

Enoch Turner's Black Neighbours

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February 2019

Blackburn Family

What could a nineteenth-century white English businessman and a black freedom-seeker from the United States have in common? Quite a lot, as it turns out.

Seeking a Better Life

Enoch Turner left Staffordshire after the death of his wife, and at a time of economic decline in England. He arrived in the Town of York, Upper Canada, about 1830. Turner bought land on the south side of Palace (Front) Street, east of Parliament. Some of his new neighbours were people of African descent.

Turner decided on a venture he knew would succeed: he would build a brewery. His plans also included a house with a view of Lake Ontario, and cottages for his employees. Unlike most Toronto employers who saw the city's African Canadian population as merely a source of cheap labour, he hired a Black man as a skilled carpenter. This was Alfred Blackburn, who had escaped from slavery in Kentucky.

Alfred had been born in about 1806 near Maysville, Kentucky. His mother was an enslaved woman named Sibby. Four years later, Sibby had another little boy she called "Thornton." They were born on the Ohio River within sight of free soil. Alfred was sold away from her at age 11 to apprentice to a stone mason at the village of Washington, Kentucky, not far from his mother's home. Alfred Blackburn yearned for freedom, so in 1826 he crossed the Ohio River to Ripley, in the free state of Ohio. From there he made his way to Canada. Alfred settled in Toronto and went to work for Enoch Turner.

The Blackburn Riots

Alfred's little brother Thornton was only four years old when he was bought by an elderly man as a present for his own grandson. He, too, went to live in Washington. When he was 14, Thornton was sold again, this time to a place far away. His mother and brother had no idea what had become of him.

In 1833 Alfred heard about the Blackburn Riots in Detroit, probably from the itinerant Reverend Washington Christian, founder of Toronto's Baptist congregation. This race riot was sparked by the capture of fugitive slaves with the surname "Blackburn". Soon Alfred learned that this was his younger brother Thornton and wife Lucie, who had fled slavery in Kentucky two years earlier. Captured and sentenced to be returned to Kentucky bondage, their plight caused a violent protest, during which African American Detroiters helped the couple escape to Canada.

Michigan authorities demanded the Blackburns' extradition to stand trial in the United States. Thornton and Lucie were detained in Sandwich to wait for a decision by the Canadian court. It was the first time freedom-seekers were threatened with a return to American soil. Alfred and all black residents of Upper Canada will have been anxious: their own liberty was at stake. There was a collective sigh of relief when Lieutenant Governor John Colborne denied the request. He knew that if the Blackburns were tried in an American court, they would be re-enslaved, a punishment that did not exist in Canada no matter what the crime. His decision that extradition could only take place when the crime was punishable by a similar sentence in British colonial Canada remains the basis of Canadian extradition law today.

Entrepreneurs

The two Blackburn brothers were at last re-united when Lucie and Thornton moved to Toronto in 1834. They may have stayed with Alfred in the house he rented from Enoch Turner, but soon they had a home of their own on what today is Eastern Avenue. Thornton probably built it with Alfred's help: it was a "shotgun" house, a style they had grown up with in Kentucky. It was just a couple of blocks away from Alfred Blackburn's home and Enoch Turner's brewery. (At the corner of what is now Sackville Street and Eastern Avenue on the property of Inglenook School.)

Thornton Blackburn found work as a waiter at Osgoode Hall. He heard about a new service being offered in Montreal: the cab. It was a great business opportunity, so in 1837 he and Lucie had one of the new-fangled carriages constructed. It was painted an eye-catching red with yellow trim, and they named it "The City." It was the first cab ever seen in Canada west of Montreal.

Lucie and Thornton's business was very successful. Like Enoch Turner, they invested in real estate, providing affordable rental properties for other refugees from bondage in various parts of Toronto.

Rebellion!

For years William Lyon Mackenzie and other community leaders had been lobbying for reform. There was a disconnect between the urban-dwelling colonial aristocracy and the needs of the majority of the province who lived on farms or were clearing bush. In December 1837 rural discontent turned to action and the Mackenzie Rebellion broke out.

Men wanting to defend their city and families gathered at Market Square to form militia groups and receive firearms. In the forefront were black Torontonians, afraid that an overthrow of the British colonial government would endanger their freedom.

Seventy rebels made their way through the woods east of the town to destroy the bridge that crossed the Don River, connecting the Kingston Road to King Street. This was not far from

the Blackburns' home. As the rebels were setting fire to the bridge, they were confronted by a black man with a musket. They beat a hasty retreat. This man was either Alfred or Thornton Blackburn, and in later years Thornton proudly showed off the bullet hole in his dining room wall which he said had been put there by one of Mackenzie's rebels. The brothers joined the 1st York Militia to protect the country they had risked so much to reach.

Later that same year, Alfred and Thornton pooled their savings and Thornton took the Underground Railroad in reverse. He went back to Kentucky to rescue their mother, Sibby, and she came to Toronto to live with Alfred.

Benefactors

In 1842, a meeting was called to establish an Anglican church in the east end of Toronto. Enoch Turner was one of the founding members of what became Little Trinity Church. Both he and Lucie Blackburn were early subscribers to the building fund.

Enoch Turner funded the building of a free school to serve children of the poor living in the neighbourhood. It was built on Trinity Street, beside the church. Alfred Blackburn probably helped him build the school, and then moved to a house on what today is Cherry Street, living with his mother near the home of his brother and sister-in-law.

At this point Alfred may have gone to work for the Gooderham & Worts distilleries, south of his home, for the families were strong supporters of Little Trinity Church, and knew the Blackburn family well. Alfred had been trained in stone masonry in Kentucky, so perhaps he helped build the stone distillery building that opened in 1861 at the Gooderham & Worts site, now the Distillery District.

With first-hand experience of the horrors of slavery, the Blackburns were anti-slavery activists. Thornton attended the internationally important *North American Convention of Colored Freemen*, held in the new St. Lawrence Hall in 1851. The convention concluded that the "British Government is the most favorable in the civilized world to the people of color, and is thereby entitled to our entire confidence."

Thornton was appointed the Vice-President of the Canadian Mill and Mercantile Association, which established mills and a store in the Elgin Settlement in Buxton, near Chatham, Canada West. This settlement had been established as a community where freedom-seekers could achieve their economic as well as personal independence. The Blackburns and other business leaders in the Black community provided work opportunities for the newcomers.

Kindred Spirits

In fact, Enoch Turner and the Blackburn brothers had much in common. The three men came to Canada for a better life; they put the skills they had to good use, and became successful in their new home; Thornton Blackburn and Enoch Turner gave back to their

community as philanthropists, while Alfred contributed his knowledge and ability to the building of the city. All three men made Toronto a better place to live.

Find out more about the Blackburn family:

Smardz Frost, Karolyn, *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: a Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad*. Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2007.

Winner of the 2007 Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction.