, 1852, Black Abolitionist Papers on microfilm, Reel #7, 444-45.

³⁰ Farrell, "History of the Negro Community in Chatham, Ontario," 124.

³¹ A great controversy was caused when in 1860 Highgate and Whipper, both holding second class certificates, lost their teaching positions to a white teacher with a first class certificate. Black parents preferred to have a Black teacher as a role model for their children. Farrell, "History of the Negro Community in Chatham, Ontario," 125-131; Afua Cooper, "Black Teachers in Canada West, 1850-1870: A History" (M.A. Thesis, Graduate Department of Education, University of Toronto, 1991) 59-60.

from New Jersey, was also an assistant at this school for a number of years.

Amelia Freeman was invited by Dr. Martin Delany and others to establish a private school in Chatham. Miss Freeman was born and reared in Ohio, attended Oberlin College and studied under the tutelage of Reverend Charles Avery of Pittsburgh. She taught art and music at Avery College and then Allegheny Institute in the early 1850s. Upon her arrival in Chatham in 1856, she set up a "finishing school" for the children of the well-to-do Black artisan class. It quickly expanded to include philosophy, American history, algebra and botany. Instruction in art, embroidery, music and written composition continued, but at an additional fee.³²

Unlike the government school, however, Freeman's school was not free and it experienced financial difficulties throughout its history. On 15 January 1857, a fundraising event boasting speakers, a band, and choir was held to enable Miss Freeman to purchase a stove, desks and other supplies.³³ Later that year, Amelia Freeman married Isaac Shadd, editor of the *Provincial Freeman*, and the prospects for the school were strengthened. Isaac became one of the managers of the school and his sister Mary Ann Shadd Cary became a teacher and trustee. Emeline and Sarah Shadd, sisters of Mary Ann and Isaac, were assistant teachers.

Shadd Cary sought financial assistance from various religious and philanthropic groups like the American Missionary Association and the Refugee Home Society to keep the school open. It served a vital need in Chatham for it was largely attended and offered an excellent education. But running the school was not easy. The teachers were poorly paid and their health suffered from the stress of teaching in crowded, unsatisfactory conditions. Furthermore, they were forced to find jobs in the public system to keep their private concern afloat. After 1867, the school finally closed when, one by one, Mary Shadd Cary, Emeline and Amelia Freeman Shadd headed south after the end of the Civil War to lend their skills during Reconstruction.³⁴

In the 1870s and 1880s, segregated schooling continued to be the rule. Although Simmons vs. the Township of Chatham in 1861 successfully challenged the gerrymandering of school district boundaries on the basis of race, it did nothing to abolish the practice of segregated schooling. This the African Canadian populace continued to oppose, but to no avail.

In 1873, the Wilberforce Educational Institute was opened at the corner of Princess and Wellington. It was an amalgamation of the British American Institute, Josiah Henson's defunct showcase at Dawn, the property of which was finally

³² C. Peter Ripley et al., eds., *Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol 2 *Canada, 1830-1865* (Chapel Hill, NC and London, UK: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) [hereafter called *BAP*], 489-90n; Cooper, "Black Teachers in Canada West," 65-6.

³³ *Provincial Freeman*, 10 January 1857; Cooper, "Black Teachers in Canada West," 66

³⁴ Cooper, "Black Teachers in Canada West," pp. 67-70; *BAP*, 489-90n.

Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott was the first Canadian-born Black to practise medicine, a surgeon in the U.S. army, Assistant Director of the Freedman's Bureau Hospital after the Civil War and, as a member of the York Pioneers, one of the founders of the Ontario Historical Society. Toronto Reference Library.

sold in 1868 after a protracted legal battle between Josiah Henson and John Scoble, and the Nazrey Institute founded by Reverends William Nazrey, Walter Hawkins, R.R. Disney and others in 1869. Although the grand vision of Henson and his cohorts had foundered, the sale of the Dawn property for \$30,000 breathed new life into the dream of a quality educational facility for African Canadians in Kent County. The Institute was also the beneficiary of the philanthropy of Charles Avery of Pennsylvania. Wilberforce was established not only to provide excellent primary and secondary schooling for Chatham's Black youth, but also to prepare young people for such fields of study as art, law and medicine at the university level. It also groomed students for teaching, business and commercial undertakings. The school moved to King Street in 1887, where it remained until the building was demolished in 1952.³⁵

