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Issue 10

# Promised Land Chronicle

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## The Huts of Chatham

During the 1850s, Dr. Martin Delaney called Chatham his home. Oddly, if you were to do a quick reference of his bio available on various popular on-line resources, one would find so little mention of Canada and specifically his time in Chatham, it is as if it never happened. Or perhaps Chatham-Kent just needs to do a better job promoting one of our most illustrious residents.

Local lore maintains that Dr. Delaney lived at the corner of Murray and Adelaide Streets. However recent work by PLP researchers reviewing property records (part of the Project's oft documented Geomap) sheds greater light on the subject and raises the exciting possibility that his house still stands.

During his time in Chatham, Dr. Delaney, among other things, played a key role in ending a local Cholera outbreak, attended the John Brown Convention and is believed to have penned a large portion of his serialised book "Blake; or the Huts of America." "Blake" was the first novel by an African American to be published in the United States.

As this story goes Delaney's house was at the corner with Murray and fronted on Adelaide, also known as Lot 27 of the Old Survey. In this survey, the original lots and crown patents were one square acre, however, by the time Delaney shows up in the later half of the 1850s many of these properties had been subdivided and were then being sold as smaller units. A search of the property transaction abstracts housed at the McGeorge Building shows that Delaney only purchased the "north half of the east half" of lot 27. This then is only a roughly ¼ acre property of the original lot 27, and because it is the north-east quadrant it could only have fronted on Murray. Unfortunately, the actual property deeds and mortgage papers bearing Delaney's signature did not include surveyor notes with precise measurements delineating the property in his day.

A clue was uncovered in one entry on a subsequent purchase of the neighbouring north-west quadrant a couple of years later notes that that property extended 106 feet along Murray from the corner of Adelaide. Today, the first house fronting on Murray east of Adelaide is located 120 feet from the corner, placing it 14 feet on Delaney's side of what had been the dividing line between the north-east and the north-west properties in his era.



58 Murray Street – Was this Martin Delaney's Chatham residence?

This house would appear to be a rather unremarkable traditional "salt-box" design. It has also been heavily renovated with early and mid twentieth century materials so much so, a person would be forgiven for thinking that was when it was built. Speaking with Dave Benson, Heritage Coordinator for the Municipality of Chatham-Kent, the PLP has learned that he has long has his eye on this house. He believes that beneath this exterior is a house that could be original to

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the property and actually date from the 1850s. Mr. Benson has been protecting and designating heritage properties in Chatham-Kent for decades and believes all the signs are there. In deed he is even personally renovating a near identical saltbox which dates to the 1850s in Morpeth, south east of Chatham.

The only way to be certain is to gain access to the property and investigate any original features and details that may still exist beneath the 20th century renovations, even the saw marks on beams and floor joists could be all it will take. If this is the case, then 58 Murray would be the only house in this stretch of properties falling within the approximate boundaries of Delaney's purchase to date to that era and would be have to be the actual house in which he resided. Within these walls he wrote a chunk of Blake: or the Huts of America. The same local lore holds that Delaney and his friends oft referred to his Chatham residence as "The Hut."

An interesting and noteworthy sidebar to this story is the price Delaney paid for the property in 1857: \$1800. This was a princely sum. He purchased the property from Robert Payne, a local property owner with ties to the board of education.

Just a couple of years before this, Payne only purchased the property for \$400. We can't explain away the jump in price by speculating Payne purchased the lot when it was empty and had built a house on it by the time he sold it to Delaney. If that were true it makes no sense that once buying it back from Delaney for \$1800 that the very next year Payne sells it to a new buyer for just \$400. This property will not sell for more than \$1000 again until 1882, 24 years later. No property in the immediate vicinity sells for over \$1000 in the 1850s until the late 1870s.

Could it be this was a special price charged to Delaney because of his race? Although Chatham was a mixed race community with a large black population, that population lived south of McGregor Creek. Delaney purchased on an established and predominantly white neighbourhood.

**The Simonton Table**

Tina Simonton is a student at Blenheim District High School who is already dreaming of a life at University of Guelph this fall. Like most students in her position she looks forward to the end of High School, she just needs to complete this one last semester. Heading into these final classes she did not know about the Promised Land, and nothing of its ongoing work in local schools. Nor did she suspect that an old family legend would become the centrepiece of an English class project and equally intrigue so many historians.

Unlike many students choosing a research topic, hers had a personal connection. Her family owned a fine antique table that, as the story goes, was built and given to their ancestors as a gift by a black farmhand they had once employed. The table has fine crafted details and appears to be the work of a skilled tradesman. Who was this unknown man? What was his story? Surely someone of this skill would have built more than the one table, have we perhaps discovered a talented furniture maker whose wares are spread around the region? Tina was determined to discover the identity of the man, and confirm the story attributed to the table.

The Simonton Clan arrived in Chatham-Kent from Ireland in the 1830s, some of the first settlers in Howard Township. Within two decades, two Simonton brothers were working what was for the time a large farm near Botany, and needed labourers to tend it all. One such farmhand was a man whose name is lost today, but is attributed to be the craftsman behind the tale table.

