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Issue 9

Promised Land Chronicle

Honouring the Legacy of First Baptist, Dresden

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First Baptist Church, Dresden was filled to capacity Sunday, November 20, 2011, for a special service celebrating the unveiling of a new plaque from the Ontario Heritage Trust. This historic designation just awarded to the church is the culmination of a long process undertaken by committed members of the congregation. The plaque's impetus arose during a succession of milestone anniversaries the congregation feted in recent years, including the current physical church building's 150th anniversary, and the 200th anniversary of Rev. Samuel Davis' birth.

First Baptist (commonly referred to as Queen Street Baptist Church) was constructed by the Reverends Samuel Davis and William Newman in 1857. Both men were active members of the American Free Baptist Association, the Amherstburg Regular Missionary Baptist Association and the British American Institute. Davis would dutifully serve as pastor at the church for 18 years. Thanks to the efforts of men such as community historian Bill Richardson (himself a Davis descendant) Ontario Heritage Trust granted the church this well deserved designation.

Missionary churches were in many ways the founding bedrock on which this country is built. They were often among the very first physical structures built in a community. They served as a community's heart, creating a sense of connectedness among the otherwise intrepid but diverse pioneers. They could inspire, as in the lifelong work of men like Newman and Davis, a striving toward not only the sense of community but also toward a higher purpose and common good. First Regular Baptist Church is a testament to their efforts.

The plaque reads as follows:

“The First Baptist Church of Dawn – established by former slaves and free African Americans in the 1840s – held its meetings in private homes, then in a log chapel at the British American Institute. In the 1850s, a Baptist congregation met on Main Street in Dresden, until a lot was purchased from parishioner George Johnson on the present site. A church was built by the congregation and the inaugural service of the First Regular Baptist Church was held on November 15, 1857. Reverends William P. Newman and Samuel H. Davis, the church's “founding fathers,” were prominent abolitionists and former British American Institute headmasters. Newman raised much of the funding, and Davis oversaw the construction of the church, donating 100 cords of wood to pay for the sawing of the lumber, which forms the original structure of the chapel to this day. For generations, the church has been an integral part of community life in Dresden. Today, it stands as a testament to the faith, fortitude and determination of these early pioneers.”

The Promised Land is proud co-sponsor of this plaque. \$2500 was paid toward the cost of the plaque as part of our initiatives to promote and preserve heritage properties.

For more information on the life of the Reverend Samuel Davis please see page 4.

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How the PLP Changed My Classroom for the Better

During this year, the grade twelve students in my English classes have been working with the Promised Land Project. Students first read the novel "The Book of Negroes" by Lawrence Hill and then chose a topic they wanted to research. The PLP has been an amazing opportunity for these students. Several speakers were organized for the students covering topics from slavery, to the John Brown convention, to life in Dresden, Ontario to get the kids primed.

The most amazing aspect of this project has been to watch the astonishment and disbelief of my students as they discovered that slavery existed in Canada, and that the area of Chatham-Kent played a large role in the history of black Canadians. One of my students commented that it is amazing that "we don't know a lot of the things that have happened in our own backyard". Many have begun to voice the opinion that their historical education has been woefully inadequate and that history textbooks do not provide a wholly accurate picture of life in Canada. To help students begin to think critically about the world around them is a mainstay of my teaching practice and with the help of the PLP I have been able to provide students with the chance to think more critically about their past, and in turn, their present.

As part of the research students have had to conduct, they have made contact with many community groups and organizations that they would not normally have visited. The PLP made this access extremely easy for students by providing speakers and giving students contact names. Students were also able to help in the rehabilitation of several headstones in the Chatham cemetery and came away with a new appreciation for historical records and archaeology.

This program has been phenomenal and I will continue to develop this classroom curriculum after the mandate of the PLP is finished. I cannot think of a better form of flattery than to continue the program long into the future.

Karen Locke teaches English at John McGregor Secondary School

Claiming the Promise: A Retrospective on African Canadian History

In June, Chatham-Kent will host the Promised Land Project's final annual symposium. Claiming the Promise: A Retrospective on African Canadian History. This will mark the official conclusion of the PLP, and showcase the results of the five year project.

