

Plaque Build-up: Commemorating the Buxton Settlement, 1950-2000

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Introduction

After a brief visit to the small Southern Ontario hamlets of North and South Buxton, one is immediately struck by the serenity and isolation of this region. Vast fields dotted by modest dwellings dominate the landscape. This thinly populated countryside is the second largest national historic site in Canada.

Embedded in the landscape are several commemorative plaques. In South Buxton, immediately in front of St. Andrew's Church, there stands a short cairn with a small bronze plaque that reads, "1949, In memory of Rev. Wm. King who founded Buxton Settlement, 1849, and built St. Andrew's Church, 1859." A few steps away from this cairn, stands a blue plaque that also commemorates the Buxton settlement. It was placed there in 1965. In North Buxton, there is a museum and a set of three plaques that designate the Buxton Settlement as a national historic site. Why are there so many commemorations to a single place and a single moment in history?

If we take a closer look at how these separate acts of commemoration came to be – the cairn and the various plaques – we can begin to unravel this complex set of events and multiple layers of memory. Each plaque was written and placed with particular interests and concerns in mind. Each of these plaques tells us more about the time and the people who placed them there than about the founding of the settlement itself. The placement of a monument or plaque is a political act expressing various meanings and serving particular interests. Therefore, it is worthwhile exploring the meanings of the many commemorations of Buxton.

This article argues that successive commemorative acts associated with the Buxton Settlement have been integral to the process of local, regional and Canadian national identity formation. The commemorative plaques at the Buxton Settlement are particularly important in that they demonstrate how the meaning of the site has shifted with each commemoration and how the site has taken on greater significance as the Ontarian regional and Canadian national narratives have undergone change. The article begins by examining how and why the plaques in South Buxton were constructed over the period from 1950 to 1965, demonstrating the intimate connection between their construction and the formation of local and regional identities. It then explores the most recent set of plaques that designate Buxton as a national historic site, highlighting the way in which elements of Buxton's past that fit into the greater collective narrative of plurality and tolerance have been emphasized while others that problematize it have been "forgotten".

The Plaques in South Buxton

On May 7, 1950, a large crowd gathered in front of St. Andrew's Church in South Buxton to witness the unveiling of the monument to Reverend William King, founder of the Buxton Settlement.¹ King was a Presbyterian minister who had emigrated from Ireland to Ohio with his family in the early nineteenth century. He soon left his family and headed south to Louisiana to teach. King had been greatly influenced by the slavery debates in Britain and considered himself to be opposed to the institution of slavery. However, he soon found himself intimately entangled in the very system of slavery that he believed to be so repulsive.² King purchased his first slave to work as a servant at his school. He then inherited four more when he married. King's personal holdings of slaves were said to have greatly troubled him.³ After

¹ *The Windsor Daily Star*, 8 May 1950, 12.

² Victor Ullman, *Look to the North Star: A Life of William King* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 90.

³ Ullman describes how King felt pressure to emancipate his slaves after returning to Scotland to become a minister where he had been personally confronted by well-known black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. See *ibid.*, 40. Sharon A. Roger is highly critical of King's stated disdain for slavery and discusses at length in the third chapter of her dissertation evidence to suggest that King could have avoided slavery like his brother had and that he was eventually

inheriting even more slaves from his late father-in-law, King had become a slaveholder and plantation owner with fourteen slaves. By the 1840s, his conscience could no longer bear the burden of chattel bondage. Consequently, King set out to find land in Canada where he could settle and free his slaves. His hope was that by giving the formerly-enslaved blacks their own land to homestead, he would free them from the “slavery of ignorance”⁴ and give them the opportunity to become temperate, modest, hard-working individuals. This was the vision for what would become the Elgin (later called Buxton) Settlement. After establishing a stock holding settlement association with the help of Governor General Lord Elgin, King purchased 4,300 acres of land. Later, he purchased an additional 4,700 acres on the shore of Lake Erie, near the town of Chatham, in what would later be known as Ontario.