The level of excellence to which Wilberforce aspired can be judged in part by the calibre of people who were hired to lead the institution. Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott, known as the first Canadian-born Black to practise medicine, was its



first president in 1873. Abbott was the son of Wilson R. Abbott of Toronto, easily the richest Black in Toronto if not all of Canada West, and who had made his fortune in real estate. The younger Abbott was born in Toronto but educated at the famous Elgin Settlement at Buxton, just fifteen miles from Chatham. He studied medicine at the University of To-

³⁵ On the British American Institute and its eventual sale and establishment of the Wilberforce Institute, see Josiah Henson, *Autobiography of the Reverend Josiah Henson from 1789-1883* (London, UK: Christian Age Offices, 1882), 123-25 and 164-71; Robinson and Robinson, *Seek the Truth*, 90-91; Walton, "Blacks in Buxton and Chatham, Ontario, 1830-1890: Did the 49th Parallel Make A Difference?" (Ph.D. Thesis, Princeton University, 1979), 199-200.

ronto and graduated in 1861. Dr. Abbott became a surgeon in the Union Army during the Civil War, one of only eight Blacks to do so. He was also assistant director of the Freedmen's Bureau Hospital in Washington, D.C. Abbott returned to Canada in 1871 and moved to Chatham where he became active in the community. He served as President of Chatham's Medical Society and was one of the first coroners of Kent County.³⁶

Another well-known manager of this school was Alfred Lafferty, a brilliant University of Toronto graduate – not to mention Buxton school alumnus – from the Toronto area. Lafferty was principal at Wilberforce from 1875-1882. One of Lafferty's claims to fame was that when he graduated from the University of Toronto in 1862, he received first class honours in mathematics and the classics and was awarded a silver medal for each. The prize books that he received were discovered in 2001 and donated to the W.I.S.H. Centre's Heritage Room in Chatham.³⁷ Lafferty went on to study law and was called to the bar in 1886. He practised law in Chatham and remained active in the cultural life of the city for the remainder of his life.³⁸

Clearly, the community's fifty-plus years of struggle to educate its youth had met with both successes and failures. What was clear, also, was that Blacks remained bitter and dissatisfied about being barred from the regular public schools. In May 1884, a large and enthusiastic meeting of "Colored Citizens" met in Hunton Hall to devise an action plan to eradicate the separate school system. Isaac Holden, a successful merchant who had recently been elected to the Chatham City Council, chaired the meeting. Speaker after speaker lamented the fact that the separate school policy remained intact despite the vocal opposition of the Black community. They felt it was, or at least should be, contrary to the laws of Canada. Nathaniel Murray, owner of the Murray Block on King St. West and its fashionable boot and shoe store, outlined the "many difficulties he had encountered in past years in trying to secure admission of [Black] children to the nearest public schools in the ward or district in which the parents lived and paid taxes." Foreshadowing the grievances of nearly a decade later, Murray noted the particular injustice felt by families living one or two miles

³⁶ Robinson and Robinson, *Seek the Truth*, 12-13; Adrienne Shadd, Afua Cooper and Karolyn Smardz Frost, *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto!* (Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2002), 61, 66.

³⁷ Robinson and Robinson, *Seek the Truth*, 56; Heritage Room file, W.I.S.H. Centre, Chatham and communication with biographer Hilary Dawson, who discovered the prize books.