Tina has documented the story as it survives today from interviewing many members of different branches of the family. They all know the story, and the details are nearly identical. This man is a self emancipated slave, who made his way to Canada and by the 1850s was employed on the Simonton Farm. Neither his name nor place of origin is known. Apart from having possessed the skills to make the table, he is said to have been experienced with horses. Both the Simonton brothers and the farm where he had been enslaved in the US raised horses, so it was a natural fit, possibly the primary reason he was hired by the Simontons.

The Farmhand had left behind a wife and child when he fled to Canada, and somehow after settling into life at the Simonton farm wrote or made contact with his former slaver master and brokered a deal to purchase his family's freedom. Whether the fee was steep so as to help recoup the cost of his own freedom is uncertain but it was such that it would take many years of working for the Simontons to raise sufficient funds.

The Simonton brothers felt for the man, and after a while decided to get involved. They negotiated their own deal with the slave-owner, to buy two horses from him, but the deal included the man's wife and child as well. One of the brothers travelled to the States to complete the transaction and bring the people and horses home. In exchange, the man agreed to continue working for the Simontons to pay back the rest of the money the Simontons had contributed to buying his family's immediate freedom.

When the term was up, the grateful farmhand gave the table to Simontons as a gift of thanks. Supposedly he made it himself from a single piece of wood cut on the farm. Talking with young Tina about the deal today you can hear her irritation that everyone she spoke with universally agrees that the two horses purchased in the deal were stud colts, one black and one bay, of good blood lineage "Every Simonton knows the colour of the horses and *nothing* about the people."

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## Claiming: An Update

The 2012 (\*\*FINAL\*\*) PLP Symposium "Claiming the Promise" is fast approaching! Have you purchased your tickets yet? It is not too late, to confirm a spot in the audience.

The \$30 price of admission includes access to all events and speakers, including catered lunches and a seat on the bus as we tour the county on Friday, June 15<sup>th</sup>.

Still need convincing? As you know by now, Lawrence Hill, author of "The Book of Negroes" is the key note speaker, and will speak at the Chatham Capitol Theatre, the evening of Friday, June 15<sup>th</sup>. Admission is included with the symposium registration fee. However, tickets just for admission to Lawrence Hill and nothing else are available from the Chatham Cultural Centre box office (519-354-8338 or 866-807-7770) for only \$16.50.

Event organizers are delighted to announce that same evening will now also feature a reading by poet **Cecily Nicholson**. Her first collection "**Triage**" has just been published by Talon Press. Triage draws on Cecily is from nearby St. Thomas, but has spent the last dozen years in Vancouver BC, and presently works as a Coordinator of Funds for the Downtown Eastside's Women's Centre. Also set to perform that evening is local jazz great Ken Crone.

Beyond that one evening, it seems only fitting that in this anniversary year commemorating the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Claiming the Promise will showcase the research work celebrating and challenging our preconceived notions of multiculturalism and racial interaction in Canada from the era of the Dawn Settlement in Dresden to colonial British Columbia.

Visit the website [www.promisedland2012.inck.ca](http://www.promisedland2012.inck.ca) for all the details on times, speakers, tours, and topics!

## Puce Memorial Cemetery and the Confederate General

Many people know Puce Memorial Cemetery's more famous neighbour, the John Freeman Walls Historic Site. Puce Memorial should not be mistaken as part of the site. The larger settlement of African Canadians in the Puce area predates the arrival of the Wall family and the establishment of the homestead, the descendants of the wider settlement are not all members of the Walls Family. Puce Memorial Cemetery is but one of the burial grounds which existed in the wider settlement and still serves the community today.

This final resting place of a large community of the self emancipated and their descendants is just east of present day Windsor. Readers familiar with the Promised Land's activities this past 18 months will know that we are concerned with preserving cemeteries and gravemarkers, and this cemetery is under threat on various fronts. This includes encroachment of a new neighbourhood development right up to the recognized present day northern boundary of the cemetery; the Puce River cuts a path along its western edge that has been eroding the bank - and the graves along it - for decades and; while a large number of grave markers have simply disappeared over the years. Recent efforts of the Lakeshore Black Historical Society has succeeded in bringing attention to the site in the hopes of saving and restoring the cemetery. LBHS aims to have the property designated as a historic site in its own right.

The Promised Land has offered to help by starting the restoration process and training a team of volunteers to carry on the work later this summer. Later this year, the LBHS will further raise public awareness when rededicating a gravemarker recovered last year on the edge of the cemetery's recognized boundary. The damaged stone has spent the winter being repaired by experts. It is the gravemarker of an ancestor of Windsor resident and African Canadian Heritage Consultant, Elise Harding Davis. Its "discovery" in 2011 touched off a small media firestorm as the stone she says is proof of a family oral tradition that they are descendants of Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee. Henry Lee was an American Revolutionary war hero and later Governor of Virginia. He is also the father of the Civil War Confederate General Robert E Lee.