The cairn that was unveiled in 1950 was a monument to King’s achievement of freeing fifteen of his own slaves and establishing a refugee settlement for fugitive slaves and free black people from the north escaping the 1853 Fugitive Slave Act. The plaque on the cairn also commemorates the building of St. Andrew’s Church, which had been King’s own church and mission of the Presbyterian Synod, called the Buxton Mission. The monument was clearly a celebration of both the founding of the settlement and its religious mission.⁵

The linkage made between the Buxton Settlement and the Presbyterian mission is not surprising. One of the major supporters of and participants in the erection of the monument was the pastor of St. Andrew’s Church, Reverend W. Smith. Reverend King, who had been closely connected to the history of the Buxton Settlement, was also integral to the founding of the mission. Moreover, the very principles upon which he founded the settlement were related to this church, even though blacks of all denominations were welcomed. King’s insistence on temperance and a good work ethic were prominent aspects of life in Buxton during the time of the Elgin Association. This monument was a celebration of both the settlement and its ties to the first church in Buxton.

Many members of the community gathered to watch the unveiling of the monument. The cairn was a representation of the collective identity of this small community. As David Lowenthal has stated, “in celebrating symbols of their histories, societies in fact worship themselves.”⁶ The identity of this community was closely associated with the church. Local residents, rather than outsiders, dominated the audience and speakers. One of the speakers was Catherine Straith, the only living relative of Reverend King at the time. She assured the audience that the message of this day was *tolerance*. The identity of this community was also somewhat tied to that of the British Empire, as the cairn had been covered by a large Union Jack flag prior to its unveiling. Even though this commemoration incorporated images of imperial authority and focused on the settlement’s white founder, the local black community nonetheless still participated in this very local and intimate act of commemoration by attending the ceremony.

The commemoration of the Buxton Settlement was transformed in 1965 when the Archeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario placed a commemorative plaque at the same site as the cairn (see appendix B). This suggested that this site had become recognized as having regional significance for the province of Ontario. A period of fifteen years had passed between the erection of the King monument and the placement of the regional plaque. The placement of this plaque occurred at a time when blacks in the US were embroiled in a struggle for civil rights, resisting the systematic segregation and oppression of blacks in the Deep South.

The commemoration of the Buxton Settlement in 1965 was a regional celebration of the perceived tolerance of British North America and Canada West in the nineteenth century. The text of the plaque recognizes King as the founder of the settlement, but also makes reference to the opening of the Buxton

pressured by members of his church to finally emancipate his slaves if he wanted to continue to be a minister, see Sharon A. Roger, “Slaves No More: A Study of the Buxton Settlement, Upper Canada, 1849-1861,” unpublished dissertation.

⁴ Ullman, *Look to the North Star*, 90.

⁵ The Presbyterian Church in Ontario, along with both white and some black abolitionists played a key role in the founding and development of the Elgin Settlement through the Elgin Association.

⁶ David Lowenthal, “Identity, Heritage, and History,” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 46.

post office and gives subsequent mention to the naming of that post office after the British abolitionist, or as the plaque reads, “British Emancipator”, Thomas Fowell Buxton.⁷ The post office itself was named after the Buxton Mission, which had its name chosen by King. By mentioning the post office instead of the mission, the plaque dissociates itself from the Presbyterian Church in a way that the cairn does not. The significance of this site lies not in its association with the church, but its symbolic value representing freedom under the British crown. Timing further emphasizes this point: the 1965 plaque was unveiled on 1 August, coinciding with the 132nd anniversary of the 1833 British Emancipation Act.⁸

This celebration of freedom under the British flag in the nineteenth century, while stressing what seemed to be the historical legacy of Ontarians, was also meant to be juxtaposed with the US. The keynote speaker at the unveiling of the plaque was the MPP for Kent West, W. Darcy McKeough. In his speech, McKeough noted that while slavery had been abolished in the British Empire in 1833, it continued and thrived in the US for another thirty-two years. He also tied the commemoration of the Buxton Settlement to the civil rights movement that was going on at that time and reminded the audience that “we should always bear in mind that the way of life we enjoy today is due in no small measure to our ancestors who fought the battle before us, and those among us who continue to fight today.”⁹

McKeough inverted this celebration of freedom in Canada by mentioning that more needed to be changed in Ontario for the betterment of African Canadians. The meanings of this highly symbolic act were mixed between the statement on the plaque written by the Archeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario and the speech by McKeough to about 130 local residents of Buxton. John R. Gillis notes that in any act of commemoration, the “results may appear consensual when they are in fact the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and in some instances, annihilation.”¹⁰ McKeough resisted the emphasis on freedom under the British flag and used the commemoration of Buxton to ensure that contemporary concerns of African Canadians were addressed.