Claiming the Promise will take place June 14-16, 2012 at multiple venues around Chatham Kent including the Capitol Theatre, Chatham Cultural Centre, Buxton Museum and Uncle Tom's Cabin National Historic Site. It will include a multitude of speakers from around North America representing academia, community groups, and artists. Research Papers this year are sought from three themes: Multiculturalism, and examples of identity, expression and interaction (both historical and contemporary); the interaction of indigenous and African peoples in the Promised Land communities; and African Canadian military history are of particular interest, but we welcome all proposals relating to a full range of topics in African Canadian history, identity and culture.

This event is open to the general public, and local residents are encouraged to attend as a means of introducing them to a vastly more complex yet underappreciated part of Chatham-Kent's past. Planned activities will also highlight all Chatham-Kent has to offer out-of-town visitors and guest as the symposium gets outside the traditional confines of conference rooms for guided tours of historic sites, community ghost walks, and special appearances by esteemed artists. This is a chance at once for the Municipality to place a rich piece of history that has the potential to be a driver of economic growth in tourism front and centre and a chance for a specific community within the Municipality to proudly display its achievements for the recognition it justly deserves.

Registration will be possible at the door (spaces permitting), but advanced registration is recommended, particularly to reserve seats on buses. General Admission for the entire weekend is \$25 per person, and \$60 for general admission plus admission to the Closing Banquet.

To see a complete schedule of events including a list of speakers and topics as they are announced, please visit <http://lamacs.arts.uottawa.ca/plp> after February 1, 2012.

Registration begins February 1, 2012, interested individuals and groups may contact Devin (519) 436-0119 x351, or dandrewsplp@gmail.com for more information at that time.

Notes from Dalhousie

In September 2010, under the guidance of Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard and with the help of a research assistant, I began the process of contacting and interviewing elders from three African Nova Scotian communities, for a project entitled, "The Freedom Experience of Blacks in Nova Scotia." This project was a new phase in the scholarly efforts of the Promised Land Project, continuing in our mandate of erasing the historical amnesia that plagues African Canadian history, and seeking to include the voices of African Canadians in the telling of their own stories. With its vital role in the history of Black Canada, and with the multiple familial and other connections between the many post-Underground Railroad communities, it was important to include other voices and perspectives in the telling of the multiplicity of stories which make up Black Canadian history.

Twenty-six community elders graciously shared stories from their lives and experiences in these Maritime communities; providing us with windows into the feelings and memories of what it has meant to be a person of African descent living in Nova Scotia. Stories are the lifeblood of communities; they provide a means of preservation as well as a means to pass them on to subsequent generations (Gates, 1989; Howard, 1991). Through the rich stories they have shared, these elders have allowed us to come to a better understanding of their history and their communities.

Having completed the interview process, Dr. Thomas Bernard and I have been exploring ways of sharing the community stories in multiple venues. We have contributed a chapter to the upcoming PLP collection, exploring the lives of African Canadian women. In this book chapter, we revisit the stories of "women's work" that we encountered in the narratives. With Dr. Nina Reid-Maroney, we recently participated in the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD) conference in Pittsburgh, where we were able to present papers exploring the African Canadian experience of the Black Power movement. In the spring, Dr. Thomas Bernard and I will be traveling to a conference in Toronto, where we will present a paper on mothers and mothering in African Nova Scotian communities. To wrap up our project, we will also present an overview of our research findings at the PLP Symposium in Chatham in June 2012.

These are exciting times for those of us in Halifax, as Dalhousie University has welcomed Dr. Afua Cooper as the new James R. Johnston Chair in Black Canadian Studies, and we hope to work with Dr. Cooper in the continued work of educating our youth about the history, and presence of people of African descent in Canada.

Dr. Claudine Bonner is a Post Doctoral Fellow at Dalhousie University in Halifax

Lawrence Hill Coming to Chatham



Best selling author Lawrence Hill is coming to Chatham for one night, Friday, June 15, 2012 for an appearance at the Capitol Theatre. Hill is the international best-selling author of "***The Book of Negroes***," "***Any Known Blood***" and, "***Some Great Thing***."

