

SLAVES, STATUES & STREET SIGNS

Naming the Legacy of Slavery

As statues of those tainted by slavery tumble down across England and the United States, and the Municipality of the Township of Russell, Ontario, casts about for a namesake to replace the lamentable Peter Russell, might Perth contemplate how far the historic stain of human bondage extends? Could connections to slavery sully our streets and landmarks as well?

Who qualifies for censure as a perpetrator of slavery? Clearly those who personally or corporately owned and profited from slaves are condemned? But what of those who may not have owned slaves themselves, but still aided and abetted the cursed institution? Are they equally guilty? Perhaps even a society at large, that for centuries accepted and benefited from slavery, bears the same burden of guilt as the whip-in-hand slave master? Where does culpability begin and end?



Peter Russell (1733-1808)

Peter Russell (1733-1808) was a one-time junior officer in the British Army¹, with a gambling habit that drove him into bankruptcy, who so wormed his way into the good graces of Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe (1752-1806) that he was appointed Receiver General and then Administrator of Upper Canada while Simcoe was absent on leave in 1796-1799; during which time Russell took the opportunity to appoint himself a judge on the Court of King's Bench (even though he had no legal training whatever). All of that might be enough for the Ontario village, Township and County² bearing his name to seek out a new 'Russell'³ as patron, but it is Peter Russell's 'ownership' of four slaves, a woman and her three children⁴, that led to the Township Council's 3-to-2 vote in favour of casting him onto the dung heap of history.

Peter Russell was, of course, a man of his time, in an age when the British Empire was reaching the peak of its economic and military power on the back of a massive slave labor force.⁵ Enforcing the subjugation of hundreds of thousands of human beings demanded the constant threat and frequent application of deadly force, a level of coercion far beyond the means of the comparative handful of planters, merchants and corporate shareholders who actually 'owned' the slaves. In the 'sugar islands' of the West Indies that meant the British Army.

¹ Russell served in the 14th, 64th and 94th Regiments of Foot during the Seven Years War and as Secretary to General Sir Henry Clinton during the American Revolutionary War.

² The Police Village of Russell, the Township of Russell and the United Counties of Prescott and Russell.

³ The municipality is looking for someone with the name Russell (first, last, or middle) whom they might 'adopt' in place of Peter Russell, as actually changing the name of the community would be almost impossible.

⁴ Peggy and her children, Amy, Jupiter, and Milly. Peggy's husband and the father of her children, Pompadour, was a free Black man in Russell's employ. Slavery was still legal in Upper Canada at the time.

⁵ In addition to Russell, nine members of the Upper Canada Legislative Council, some of whom were also Executive Councillors, were slave owners or members of slave-owning families and four of the original sixteen members of the Legislative Assembly were slave owners.

While military garrisons served to defend the islands against attack from Britain's perennial enemies France and Spain, the troops were more often called upon to defend slave owners against revolt by their bondsmen. They enforced the institution of slavery, crushed any spark of resistance, and ensured the men and women in bondage remained 'in their place'.

Among the soldiers who ensured that the slave masters of Barbados, Bermuda, British Honduras, Jamaica, St. Vincent, and Tobago slept soundly in their beds were at least eight of the men honored today at the street corners of Perth.

Provost Street

Sir George Prevost (1767-1816), for whom Provost⁶ Street is named, commanded the St. Vincent garrison as Lieutenant Colonel of the 60th Foot in 1794-1795. Guarding against any attempt by St. Vincent's slaves to shed their chains was a constant; there had been a slave revolt on St. Vincent in 1769-1773⁷ and, shortly after Prevost left the island, there was another in 1795-1796⁸.



Francis Gore
(1769-1852)



Sir George Prevost
(1767-1816)



Sir Gordon Drummond
(1772-1854)



Sir Isaac Brock
(1769-1812)

Gore Street

From 1804 through 1806 Francis Gore (1769-1852), a retired Army Major, for whom Gore Street is named, served as Lieutenant Governor of Bermuda. The island was not home to the large plantations found elsewhere in the West Indies, but about 6,000 slaves still did most of the vital work as sailors, carpenters, coopers, blacksmiths, masons, and shipwrights. As six slave revolts over the previous 150 years⁹ demonstrated, a significant responsibility of Governor Gore and his staff, backed by the local garrison, was the prevention of similar rebellions.

⁶ On Perth street signs and maps the name is spelled 'Provost', a mis-spelling of "Prevost".

⁷ First Carib War.

⁸ Second Carib War.

⁹ Slave revolts were recorded in 1656, 1661, 1673, 1681, 1682 and 1761.