Although primarily local members of the community attended the placing of the plaque at St. Andrew’s Church in 1965, it represented an important broadening of the symbolic significance of Buxton. The recognition of the Buxton Settlement by this regional historic sites board seems to have reflected a change in the understanding of the regional collective identity of Ontarians and of Canadians more broadly. J.M.S. Careless was the board member who was present at the unveiling of the plaque and who had taken part in the decision to commemorate this site. He was a prominent Canadian historian who taught at the University of Toronto. Careless would two years later present his paper “‘Limited Identities’ in Canada,” to the American Historical Association.¹¹ His argument was that the Canadian population had a variety of “limited identities” based on region, culture and class that went far back into the history of the country. Careless was beginning to understand Canadian identity to be less unitary and that “the distinctive nature of much of Canadian experience has produced a continent-wide entity identifiable in its very pluralism, constraints and compromises.”¹² The recognition of the Buxton Settlement could be understood as an extension of this argument – that this small community represented one such “limited identity” in the spectrum of Canadian experience. Prior to this shift in the understanding of Canadian identity, the significance of the Buxton Settlement was only recognized as part of the local identity of Buxtonites themselves. The history of the settlement had not changed, but attitudes toward Canadian identity had changed.

The Plaques in North Buxton

⁷ Thomas Buxton and William Wilberforce were leaders in the movement that led to the passing of the British Emancipation Act in 1833. Both the Buxton Settlement and the Wilberforce Settlement took their names from these British abolitionists.

⁸ *The Windsor Daily Star*, 3 August 1965, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ John R. Gillis, “Memory and Identity: The History of Relationship” in *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*, ed. John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.

¹¹ J.M.S. Careless, “‘Limited Identities’ in Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 1, no. 1 (1969): 1-10.

¹² *Ibid.*

So far we have examined two acts of commemoration, the first of a very local nature and the second of a regional nature. Before we take a look at the designation of Buxton as a national historic site we must first understand how the Buxton Museum was built and where it fits into the spectrum of commemoration at this site. The construction of the museum is itself a multi-layered commemorative act, because of its association with the 1967 centennial celebration of Confederation.

Beginning in 1964, a group of community members from North Buxton went to the Raleigh Town Council to propose that part of the centennial grant money from the federal government go towards the construction and establishment of a museum in North Buxton. The museum would serve as a repository of memory for the Buxton Settlement containing original documents, photographs and artifacts. It would also serve an educative function by telling the community's story to those who visited the site. The community would work to preserve and communicate its own history through this museum and thus preserve its collective memory.

Even though this project was funded through a centennial grant and opened in 1967 to coincide with the centennial celebration, the construction of the museum in North Buxton was very much a local act of commemoration. However, the memory of the Buxton Settlement through this museum was used to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Confederation as well. The initiative for this project came from local Buxton residents who sought to preserve the memory of their ancestors who had settled on the land over a century before. In fact, the community in North Buxton had raised enough money itself to purchase the land for the museum before the centennial grant was even approved.¹³ Although the official opening of the museum was scheduled to occur in 1967, to commemorate Confederation, it was held on Labour Day in September of that year to coincide with the "Homecoming" celebration, which had been celebrated in Buxton since 1924.

The plaque in front of the museum officially commemorates the Confederation of Canada in 1867 (see appendix C), but the opening itself celebrated the founding of the settlement rather than the forging of the nation. The day of revelry was a tradition in Buxton in which former community members and their families returned to celebrate Labour Day. People from across the province and the US attended this event. The "Homecoming" for that year was described as having the largest attendance to-date.¹⁴ Thousands of people attended the day of celebration, which included a parade, speeches, a softball game, a beauty contest and a dance. The newspaper noted "hundreds of residents and visitors from the US lined North Buxton's main street to watch the hour long parade."¹⁵ The floats at the parade featured the centennial symbol and other symbols of Canadian national identity, such as the maple leaf, that no longer stressed freedom under the British flag.¹⁶ The opening of the museum blended the local celebration of the "Homecoming" with the national celebration of the centennial and the preservation of the memory of Buxton.