³⁸ Robinson and Robinson, *Seek the Truth*, 56, 91; Shadd, Cooper and Smardz Frost, *Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto!*, 49. The last school for Blacks to be established in Chatham was the Woodstock Industrial Institute in 1908. The trustees, including Reverends J.C. Richards and J.C. Wilmore, purchased the former King Street School and opened a school designed to train young people in the skilled and industrial trades. The Institute remained open until 1927 when it became the J.G. Taylor Community Centre, after Reverend Taylor who had played an important role in the founding of Woodstock. Robinson and Robinson, *Seek the Truth*, 92-94.

away in having to send their children past schools in their own neighbourhoods to the King Street School in the east end. George Reeves, well-known blacksmith from North Chatham, who would later become one of the participants in the action against the school board on behalf of his daughter, Jessie, also addressed the crowd.³⁹

The meeting passed several resolutions and appointed a committee of grievance consisting of Holden, Murray and Reeves. This committee was given authorization to meet with school board officials on behalf of the community. Despite the air of hopeful anticipation, which permeated the gathering, Chatham schools remained closed to African Canadians.⁴⁰

Then, on 21 January 1891, the Chatham Literary Association convened a meeting at Victoria Hall and issued a call for a convention of Black people of Kent County for the purpose of dealing with the continuing injustices they faced. Every school section was requested to send two delegates and every town or municipality, five delegates. The convention was held on 7 February 1891, with seventy in attendance. Delegates came from Chatham and Chatham Township, as well as the Townships of Dover, Harwich, Raleigh and Tilbury East. J.C. Richards was elected to chair the meeting and R.L. Holden, was elected secretary.

**Residence of Black Pupils
Attending King Street School**

Ward 1	42
Ward 2	10
Ward 3	6
Ward 4	50
Ward 5	<u>14</u>
Total	122

(Source: "Open to All: How the Committee on the Co-Education Question Will Report," *Chatham Daily Planet*, 15 December 1892.)

A committee of five – Nathaniel Murray, Garrison Shadd, J.M. Garel, Bishop Wilmore and A. Henry – drafted a constitution. The organization convened again on 21 February 1891 at Victoria Hall in Chatham, amid much enthusiasm and excitement. Here the final draft of the constitution was delivered.⁴¹ In April, the new organization elected its first officers: R.W.S. Johnston became president, R.L. Holden, vice-president, W.H. Bazie, secretary, and Perry Chase, treasurer. As already noted, the Kent County Civil Rights League went public in Chatham on Emancipation Day of that year and continued to meet on the first Friday evening of every month, collecting subscriptions and planning strategy.⁴² Thus, when the Civil Rights League petitioned the school board and made its impassioned presentation at the

³⁹ "Airing a Grievance: The Colored Citizens of Chatham Discuss Separated Schools," *Chatham Weekly Planet*, 29 May 1884.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *The Plaindealer*, 13 February 1891.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1 May 1891, 28 October 1892.

board meeting on 6 December 1892, it was prepared for what happened next.

The special committee that was struck to “study” the desegregation of the schools – or the “co-education question” as it was euphemistically referred to in the press – met on the evening of Tuesday, 13 December 1892. Principal Alfred Shadd of the King Street School had submitted some statistics that the committee was asked to consider in its deliberations.

The statistics showed that while forty-one percent of all Black students registered at the King Street School lived in Ward 4, where the school was located, the majority, or fifty-nine percent did not. Obviously, the policy of separate schools impacted a significant number of African Canadian school children.

The ensuing discussion reported by the *Chatham Daily Planet* in its 15 December 1892 edition indicates the sentiment on both sides of the issue. J.A. Wilson “said he would not support any resolution allowing the public schools to open to colored children. They had a good school of their own and he questioned their right by law to compel the Board to allow them in the same school room as white children.” William Singer responded that “the colored people were citizens like the rest of [the community]. They paid their taxes and were entitled to the same rights and privileges as the white people.” James Holmes countered that, “they had a good school of their own and good teachers. What more did they want?” Wilson then informed

the committee of his knowledge of the existence of separate schools in other regions. He declared “the petitioners made a great mistake when they said this was the only place in Canada where there were separate colored schools.... [I]n Windsor the colored children had rooms of their own apart from the whites.”

