

Slavery myths in Canada

Myth No. 1

Slavery never existed in Canada, right?

Many Canadians are under the assumption that slavery never existed in Canada (or not at the same levels found in the U.S.), which is false. The first recorded slave to arrive in Canada was a six-year-old boy named Olivier le Jeune from Madagascar in 1628. Most slaves were imported from other British colonies and the Americas.

Myth No. 2

Canada was the first to abolish slavery before other parts of the world followed suit.

Politicians enacted legislation in 1793 that set limitations on slavery in the country. The 1793 bill meant anyone born a slave would secure his freedom when he turned 25. At the time, the average lifespan of a slave was 20 to 25 years. But slavery wasn't officially abolished until 1833 when Britain abolished it.

Myth No. 3

Weren't all black slaves who escaped to Canada from the U.S. afforded all the liberties enjoyed by other European Canadians?

Despite the warm and fuzzy images and scenes displayed in most current-day slave narratives, black slaves who escaped to Canada faced discrimination, violence and segregation. Unlike racist legislation, like the Jim Crow laws, passed in the U.S., Canada had largely unwritten racist codes, which many could argue made it more difficult for black people in Canada.

Myth No. 4

Slaves who escaped north lived out the rest of their lives in Canada.

Some former slaves left Canada for the U.S. once slavery was abolished in America to escape difficulties in Canada and for chances at upward mobility afforded to them by moving to cities with higher black populations. Entire generations of black Canadians were completely lost to Canadian history by moving to the U.S.



This painting, originally entitled Portrait of Negro Slave, is one of very few public pieces of art that depicts a black Canadian slave. COURTESY, MONTREAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

Canada's unknown slave-owning past

Black History Month

Historians believe about 5,000 slaves were brought to the country. Their stories are often left out of the history books



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You've heard this story before: A group of slaves escape for freedom in the middle of the night.

But here's the twist: These slaves weren't running toward Canada. They were running away from it — fleeing from Canadian slave owners and headed for freedom in Detroit.

White American slavery is having a moment in Hollywood thanks to the Oscar-nominated film 12 Years a Slave. The story of Canadian slaves — whose lives were as unjust and inhumane as those in the south — has largely been ignored.

"We tend to think of it as 'not in my backyard' myth about slavery," says Delorean Kilen, project coordinator at the Ontario Black History Society. "People don't remember that slavery existed here because we've been 'slave-free' longer than the U.S."

Slavery existed in Canada for more than 200 years and was officially abolished 30 years before the Emancipation Proclamation order was issued by U.S. President Abraham Lincoln.

Historians believe there was an estimated 5,000 slaves who were forcibly brought to Canada, either directly as property, or shipped through

"The legacy of the underground railroad is positive and empowering but what that legacy does is that it blinds us and obscures the other things that were going on before the railroad. We had slavery in Canada, it just ended sooner."

Rosemary Sadlier, a descendant of Canadian slaves

the trans-Atlantic slave trade from other British colonies.

In 1793, Upper Canada outlawed importing slaves and the practice was officially abolished in 1833 alongside the rest of the British Empire.

"It's something that people don't want to talk about and are not comfortable talking about," says Natasha Henry, a historian and educator. "Slavery was used as a tool for both British and Canadian colonies."

"By ignoring that, we're not portraying a complete history of Canada."

Rosemary Sadlier is one of many Canadians whose roots reach back to pre-Confederation. Her mother's family can be traced to 1840, while her father's ancestors arrived in New Brunswick in 1793.

"Everyone assumes that everyone who is black is a recent immigrant, but there are thousands of black Canadians who have been here since the founding of the country," says Sadlier, an author and recipient of the Order of Ontario.

"In my younger years I didn't come away with a real sense of my family's historic contributions to this country and I think there's a way that we are made to feel to various measures that we aren't our dues, we haven't paid our taxes, we're visitors in someone else's country," she

says. "When you have something like black history, it changes all of those stereotypes because you can't be an unwelcome visitor in a country that's your own."

Charmaine Nelson, an art historian and professor at Montreal's McGill University, believes a heavy dose of corrective action is needed to educate people who see slavery as only an American experience.

"We don't ever want to take credit for slavery in Canada so we have to keep it out there in the tropics or the U.S.," she says.

Photos and portraits that depict slavery in Canada are not easily found or publicized, which adds to the difficulty Nelson and other educators have when talking and teaching the public about this stain on our nation's history.

A painting originally called Portrait of Negro Slave is one of the few items that gives a face to slavery in Canada. The name of the portrait was controversially changed to Portrait of a Haitian Woman.

"The renaming in effect expels slavery from Montreal and Quebec, rendering it only a troubling history of tropical colonies like Haiti and not one of immediate concern to Canadians," said Nelson.