This celebration of Buxton and of Canada drew significant attention from many different groups, but the meaning of the event varied among individuals who attended. Victor Ullman, the man who would publish a biography of Reverend King two years later, attended the celebrations with over 100 black people from Mississippi that were attempting to establish their own block settlement called "Freedom City". Buxton was to be their inspiration and model. Ullman and his companions hoped to utilize the memory of Buxton to serve their present day agenda. However, Ullman was not alone in his desire to use the memory of Buxton. Stanley Grizzle of the Toronto Negro Business and Professional Men's Association spoke at the celebrations and used the event to call upon the government of Canada to do more to help the impoverished people of Africa and Asia. The agendas of Ullman and Grizzle were certainly different, but both men attempted to use the memory of the Buxton Settlement to further their contemporary interests.

The construction of the museum marks a significant geographic shift in the commemorative landscape of Buxton. The previous two commemorative acts were located in what was the centre of the original

¹³ A.C. Robbins, *Legacy to Buxton* (North Buxton: A.C. Robbins, 1983), 187.

¹⁴ *The Windsor Daily Star*, 5 September 1967, 7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *The Windsor Daily Star*, 2 September 1967, 5A.

settlement in South Buxton, but the museum was located in North Buxton. This may have been because the land available for the museum just happened to be in North Buxton. However, one must also recognize that North Buxton was the centre of the black community in the area and the residence of most of the descendants of the original settlers. After the end of the US Civil War, many Buxton settlers returned to the to be reunited with friends and family. When the Elgin Association officially closed in 1873, the land in South Buxton was sold to whites that had moved into the community. Most of the black settlers who remained in Buxton moved north nearer to the new school and churches. The establishment of the museum in North Buxton reflects the contemporary demographics of the community. Rather than locating the museum in South Buxton at the site of the original settlement, the museum is located closer to the descendant families.

This spatial relocation of the memory of the Buxton Settlement continued after the museum was built, when the Buxton Settlement was designated a national historic site by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in 2000. The board placed a three-plaque series next to the museum to commemorate the Buxton Settlement (see appendix D). The tone of the first plaque, which describes the settlement, places less emphasis on Reverend King and the Elgin Association and more emphasis on the settlers and the contribution they made to the founding of the community. This plaque also clearly places the Buxton Settlement within the narrative of “the epic experience of the Underground Railroad”. It is also notable that the size of the settlement seems to have been boosted by 4,700 acres.¹⁷ Finally, the settlers are characterized as *immigrants* for the first time. These were some significant changes in the commemoration of the Buxton Settlement that occurred when national historic significance was bestowed upon the area.

Contemporary circumstances and the interests of individuals and groups had a profound impact on the shape of the many commemorations of the Buxton Settlement. As Peter Carrier has argued the “commemorative meaning derives from elements of both the original event and the new context within which the commemorative ‘event’ takes place.”¹⁸ This is an important point to make, because although the different groups and individuals who were involved at the different stages of commemoration in Buxton attempted to use the memory of the settlement for particular reasons, their agendas were limited by the history of the settlement itself. While the plaques can shift and change in emphasis, omit and include certain parts of the story, they cannot entirely manufacture the memory of the Buxton Settlement. The relationship between memory and history is not entirely subjective. Even though certain groups may be able to choose the words that go on a plaque, the meaning of a commemorative act can differ greatly depending upon who is reading that plaque and using that memory. The circumstances of the most recent commemorative event in Buxton understand the settlement to be a site of national importance.

Going National

Until 1998, the commemoration of the Buxton Settlement had not gone beyond the boundaries of the province in its symbolic significance, perhaps with the exception of the centennial celebrations in 1967 – or had it? The third plaque in the HSMBC series features an image of the “Freedom Bell”, which had been donated to Reverend King and the settlers, by a group of blacks in Pittsburgh, commemorating their achievement in founding the Buxton Settlement. This was an international commemoration of the Buxton Settlement, but only those who were there arrived and before it was placed in the steeple of St. Andrew’s Church knew of it.¹⁹ The bell is not visible from outside the church. One must be personally let into the steeple to view it; thus the only resonance of this commemorative bell is the sound it makes when rung.

Despite the hidden nature of the “Freedom Bell”, which was only revealed in the most recent commemorative plaque, it suggests that the Buxton Settlement had international significance. In fact,

¹⁷ The plaque in South Buxton states that King had purchased 4,300 acres and the plaque in North Buxton states that he arrived at 9,000 acres. The Elgin Association had originally purchased 4,300 acres then purchased the rest of the total 9,000 acres after the first settlers arrived.