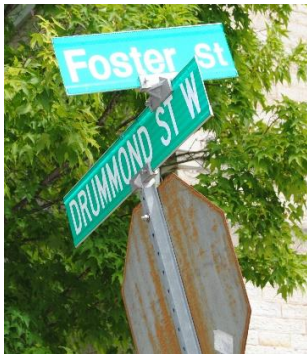
Halton Street

During the years Francis Gore served as Governor of Bermuda, he was supported by his Principal Secretary, and head of his administrative staff, retired Army Major William Matthew Halton (1769-1821), for whom Halton Street is named.

Drummond Street, Drummond Township

Suppressing any attempt to achieve freedom on the part of Jamaica's slaves demanded frequent resort to military force. There were at least 20 slave rebellions¹⁰ between 1655, when Britain seized the island from Spain, and emancipation in 1833.

Sir Gordon Drummond (1772-1854), for whom Drummond Street and Drummond Township are named, served seven months garrison duty in Jamaica in 1789, as an Ensign of the 1st (Royal Scots) Regiment of Foot, and then returned to the island, 1806-1808, as Colonel of the 8th Foot. During Drummond's second tour of duty troops suppressed a rebellion plot in Saint George's Parish in 1806 and in 1808 put down another plot in Kingston and a mutiny among slave-soldiers of the 2nd West India Regiment¹¹.



*Sir Frederick Philipse
Robinson (1763-1852)*



*Sir Francis Cockburn
(1780-1868)*



Foster Street

At the time of the 1806 and 1808 Jamaican slave revolts, Colonel Colley Lyons Lucas Foster (1778-1813), who gave his name to Foster Street, was playing his part as aide-de-camp and military secretary to the colony's Lieutenant Governor Sir Eyre Coote and then secretary to the island's Governor, William Montagu. Foster served on Jamaica from 1804-1811.

¹⁰ There were uprising in Jamaica in 1655-1670, 1673, 1678, 1685, 1690, 1730-1740, 1742, 1745, 1760, 1765, 1766, 1791-1792, 1795-1796, 1806, 1808, 1815, 1819, 1823-1824, 1828 and 1831-1832.

¹¹ Under terms of the revised Mutiny Act of 1807, slaves serving in the West India Regiments were emancipated, but a mutiny resulted when they found they were still bound to the terms of their Army service, usually for 20 years.

Brock Street

As a Captain in the 49th Foot in Barbados in 1791-1792, Sir Isaac Brock (1769-1812), for whom Brock Street is named, ensured no recurrence of the seven¹² slave revolts that had swept that island in the late 17th century; a real possibility, as demonstrated by an eighth rebellion in 1816 after the 49th Regiment had been transferred to Jamaica and then Canada.

Brock served on Jamaica in 1792-1793 ensuring that island's white planter and merchant class were safe from the retribution of their slaves.



West Indian Sugar Plantation

Robinson Street

Robinson Street is named for Sir Frederick Philipse Robinson (1763-1852), the descendant of a slave owning family from Middlesex County, Virginia,¹³ who was Governor and Commander-in-chief of the island of Tobago from 1816 through 1828, guarding against a repeat of five¹⁴ slave uprisings that had shaken the island over the previous 50 years.

¹² There were slave revolts on Barbados in 1649, 1675, 1683, 1686, 1692, 1701.

¹³ Great-grandson of Christopher Robinson (1645-1683) of Hewick Plantation, Middlesex County, Virginia; member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, who bequeathed at least 73 slaves to his children.

¹⁴ There were Tobago revolts in 1770, 1771, 1774, 1801 and 1807.

Cockburn Street, Cockburn Island and Cockburn Creek

Cockburn Street, Cockburn Island and Cockburn Creek are all named for Sir Francis Cockburn (1780-1868) who served as Superintendent of the colony of British Honduras¹⁵ from 1830 through 1837¹⁶ at a time when nearly three quarters of the colony's total population were enslaved. Slavery in British Honduras was associated with the extraction of timber rather than plantations so, with freedom more easily attainable by slipping away into the bush, slave revolts were less common than on the sugar islands. Nevertheless, Cockburn had to maintain a firm hand as there had been at least four uprisings¹⁷ in the colony in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.¹⁸



Emulating the sugar planters, the British Army itself engaged in slave ownership. Between 1795 and 1807 the Army filled the ranks of eight all-Black regiments by purchasing 13,400 slaves from West Indian plantations and arriving slave ships. In circumstances where Yellow Fever killed White troops by the thousands, Black troops were found to be of hardier constitution.¹⁹

Among those names on Perth's street signs, only Drummond had any direct experience of the slave regiments and, unlike Peter Russell, none of them seem to have ever owned a slave personally. They did, however, enjoy the services of slaves owned by others²⁰; slaves assigned to tasks around the garrison, to serve in the officers' mess and, in many cases, to work in their homes.