The marker commemorates a woman named Elizabeth Lee, wife of Ludwell Lee. According to the family tree, Ludwell is the son of Kizzie Lee, the product of an encounter between Henry Lee and a slave woman. This would make Ludwell, Henry Lee's grandson, and Ludwell's mother Kizzie, the half-sister of Robert E Lee.

The Promised Land looks forward to assisting the LBHS with their preservation work this summer, including any other Lee family stones we may find. Although the family is adamant that their oral tradition is true, we would be remiss in not mentioning it is in dispute. It will surprise no one that Stafford House, a museum to the Lee family, challenges the story. As they state in interviews with the Windsor Star following the original publication of the story, there is no definitive documentation to back up the claim, particularly any records of a Kizzie in the Lee family household.

Whether ancestry can be subsequently proved to the acceptance of all sides is irrelevant to the PLP's restoration work. A Ludwell and Elizabeth Lee did exist and they were buried at Puce Memorial Cemetery with other founders and residents of Puce. Present day generations should work to preserve, respect and remember those who came before, and made this community, this Canada what it is today.

The Centre for Culture, Identity and Education (CCIE),  
University of British Columbia, and the Promised Land Project  
Presents a Two Day Conference, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> April, 2012

## Black British Columbians: Race, Space and the Historical Politics of Difference

On April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1858 in response to an invitation from the Governor of the Colony of Vancouver Island, Sir James Douglas, thirty five Black women and men left San Francisco aboard the ship Commodore bound for Victoria. When they arrived at Victoria Harbour on April 25<sup>th</sup>, they became the first Black people in the new colony, soon to be joined by six hundred additional immigrants, all looking to escape the overt racism, lack of opportunity and in some cases informal servitude of California for the promise of freedom, economic opportunity and citizenship in the Colony of British Columbia. There was soon a substantial Black presence in the Colony from Victoria to New Westminster, Kamloops to Salt Spring Islands, indeed enough to facilitate the establishment of the all Black Victoria Pioneers Rifle Corps (aka the African Rifles) in 1860. Prominent figures included the businessman and deputy Mayor of Victoria Mifflin Gibbs; Louis and Sylvia Stark who were the first non-Aboriginal homesteaders on Salt Spring Island and their daughter, Emily Stark who was one of the first teachers in BC; Kamloops councillor John Freemont Smith; activists for women's rights, Clarisa Fortune and Annie Norton; and dentist Allen Jones.

The presence of Blacks complicated the politics of difference in the Colony as working and romantic relationships and everyday interactions were negotiated between Aboriginals, Whites and Blacks in the Colony. Unfortunately much of that history and especially the historical and indeed contemporary presence and participation are largely marginalized in accounts about BC. Vancouver takes considerable pride in its current multiculturalism- its ethnoracial diversity, the common place nature of interracial and interethnic relationships and increasing mixed raced population. Strangely, the historical presence of the politics of difference is eschewed in this presentist conception of BC diversity, including the substantial contribution of Blacks. Indeed, to return to the origin, most accounts do not even acknowledge that Governor James Douglas, whose initial invitation resulted in that first wave of Black settlers to BC was himself multiracial: his mother was Creole and his father a Scotsman and furthermore, Douglas' wife, Amelia was multiracial- aboriginal and white.

This collaborative conference brings together prominent community historians, youth activists and academics to address issues such as Black trajectories including the links between movements within Canada and historical and contemporary US/Canada border crossings; the lives and works of prominent male and female Black Pioneers; the significance of the African Rifles; interracial relationships, multiracial identities and the politics of difference (Black/White/Aboriginal) in historical BC and the curious marginalization of the historical and contemporary presence of blackness in present day conceptualizations of British Columbia. Results and highlights will be published in future edition of the "Chronicle."

## The Simonton Table – continued from page 2

The table has recently been reviewed, via photograph, by an expert in early Ontario furniture. He agrees it has a very "Kent County look to it," and was probably made in the 1850s or 60s. However, because of the complexity of the turned elements and a few tell tale features he believes it was more likely made by the Robert Smith Company of Chatham. Smith's was a large operation once located on King St W near William and backing onto Jahnke St. It was a steam powered shop employing on average 30+ people at any given time. Therefore, although disappointing for Tina, it is far more likely that the table was purchased rather than built by the farmhand.

Because of its labour force, the time period and the shop's location in town, one can easily speculate that a significant percentage of the Robert Smith workforce was African Canadian. Whether or not the Simonton farmhand was later one and had a role in making the table can not be determined. At this time there is no comprehensive list of Smith employees and apprentices.

Despite this minor set back, Tina's primary task remains: who was the farmhand? Where did he come from? What happened to him and his family? In her near future she plans a trip to the Ontario Archives in the hope of finding tax assessments and census documents from the period which may have captured the names of other residents and employees at the farm. We can't wait to see what her search reveals.