Cooper moved, seconded by Singer, that the prayer of the petition be granted and that the committee recommend at the next Board meeting that all schools be opened to Black children beginning January of the next school term. The motion carried by a vote of 3-2. Yeas: Cooper, Singer and John Holmes. Neas: James Holmes and Wilson.

The Board met again on 20 December 1892. This was a special meeting set up primarily to receive the report of the sub-committee and to settle the question of whether or not separate schools for Blacks and Whites should continue to exist. After dealing with some financial matters, the sub-committee on separate schools tabled its report. The report stated that all schools be opened to Black students. John Holmes moved, and Robert Cooper seconded, that the report be adopted.

Unfortunately, the forces of segregation had come prepared. Dr. McKeough moved in amendment, seconded by J. A. Wilson

That the Board of School Trustees shall through its “Inspector” or otherwise at its discretion regulate and direct the admission and attendance of the children – white and colored – at the various schools – allotting and sending them to such schools as may be considered in the best interest of the children and the public.⁴³

⁴³ “Left to the Inspector: How the Public School Board Escape(s) an Awkward Dilemma,” *Chatham*

By leaving the matter up to the “discretion” of the school inspector, the majority of trustees were saying, in effect, that they would not take a stand on the issue one way or another. Moreover, this “solution” to the problem gave all the appearance of having been concocted prior to the meeting so as to thwart the proponents of fair play and equality.

A heated debate ensued. Singer responded to the amendment by calling it a great injustice, believing that the Board had no power to send children from one end of the town to the other on account of colour and that this amendment allowed the inspector to keep things exactly as they were. John Holmes said he was surprised by the amendment and asked why the trustees had not come right out and said they did not want the “colored children” to go to White schools.

Wilson countered that the report would cause dissension in Chatham. He also acknowledged that he did not believe there were more than 200 Black children in the town – certainly not the 400 that was claimed by the Civil Rights League – because there were only 51 on average in attendance at the King Street School. He would never cause any wrong or injustice to be done to his fellow “colored citizens.” Everyone was getting his just rights and harmony existed among all.

Cooper called the amendment nonsensical and mocked his opponents: “Those people over the river are too much frightened.” He added that he hoped if

the report was voted down that the Black community would take the necessary legal action to get what they wanted. Dr. Rutherford argued he did not feel they were side-tracking the matter and that the petitioners’ proposal could only be adopted in a gradual way.

After passionate arguments had been made on both sides, the trustees finally took a vote. Seven chose to leave the matter with the inspector and three opted to adopt the committee’s report as is. The *Chatham Daily Planet* correctly estimated that the “co-education question” had effectively been “left in the status quo.”

Before adjournment, another matter was briefly brought before the board. William Singer, a staunch defender of the Black community’s right to attend any school in Chatham, resigned his position, stating that pressure on his time would not allow him to serve any longer. His resignation was accepted, leaving one less ally in the Blacks’ favour on the Board.⁴⁴ It appeared that, for the time being, the school board had successfully skirted the issue.

But the matter was far from over. After years of opposition in the form of polite requests, meetings, and letters to the editor of Chatham papers denouncing the policy of separate schools, the Kent County Civil Rights League would not so easily be deterred. Members knew what they were up against. They had carefully and quietly been planning strategy and raising funds at weekly meetings over the

Daily Planet, 22 December 1892; Chatham Public School Board Minute Book, September 1889–November 1896, 144–46.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

past year and a half. Unfortunately, the *Chatham Planet* newspaper, which had provided detailed accounts of the School Board meetings at which much of the controversy played itself out, is not available from January – May 1893, a crucial period of this investigation. This part of the story, therefore, has been pieced together from School Board minutes and a couple of short eyewitness accounts.