¹⁵ Now Belize.

¹⁶ While Cockburn was Superintendent, Britain abolished slavery in 1833.

¹⁷ There were revolts in British Honduras in 1765, 1768, 1773, 1820. It is noteworthy that Cockburn presided over the five year post-slavery 'apprenticeship' period between the 1833 passing of the act to abolish slavery throughout the British empire and final emancipation in 1838.

¹⁸ In the post slavery period Cockburn was Governor of the Bahamas, 1838-1843.

¹⁹ Between 1799 and 1802 disease killed more than 6,000 White troops in the West Indies, but only 1,600 Black troops died of the same cause.

²⁰ Supplied by labor contractors to the British Army.

More importantly, their position as British Army officers serving in the West Indies placed them squarely in roles just as essential to keeping men, women, and children in lifetime bondage as that of the plantation overseer with his whipping post. Without their participation and that of the troops they commanded, slavery on the West Indian plantations could never have been sustained. Except by the application of deadly force, how could less than 50,000 whites manage to keep nearly ten times their number of Blacks enslaved?²¹

<u>Island</u>	<u>Slave</u>	<u>Freedmen</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Total</u>
Bahamas	9,991	1,204	3,306	14,500
Barbados	74,990	2,512	15,538	93,040
Bermuda	No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data
British Honduras	2,899	1,000	201	4,100
Jamaica	346,399	29,911	27,890	404,200
St. Vincent	27,402	1,313	1,134	29,850
Tobago	<u>1,993</u>	<u>804</u>	<u>804</u>	<u>19,600</u>
Total	479,674	36,744	48,872	565,290

Yet, all men and the lives they live are multidimensional.

As Governor General and commander of British forces in North America 1811-1815, Sir George Prevost directed the successful defence of the Canadas during the War of 1812. In 1814, Isaac Brock and his 49th Foot turned back the American attack at Queenston Heights and Gordon Drummond's little army fought U.S. forces to a standstill at Lundy's Lane. Colley Lyons Lucas Foster²² fought at the Siege of Fort Erie and was twice mentioned in dispatches for his part in the War of 1812. Without these men we might have found ourselves living under the regime of men like Donald Trump.

Francis Gore may have been *"the most incompetent and disliked Lieutenant Governor in the history of Upper Canada"*²³ but his administration did establish a system of common and grammar schools, helped ready the colony to face American invasion in 1812-1814, and implemented the colony's first program of public road construction. Gore's secretary²⁴, William Halton, was an advocate for the welfare of veterans of the War of 1812 and their families, and for the settlement of United Empire Loyalists in Upper Canada.²⁵

²¹ Data for 1810 from *Memory Of the World Register: Registry of Slaves of the British Caribbean 1817-1834* - UNESCO (2011)

²² Still Drummond's Military Secretary.

²³ Historian Robert MacIntosh in his book *Earliest Toronto* (2006).

²⁴ Halton came to Upper Canada from Bermuda with Gore.

²⁵ William Halton was, however, pretty much a cypher. Although a County and numerous physical features across southwestern Ontario were named for him, no statues were raised in his honour, no portrait of him was ever made, he died without issue, and his name has even been eroded from his headstone in England.

Before his posting to British Honduras Francis Cockburn played a leading role in creating new lives for thousands of immigrants escaping bitter poverty in Britain. As the British Army's Deputy Quartermaster-General in the Canadas he established and provisioned the military settlements at Perth, Richmond, Lanark, the Bay of Quinte, Glengarry County and Rivière Saint-François.

Even Russell Township's (former) namesake, Peter Russell, was not entirely without merit. During his regime in Upper Canada, he was an outspoken supporter of First Nations' rights when they had issues with encroaching white settlers, and he attempted to reform the system of land grants in order to curtail rampant speculation, nepotism, and corruption.

Therein lies the dilemma of slaves, statues, and street names.

While their accomplishments and contributions to Canada's early history placed their names on Perth's street signs, does reconsideration of their part in perpetrating slavery dictate their names should now be replaced - as in the case of Peter Russell?

Or should we recognize this as a 'teachable moment', through which we may contemplate and acknowledge the complexity of so-called 'great men' and the general untidiness of history.

- *Ron W. Shaw (2020)*