

## What Happened in the Queen's Bush?

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I am a white man. I have privilege.

I grew up being mostly unaware that I was white because I interacted with so few who were not. Yet, unknown to me, the historical tending of my childhood landscape was by diverse peoples.

Our home farm was on the east half lot 19, Concession 1, on the Wellington County side of highway 86, in Wallenstein. It is at the edge of the Haldimand tract and is now owned by our next-door neighbours. The Anishinaabe, Mississaugas of the Credit and Haudenosaunee had previously managed the land as a “bundle of responsibilities” with over 80% forest cover and forest garden systems. Now the Anishinaabe no longer pick berries nor hunt game under reciprocal relationships.

In university, my friend Bert, from Ghana, was kind enough in long discussions to help me understand his experience of being a black man. He gifted me with the question, “What would the world be like if Africa had access to guns and gun powder before Europe did?” I still don't know but I can surmise.

Black families started settling in the Queen's Bush, from Waterloo and Wellington Counties up to Owen Sound, in the 1830s as revealed by Brown-Kubisch in her book, “The Queen's Bush Settlement.” This was a history of fortitude and resilience. One black settler arrived in winter and lived in a hollowed-out log, without bedding, until he could build a shelter. They cut trees, planted crops and built cabins. In 1840, a school for black children was built next door to our farm. However, it was destroyed by fire in 1849.

In the 1850s Benjamin Drew, in his book, “The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves,” recorded his interviews with former slaves in American states who fled to Upper Canada. John and Eliza Little dramatically escaped slavery and did not have the luxury of a train, above or below ground. They walked, ran, swam, hid, starved and clawed their way to safety and eventually settled on the east side of our farm, in the 1830s. By the 1860s they were gone.

Geoff Martin (distantly related in Martin web) wrote an excellent piece, “Slave Days in the Queen’s Bush” <https://bit.ly/2Bo1yRa>. It should be required reading for all Ontario high school students. “Something happened here, and the answer is found at the point of a surveyor’s stake. Which is to say, the settlement got mapped. And colonial mapping was an extraordinarily—and intentionally—adept practice at turning supposed blank white space on paper into white settled space on land.” The former slaves, faced with demands to pay cash for deeds and property taxes, had little or no money nor property rights knowledge. The fruits of their labour were plucked and they had to leave.

My Mennonite ancestors arrived in Upper Canada with money and a knowledge of property rights. They were pacifists with historical experiences of fleeing war in Europe. Other white settlers also fled injustice and worked hard to establish their families in Ontario. Nevertheless, our privilege was not earned by the hard work of our ancestors, although they did work hard and persevered. Neither are whites morally superior. Our privilege is inherent to accepted assumptions, about how the world works for white people, after Africans were enslaved and indigenous peoples of Turtle Island were forced from their land. White people developed political and legal systems to serve our interests and these systems entrench a belligerent reluctance to share.

Our challenge now is to forgo blindness and to see our privilege for what it is. Our tasks are to learn more about the experiences of black and indigenous people and people of colour, and to engage in neighbourliness, one practical act at a time. We can also advocate for and vote for changes to our legal, political and economic systems to level the playing field for fair participation.

Ecologists like me attribute synergistic ecological benefits to diversity in soil and whole ecosystems. Similarly, Richard Florida, Rotman School, University of Toronto, attributes economic and social gains to the diversity of engaged people. Imagine the potential we could realize by letting go of privilege and embracing the power of diversity. The Queen’s Bush might be regenerated to a Diverse People’s Forest Garden.

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