Phase two of the League's campaign to desegregate the schools was ready to be implemented. George Tyrrell, a plasterer, sent a letter to School Inspector Reverend A. McColl requesting that his stepdaughter, Mary Ellen Gibson, be transferred from King Street School to McKeough. The letter stated that she was only eight years old and of delicate health and could not travel the two miles and back every day to the King Street School. In addition, Elizabeth A. Griffin sent a letter to the inspector requesting that her son, Howard, be transferred from King Street School to Queen Street School. While the family resided in Ward 2, Howard Griffin was compelled to pass the doors of the Queen Street School on his way to the King Street School, located in Ward 4.⁴⁵

The letters were read aloud at the 7 February meeting of the school board. The two remaining supporters of the Black community on the board were unwavering: Robert Cooper moved, and John Holmes seconded that the transfers be ap-

proved and the inspector be so instructed. The vote was 2-4 against the motion.⁴⁶

When the majority of trustees again failed to act in their favour, the League immediately set in motion phase three of its campaign. Members took the matter to attorney C.J. O'Neill, a Chatham lawyer, who proceeded to fire off a letter to the board. Referring to the requested transfers of George Tyrrell and Elizabeth Griffin, the letter stated that all schools must be opened immediately, or they would take their case to the High Court of Ontario. At the 7 March 1893 board meeting, the recording secretary read O'Neill's letter to the trustees. They decided to solicit the opinion of the board's lawyer about their chances in a legal showdown. A special meeting would then be called.⁴⁷

In the meantime, the League staged a direct action reminiscent of the non-violent protests of the American South in the modern-day civil rights era. Mrs. Clark Hansboro and Elizabeth Griffin took their children directly to the Central and Queen Street Schools and attempted to gain admission of their children at those institutions. They were refused by the principals in question. In addition, George Reeves took his six-year-old daughter, Jessie, to Head Street School in North Chatham and attempted to enroll her in school for the first time. She, too, was refused admission.⁴⁸

A special meeting of the board was

⁴⁵ Chatham Public School Board Minute Book, September 1889-November 1896, 151-52.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Chatham Public School Board Minute Book, September 1889-November 1896, 155-56; "Reminiscences of J.W. Montgomery."

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*



School class of both Black and White students. Daniel G. Hill Collection, Archives of Ontario.

called for 14 March 1893. The board's solicitor, Mr. Atkinson, had submitted a written opinion of the situation, which was read to the trustees. Based on what they heard, it was decided they would send a letter to George Reeves requesting him to make a regular application to the board for the admission of his daughter to Head Street School and that his application would be duly considered. Regarding the transfer of the other students from King Street School to Queen Street and Central Schools, it was decided to leave the matter in the hands of Chairman McKeough, Inspector McColl, J.A. Wilson and Thomas Wanless, a new trustee. They would deliberate and report on it at the next regular board meeting. The Secretary was instructed to notify C.J. O'Neill of the steps that were being taken.⁴⁹

Obviously, the legal opinion that was read to the trustees on the 14th of March was not favourable to a policy which denied children access to public schools on the basis of skin colour. However, while

they appeared ready to concede access to Head Street School to Jessie Reeves, who was just entering public school for the first time,

they felt uncomfortable allowing those who were transferring from King Street School to other schools in town.

On 4 April, the trustees again met for their monthly meeting. After some initial business was transacted, the committee appointed to look into the transfers from King Street School presented a majority report and a minority report. The two reports read as follows:

Majority Report

Chatham April 3, 1893

The Public School Board of Chatham,

We the majority of your committee appointed to consider the application of Mr. Hansboro for the transfer of his children from King Street School to Queen Street School and Central School respectively and Mrs. Griffin's application to send her child to Queen Street School report as follows:

We believe it to be in the best interests of Mr. Hansboro's children that they continue to attend King St. School and also in the best interest of Mrs. Griffin's child that she send it to King St. School, said King St. School having been set apart and thoroughly

⁴⁹ Chatham Public School Board Minute Book, September 1889-November 1896, 157-58; *The Plaindealer*, 24 March 1893; "Reminiscences of J.W. Montgomery."

equipped with modern appliances and Teachers well qualified to give the children of the colored Rate-payers all the advantages of the Public school system. We would therefore recommend that the applications of Mr. Hansboro for transfers be not granted and that Mrs. Griffin send her child to King Street School in accordance with the Public school Regulations page 102 Sec 10 which reads as follows: "Pupils in Cities and Towns and incorporated villages shall attend such schools as may be designated by the Trustees and no transfer from one school to another shall be allowed without their consent."