Hill's appearance will coincide with the Promised Land Project's next annual Symposium: Claiming the Promise. Symposium registrants will get in for no additional cost, separate tickets will be available through the Capitol Theater box office for those who only wish to see Mr. Hill's appearance.

Symposium Registration and Lawrence Hill Tickets both go on sale Feb 1.

NURTURING NEW RESEARCH LINKS: HURON-OBERLIN-TULANE



Huron University College History students on the steps of the Finney chapel, Oberlin, Ohio, with Liz Schultz and Thelma Quinn Smith of the Oberlin Heritage Center, October 2011

History students from Huron University College in London visited Oberlin College in October, in preparation for their work transcribing and annotating the correspondence of the Reverend Hiram Wilson. This is the second phase of a project that began last year, supported by the Oberlin College Archives and Library. Added to the project's list of academic partners for 2011-2012 is the **Amistad Research Center** at Tulane University, which holds Wilson's correspondence with the American Missionary Association. The Wilson letters are part of the Amistad's extensive microfilm collection of anti-slavery materials.

During the Oberlin visit, PLP students were hosted by Ken Grossi and Julie Weir of the College Archives

and Library; Roland Baumann, Archivist Emeritus at Oberlin; Barb Bickel of the Lorain County Visitors' Bureau; and Liz Schultz and Thelma Quinn Smith of the Oberlin Heritage Centre. In partnership with the Lucan and Area Heritage Museum, the class is also researching the Wilberforce settlement and the connections between Wilberforce, other settlements in Canada, and the broader anti-slavery context. The research has been supported by the RBC Fund for Community-based Learning at Huron, the PLP, and the Public History program at Huron's constituent university, UWO.

A public launch of student research (which we will not scoop in detailing here) is planned for April, at Huron University College.

Biography Spotlight: Samuel Davis (1810-1907)

Samuel Davis was born in August 1810 in Temple Mills, Maine. He initially trained as a mason but also attended Oberlin College in Ohio, before finally settling in Buffalo New York, where he got work as a school teacher. He was the third black educator to be hired by the public school system in Buffalo, where he was posted to the African school.

In 1844, now a highly respected community leader and renowned orator, he maintained his teaching position and worked as a station master on the Underground Railroad, while he put his mason skills to work as a builder of Michigan Street Baptist Church in Buffalo. Davis would later become an ordained minister at this same church. In 1846 he relocated to Detroit, Michigan, where he became pastor of Second Baptist Church and continued his work with the Underground Railroad.

During this time period, north of the border, in an attempt to keep its doors open to freedom seekers the British American Institute (BAI) was going through a spate of financial and managerial restructuring. The American Baptist Free Mission Society (was an abolitionist organization within the faith, based in New England) who sent money and aid to refugees at the Dawn Settlement (and elsewhere), used its growing influence over BAI operations as a result of this restructuring period to have Davis, and Rev. William Newman placed in joint authority over site. As an experienced educator Davis was asked to run the manual labour school.

In 1857, the expanding community began to construct its first permanent church, First Regular Baptist Church, on Queen Street. Davis worked to cut some of the lumber himself and even donated wood for the structure. The following year he became its pastor while continuing to teach at the BAI. He was the church's first minister and served in this role for 15 years before taking a break.

The BAI and its school eventually closed, the property divided and sold in the late 1860s. Davis remained a pillar of the community and the church, and continued to serve his flock, the church and the Amherstburg Regular Missionary Baptist Association in many roles over the years after the closure of the BAI. This included serving many years as an itinerant minister and travelling missionary, 5 years as pastor at Sandwich Baptist Church (Windsor), 1 year as pastor at First Baptist Church (Chatham) and 3 more years back at First Regular Baptist (Dresden).

Davis died in the fall of 1907, aged 97.

