

IN MEMORY OF "UNCLE TOM"

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NO one would deny that the County of Kent is one of most historic interest in the annals of English history; but few people realize that Kent County, Ontario, may proudly claim the burying place of at least two famous men. The Tecumseh monument is situated in the Township of Zone, on Highway Number Two, and is as near as can be determined to the spot where the celebrated Indian Chief is buried. Near Dresden, in the same County, is a small cemetery: the Henson plot. One of the graves there is that of the Reverend Josiah Henson, who was not only the original "Tom" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but also the negro pioneer and patriot, and leading educationist of that period.

Henson, the slave, was an outstanding character, born of a slave mother, as was, in later years, the famous negro poet, Paul Lawrence Dunbar. His father had been killed by the blows of an overseer, when attempting to protect his wife against the advances of this same overseer. Industrious, and shrewd in business; kind and trustworthy; these traits, coupled with his unusual business ability, won him the confidence of his master, who entrusted him with such commissions as the marketing of produce in distant cities, and in later years won for him the position of overseer on his master's plantation.

Still embittered by the injustices of slavery, Henson became a fugitive. For many weeks he was as a hunted animal, the chase and cry covering at least four States, almost a thousand miles in distance. The company of his wife and four small children made the escape even more difficult. Hiding by day in the dense woods, travelling by night, assisted here and there by generous Quaker folk, he finally reached the country that to him and his family meant freedom and peace. No one could more fully comprehend the meaning of the word freedom, for at that time the *Fugitive Slave Act* gave slave-owners the right to pursue and recover their fleeing human property. Negroes were chased, caught and borne back to the plantations in deep humiliation. After some years of residence in his new and happy haven in Ontario, Henson (who had learned to write

and read at fifty years of age) wrote a modest account of his slavery days, and his daring escape.

At that period there was living in the New England States a woman of remarkable attainments: accomplished in the literary realm, earnest and devoted to the poor and afflicted, with a great depth of character for justice to all—Harriet Beecher Stowe. When twenty-one years of age she had married the Rev. Calvin Stowe, Professor of Biblical Literature in the Seminary of which her father, Dr. Lyman Beecher, was President. For years after her marriage, life flowed on with perfect serenity. Children were born, and she, as an exemplary mother, educated them with great care and understanding; yet found time to devote to her own literary compositions. Her articles and sketches, remarkable for their unusually high moral aims, found their way into various periodicals. (Her brother, Henry Ward Beecher chided her for having written so absorbing a tale, as it kept him up late at night reading it.) She, as well as her husband, and her father, entered into the cause of Negro Emancipation, and availed herself of every opportunity to assist these down-trodden people.

Having read Henson's story, Harriet Beecher Stowe decided she must meet him as soon as possible. While on her way to join her husband in Maine, about the year 1850, she stopped over in Boston, where she met, through her brother, the freedman negro preacher, Rev. Josiah Henson, heard him relate many amazing stories, and describe atrocious scenes of slavery days; and the Christian charity of the man who had suffered intolerable agonies made a lasting impression on her fine mind. Three years later, her famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin* appeared. The success of the book was extraordinary. It has been sold by millions, as well as translated into nearly all European languages. Both continents thrilled with horror and indignation at the wrongs and the sufferings of those helpless creatures, held in such iniquitous bondage. The exquisite pathos, the irresistible drollery, the masterly exhibition of human character, the suffering and Christian fortitude, all were combined in a tale that shall never die. Years passed. Henson, by unusual business gifts, acquired a small sum of money and considerable property at Dresden; but ever in his remembrance was the desire—the great and burning desire—to render aid to his brethren still held under the ruthless law of slavery. Thousands of negro fugitives crossed the boundary to Canada and

Freedom; and Henson is said to have personally helped more than a hundred slaves to find the land of peace.

Then began the titanic struggle: the North was justly aroused; the South, deeply embittered. Harriet Beecher Stowe had written her story from a profound and sincere sense of duty and conviction. Lincoln said her book caused the Civil War. At least it stirred the nation as nothing had done before the war itself. The world knows the history of that struggle—the heat and strife that have lasted even to the present day.

Henson dreamed his dreams, and those dreams were all for the betterment of his race. His deepest desire was to have an established settlement; a colony for those freed men, where they might learn to be an honest and industrious people—a respected race. Finally his dream materialized. Encouraged in his efforts by Sir John Colborne, and with the assistance of some Boston friends, he was able to purchase a portion of land in the township of Dawn, Kent County, and beside the old river Sydenham the great effort was commenced. The land, about a square mile of bush, had to be cleared; log cabins, saw mills, and grist mills erected; all these things of urgent need for these settlers. Kindness is wisdom, and Henson in his kindness to his people, and therein his wisdom, knew these poor oppressed men and women needed more than the virgin land, the log houses, and daily food. They, one and all, needed education: schooling for the adults as well as the children. Education, and education alone, he felt, would raise them above the woes and miseries they had known. He endeavored to fashion an Institute: the *Dawn Institute*, it was called, for the advancement of these people. Funds were low. Difficulties beset him at every turn. No help seemed forthcoming, and misunderstandings and misgivings hindered his progress, until his plan for education was a defeat. But Life had not defeated him! The passing years heaped recognition on him. A fine platform orator, he had become a welcome visitor, and a public demand. Churches were thronged to hear him speak, and his rare ability and melodious voice won him ever increasing honours.

Men of great influence in the United States became his friends. Visits to England won him the approval and admiration of cultured and learned men of the times. When last he crossed the Atlantic, a few years before his death, his effort was to raise funds for a meeting house, and a school, for the negro people. At Windsor Castle her Majesty, Queen Victoria and her Court received him. At the country seats of several

noblemen, and at the palace of the Archbishop of Canterbury, he was a welcomed guest. Nor must Henson the patriot be overlooked. When trouble threatened around the Detroit border, he raised a troop of colored refugees from the Dawn Settlement, who held the old Fort Malden until the arrival of the Regiment of British Regulars. Simplicity, pathos, accomplishment, remembrance: this is the story of the man known to the world as "Uncle Tom".

The winding River Sydenham slips on its way nearby the little plot where Josiah Henson lies in long sleep.

A slender flag pole, and near it a wooden slab, darkened and weather-beaten, tells

THE GRAVE OF JOSIAH HENSON,
the original TOM of
Uncle Tom's Cabin, by
Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Several graves are in this small cemetery, that of Peter Henson, presumably a son, and Elizabeth, his wife. And, in a corner, a small monument tells the story of a fellow slave and friend of Henson—

JOHN FORD

Born in Virginia, A.D. 1815,
Died in Chatham, Ont.
August 28, 1870
He belonged to John Kees,
while in slavery was named Nicholas Kees.
His mother's name was Sylvia Kees, and his father's
name Lewis Ford.

The monument which marks the grave of Josiah Henson stands about six feet high. On the stone is carved the Open Book, and a crest after the style of the Masonic order is on the front of the tomb, with the following inscription:

In memory of the REV. JOSIAH HENSON.

Died

May 5, 1883

Born

July 15, 1789,

aged 93 years, 10 mos., and 53 days.

There is a land of pure delight

Where saints immortal reign;

Infinite day excludes the night,

And pleasures banish pain.

I Know That My Redeemer Liveth

HENSON.