¹⁸ Peter Carrier, “Historical Traces of the Present: The Uses of Commemoration,” *Historical Reflections* 22, no. 2 (1996): 435.

¹⁹ According to Roger’s dissertation, King had originally wanted to send the bell back, because he first saw it as a donation and that the settlers had to remain independent, but after discussion with some of the settlers they decided to keep the bell for the church as a gift.

according to Sharon A. Roger, the settlement had received great international attention from various abolition groups in both the US and Britain.²⁰ Buxton was considered so successful a model of black settlement that Samuel Gridley Howe, from the American Freeman's Bureau came to inspect the site in 1864 in order to gain guidance on how to settle free blacks after emancipation. However, the notoriety and prominence of the Buxton Settlement waned after 1873 and received little national attention in Canada.

The historiography of the Buxton Settlement (and African Canadian historiography generally) failed to attract a great deal of interest amongst academic historians until recently.²¹ Owen Thomas has argued that the study of blacks in Canada has been marginalized and has not figured prominently in the historiography of Canada. Thomas suggests that what has been written about blacks in Canada has been limited to the refugee period:

The reason for this focus is simple. Since most of the refugees came to Canada to escape the poisoned atmosphere of racism and violence in the United States, the study of this period allowed for a very favourable comparison of Canadian society and the "Queen's justice" with that south of the border.²²

The short article in the *Journal of Negro History* by Fred Landon would fall into this category of comparing the tolerance of Canadian society with that of American slave society.²³ Landon's article was the first to be written about the Buxton Settlement from a historical perspective in 1918. Local residents and descendants of the original settler families have written most of the historiography of the settlement, with the exception of a few writers.²⁴ Most of the early writing tended to focus on the achievements of King rather than the settlers. Until A.C. Robbins' book, *Legacy to Buxton*, no one had written about the achievements of the community after 1873.

Robbins argues that the memory of the Buxton Settlement was silenced by the community itself in the fifty years following the closure of the Elgin Association. She says that a wall of silence went up about the refugee period and that

[o]f course many of us were told about our grandparents who had been slaves and maybe a few of us had heard about the Elgin Settlement, but a far greater number of us were told little or nothing about our early home which just fifty years before had been known world-wide but now was ignored by the history books, 'forgotten' by the old folks and unknown by its grandchildren.²⁵

The greater Canadian community had "forgotten" about the Buxton Settlement and surprisingly, so had the local community. The long period of silence surrounding Buxton prevailed until very recently when Buxton was declared a place of national significance.

²⁰ Roger "Slaves No More," 419.

²¹ Research and writing on the history of blacks in Canada is steadily growing with the work of academics such as Judith Fingard, H. Amani Whitfield, Barrington Walker, Sharon A. Roger Hepburn and others.

²² Owen Thomas, "Cultural Tourism, Commemorative Plaques and African-Canadian Historiography: Challenging Historical Marginality," *Social History* 29, no. 58 (1996): 433.

²³ Fred Landon, "The Buxton Settlement in Canada," *Journal of Negro History* 3 (1918): 360-367; Landon was one of the major forces behind the first commemoration to the Underground Railroad in Canada by the HSMBC in 1925. This took the form of a plaque that emphasized the importance of freedom under the British Crown and that fugitive slaves came to Canada and "found friends, freedom and protection under the British Flag" (plaque text). Landon later became a member of the HSMBC from 1932-1958 and was chair of the board from 1950-1958.

²⁴ For a comprehensive overview of the history of the Buxton Settlement see Robbins, *Legacy to Buxton*; The most recent biography of Reverend King is Ullman's, *Look to the North Star*; Roger's, "Slaves No More" and Jonathan W. Walton, "Blacks in Buxton and Chatham Ontario, 1830-1890: Did the 49th Parallel Make a Difference," unpublished dissertation, are two of the most recent academic works on the settlement; William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, "Opposition to the Founding of the Elgin Settlement," *Canadian Historical Review* 38, no. 3 (1957): 202-218, provides the first critical look at the response of whites in Chatham to the founding of Buxton; Howard Law, "'Self-Reliance is the True Road to Independence': Ideology and the Ex-Slaves in Buxton and Chatham Ontario," *Ontario History* 77, no. 2 (1985): 107-121, examines some of the underlying intentions and goals for the founding of the Buxton Settlement and compares Buxton as a block settlement to Chatham as an integrated settlement.