Why Bringing Local History to the Local Classroom Is Important and Can Work

Successfully introducing local history – and particularly Black History -- to area schools has long been a dream of many local historians. My dream was given the chance to become reality because it converged so well with my existing connection to the PLP. The Project seems to have found, with the cooperation of some creative and imaginative teachers, a successful formula to make it all happen. I am one of several local historians and resource people coordinated to attend participating classes by the Promised Land Projects' Devin Andrews.

Success in this process is dependant upon not just teaching but connecting with youth. No easy task in this day and age. But this fall I was witness to one of those special “aha” moments that make being a community resource in this project worth it.

I was talking to two young students in an English classroom (my fourth trip to this particular school's classes) – and in this one moment, I knew we'd done something more than merely introduce dry facts and information into the history curriculum. A student standing in front of me suddenly underwent a transformation from “eyes glazed over” to “eyes lit up”. We were reaching them – some who'd never even considered studying history – understanding that they had a role in exploring and safeguarding community history. *And, it could be interesting at the same.*

What makes the PLP approach so effective that it inspires even non-history students to approach their local principal (as happened at Dresden last year) to demand that everyone have a chance to learn about the local Black History? Or to voice a feeling they would be “robbed” of an important part of their communal heritage if they were not given the opportunity to know about the local connection to the Underground Railroad and the Civil Rights movement?

Part of the formula is the inspired teachers who have been willing to creatively develop the raw material of recent research into course material for use in non-history classes. And part I suspect is the opportunities PLP has opened up to connect people who are passionate about local history, and those who have a direct and personal link to some of the events of the near past, to students. It has enabled students and teachers to literally get their hands dirty and to dig into projects that put them in direct contact with historical artefacts (such as in the cemetery projects lead by Hans Vanderdoe this past season.) In short, PLP has opened up the classroom to the community, and the community to the classroom.

To have students exploring local historical sites such as Uncle Tom's Cabin and Buxton, instead of simply reading about slavery in the Book of Negroes by Lawrence Hill also gives the non-history aspects of the curriculum a new edge. It brings words of a historical novel to life, breathing new meaning and relevance into the printed words on the page.

Beyond the “educational” aspects, for the community, and community researchers like myself, there is the added reward of students valuing the work we do and engaging their community. Opening up students eyes to see the link of long familiar buildings to important events and personalities of the Underground Railroad and Civil Rights history helps people to appreciate that history isn't just a story that takes place “long ago, and far away” where it can seem more the stuff of novels than 24 hour news channels and tweets. That “real” history can and did happen here, and that it has shaped our communities and shaped us, is a lesson that can't fail to be engaging and instructive.

It is important in such exercises that the history that is presented is also “real”. That it doesn't edit out the painful bits, the places where people struggled, or where communities and individuals did not reach out in understanding and compassion. There are important life lessons in this. Through this kind of honest telling of the story, students come to understand the complexity of history, a complexity of human relationships and cultural interaction and that real people struggle in very different ways to come to terms with events and social issues. Giving them a chance to hear about these struggles from the people who were there (as in the Civil Rights era) can't help but open up dialogue on a range of subjects, and to provide lessons in civics, social justice and human development. On a very basic level it also explodes the notion that such things as the Civil Rights struggle only happened to other people and other places, and that some of us are somehow immune from the all too human tendency to make someone else the “other”.

The real satisfaction of the PLP's initiative is not simply that we have introduced teachers and students to the richness of historical events in the local area, but that the history has become something alive and relevant as a vehicle for understanding challenging issues we continue see in the present day.

Marie Carter is a Promised Land co-applicant, Dresden community historian and Migrant Workers Ministry Specialist with the Roman Catholic Church Diocese of London

Message from the Community Coordinator

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read this and previous editions of the Promised Land Chronicle. I have enjoyed preparing them, and I hope that they have helped you, the reader, to better appreciate and understand the ongoing work of the PLP.

We are into the final year of the Project! And 2012 will be an exciting one as we work to showcase all we have accomplished and complete the final pieces of our legacy.

In deed there are only 2 Chronicles left to be written.

There will be many announcements along the way, so stay tuned!