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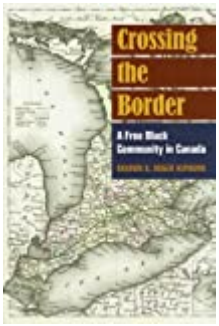

Sharon A. Roger Hepburn. *Crossing the Border: A Free Black Community in Canada.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007. x + 252 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03183-0.

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A Beacon of Light for Early Black Settlements

Crossing the Border by Sharon A. Roger Hepburn, professor and chair of the department of history at Radford University, chronicles the history of Buxton, one of the most successful all-black settlements in nineteenth-century Canada. As she traces the evolution of educational institutions, businesses, and political structures in Buxton in the mid-1800s, Hepburn focuses on the degree to which black settlers achieved autonomy and control over their lives in a hostile white environment.

Hepburn explains why Buxton succeeded when other settlements failed. She contends, for example, that Wilberforce, the first black community built in Canada named for the British reformer and abolitionist William Wilberforce, failed because of the hostility of whites in the area, few religious and social activities for its inhabitants, and the isolation of its rural setting. To a great extent, other communities failed for these reasons. Fergus M. Bordewich, author of *Bound for Caanan* (2005), disagrees with this explanation, contending that Buxton proved to be the most successful black settlement because it was highly paternalistic. Its founder, Reverend William King, a Presbyterian minister, obtained support from the Presbyterian Synod and then recruited local businessmen to oversee the settlement's finances. Settlers were required to buy their land and could rent it out to others, with the proviso that if they resold it within ten years they had to sell it to a black settler. Each settler was required to clear at least six acres immediately and build a house at least eighteen by twenty-four feet in area, set back at least thirty-three feet from the road and bordered by a picket fence and flowers. "King left nothing to chance," writes Bordewich.[1]

Shared responsibility was another unique characteristic of Buxton. Logging bees, chopping bees, and house raising bees were common events. The settlement warmly welcomed runaway slaves and protected them from bounty hunters. Solidarity and security, a strong sense of community, the opportunity to own land, a developing social structure, and the creation of new schools and churches gave members a measure of psychological freedom and economic independence from white control. Originally named the Elgin Settlement (after the gover-

nor general of Canada) by King, Buxton boasted many achievements in 1852, barely four years after its inception: a population of 300, 128 head of cattle, 15 horses, 30 sheep, and 250 hogs. By the late 1850s, with over 700 inhabitants, Buxton had a lumber mill, brickyard, blacksmith, hotel, general store, bank, and post office, as well as 3 schools and 4 churches. This community was integrated by whites in 1860.

The Buxton Mission School was the crown jewel of the settlement. Housed in a log cabin built in 1851 and staffed by teachers in training at Knox College in Toronto, one of the Presbyterian Church of Canada's major institutions of higher education, the school eventually achieved financial and academic stability and provided high quality education for students. Impressed by the reputation of this school, white and black parents in the area enrolled their children, producing a racially integrated place where Latin, geography, English grammar, and history were taught. According to Daniel G. Hill's *The Freedom Seekers*, a progress report issued two years after its founding documented the "students displaying a degree of acquirement which plainly demonstrated that the intellectual faculties of the colored race are by no means of an inferior order."[2] Follow-up studies of graduates of the Buxton Mission School documented their successes in later life. Alumni became ministers, teachers, lawyers, and physicians in Canada and the United States. Hepburn provides convincing evidence that these achievements challenge the theory that blacks of this era were powerless, passive victims of white oppression.

This book testifies to the significant, seminal role that Buxton played in African American and African Canadian history. The enduring power of this legacy will become readily apparent to readers of the book who attend Buxton's Annual Labor Day celebration, which celebrates the contributions of its ancestors. It is indeed unfortunate that those who publish books on Canadian history refrain from saying much about this important chapter in the history of Canada; the reasons are best left to the reader's speculations. What we do know is that Hepburn's book joins the ranks of the very best accounts of how thirty thousand runaway slaves fled Southern U.S. plantations in search of new lives in Canada, and once there, built viable settlements despite overwhelming odds against them. We are immensely grateful for this well-researched and well-written account.

Notes

[1]. Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan* (New York: Amistad Press, 2005), 39.

[2]. Daniel G. Hill, *The Freedom Seekers* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992), 87.

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