Committee J. A. Wilson T. Wanless

Minority Report

After having made all necessary inquiries into the application of Mr. Hansboro and Mrs. Griffin for the transfer of their children from King St. School to the Central and Queen Street School respectively, I beg to report favorable to these transfers.

George T. McKeough

The minutes of the meeting do not indicate that there was any discussion of the reports. All that is revealed is that Mr. John Holmes moved and Mr. Cooper seconded that the report of Dr. McKeough – the minority report – be adopted. When the vote was taken, the yeas were seven and the neas, two. The minority report was declared carried.⁵⁰

This final vote struck a resounding blow to segregated schooling in Chatham. Clearly, it was not what the majority of school trustees wanted to happen, but it

was the only rational decision that they could make at that juncture. Obviously, the turning point in this saga was the board solicitor's opinion indicating that they could not hope to prevail in a protracted legal court battle.

On 5 April 1893, the announcement was made that all public schools would henceforth be opened to Black children. The parents who applied for transfers or admission to the ward schools were admitted on 10 April 1893. Black Chatham rejoiced.⁵¹

The Black community and the Kent County Civil Rights League had won a landmark case and they were rightly elated by the desegregation of Chatham's schools – finally after decades of denial! The lesson to be learned was that logical arguments, polite requests at meetings with school officials, letters of protest to local newspaper editors, even idle threats – these strategies, in and of themselves, were not going to win out in matters of entrenched racism. Rather, the brilliant tactics implemented by the Kent County Civil Rights League of having a plan a, b, c and d and if that didn't work, a plan e, f and g are what ultimately helped to carry the day. The League's unrelenting series of manoeuvres went a long way toward convincing school board officials that it had no intention of slithering away and disappearing.⁵²

Ironically, the desegregation of the

⁵⁰ Chatham Public School Board, Minute Book September, pp. 160-1; "Reminiscences of J. W. Montgomery."

⁵¹ *The Plaindealer*, 24 March 1893; "Reminiscences of J.W. Montgomery."

⁵² In his account of the events recounted in this article, J.W. Montgomery hailed the selfless character

public schools was only the first successful battle in a larger war. There were more grievances yet with which Chatham Blacks had to contend. An A. Parker wrote a letter to the editor of the *Chatham Daily Planet* dated 12 May 1892.

Sir,
Chatham hotels have no use for the colored man. When he calls for a night's lodging they say they have no vacant room. If he asks for a meal they say they do not cater to his class, but he can get it down at the market shed, where ... though the houses are hospitable they have not sufficient means of accommodation. There are seven hundred colored ratepayers in Chatham who are deprived of rights and privileges they ought in fairness to enjoy. When they ask the honorable Board of Commissioners for license for a hotel so they can be suitably accommodated among

themselves, they are refused. There has been application vainly made for three years by one of four hotelkeepers and the reason of the refusal is not yet accounted for.... Civil rights is what we want and civil rights is what we should get.

Parker's letter is illustrative of the wrongs many continued to experience, particularly in the area of public accommodation. But it would be another sixty years before the issue of fair employment and fair accommodation practices would finally be dealt with at the legislative level within Ontario and ultimately the country as a whole. And Blacks from Chatham, Buxton and Dresden – through the quiet but unwavering leadership of Hugh Burnett and the National Unity Association – would be at the forefront of this struggle as well.

of Principal Alfred Shadd, who supported the League's campaign even though he was aware that it would probably result in the loss of his own position as a Black teacher at a Black school. Sure enough, in subsequent months the school board retaliated by firing him, but Shadd, undaunted, moved out west, first teaching, and then becoming a medical doctor, municipal politician and newspaper editor in Saskatchewan. "Reminiscences of J.W. Montgomery;" Colin Thomson, *Blacks in deep snow: black pioneers in Canada* (Don Mills, Ont.: J.M. Dent, 1979) chapter entitled "Doc Shadd;" Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41821&query=Shadd.