²⁵ Robbins, *Legacy to Buxton*, 113.

This “rediscovery” of Buxton reflects changes in the conception of Canadian national identity and the significance of particular moments in the collective Canadian past. Pierre Nora captures this notion beautifully, even in the translation from French to English: “History proposes, but the present disposes.”²⁶ It is those in the present that have determined that Buxton is now a nationally historic place so “as our perception of the past changes, we discover reasons to look again at traditional subjects that once seemed to hold no further interest, the common places, as it were of our national memory,”²⁷ or in the case of Buxton, the places that we have left behind or left to the margins of our national memory. Those who have been critical of the inclusion of the memory of marginal groups in the greater national narrative, like Frits Pannekoek, argue that “where new interpretations that include marginalized groups have been presented, they have generally been layered onto the dominant narrative and have remained subservient to it.”²⁸ Can this be said for the memory of the Buxton Settlement?

Now that Buxton has gained the attention of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, it has gained national historic significance as a result of particular changes in the conception of the Canadian past and national identity. The designation of the Buxton Settlement as a national historic site was part of a greater project initiated by the HSMBC in 1996 for the commemoration of the Underground Railroad in Canada. The project was to develop a system of commemorative historic sites, buildings and persons. Buxton was chosen to be the historic site.

In December of 1998, Shannon Ricketts, an architectural historian for Parks Canada, presented a paper before the HSMBC that had investigated potential sites for designation in southern Ontario.²⁹ Ricketts had categorized black settlements in the region as either integrated settlements or block (segregated) settlements. She noted that only five per cent of the refugee settlers during the period settled in segregated rural communities. Most had moved to urban areas in integrated settings, where employment opportunities were greater despite certain prejudicial restrictions.

Buxton stood out among the other block settlements of Oro, Wilberforce, Dawn, and the Sandwich Mission. The Oro settlement was not suitable for the commemoration of the Underground Railroad, because it was intended for black Loyalist veterans who had fought in the War of 1812.³⁰ Oro did not last very long as a block settlement and left behind very few physical traces. Wilberforce was established as a block settlement in 1829, but failed to attract enough settlers to make land payments. The Dawn Settlement, which is associated with Josiah Henson, was a somewhat smaller community founded in 1842. It had a smaller population than Buxton and few physical artifacts from the site remained. Josiah Henson had already been designated a person of historic significance so the Wilberforce Settlement was not chosen to be a national historic site. Finally, the Sandwich Mission, which had been established by local preachers to help refugees in the Amherstberg area, had been plagued by scandal and also failed as a settlement scheme.

The integrated settlements proved to be more complicated than the block settlements and also contained very few physical artifacts and evidence of the refugee settlement in those areas. The most prominent integrated settlement destinations of refugees were Chatham and Toronto. In these integrated settings “equal opportunity in employment, housing and education became an exception rather than the rule.”³¹ Racist attitudes prevailed even north of the border in communities like Chatham and Toronto. With the exception of a few houses that had belonged to prominent blacks, insufficient physical remnants of refugee

²⁶ Pierre Nora, “The Era of Commemoration,” in Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 3 of Symbols, English Language Edition, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 618.

²⁷ Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 1 of Conflicts and Divisions, English Language Edition, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 14.

²⁸ Frits Pannekoek, “Who Matters? Public History and the Invention of the Canadian Past,” *Acadiensis* 19, no. 2 (2000): 213.

²⁹ Shannon Ricketts, “The Underground Railroad in Canada: Associated Sites, a study for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada,” December 1998.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

settlement in the integrated settlements prevented them from being designated as national historic sites, according to Ricketts.

Buxton proved to be the best option for designating a site for the commemoration of the settlement of black refugees, despite the fact that the majority of refugees settled in integrated settlements. According to Ricketts, Buxton was an example of a successful block settlement scheme for refugee settlers during the period of the Underground Railroad. In fact, if one compared Buxton with the rest of the block settlement schemes, it was just about the only successful one! Buxton had reached a peak population of over 1,000 residents by 1859, boasted three schools, two temperance hotels, a general store, a post office, a sawmill, a brickyard, a gristmill, and a pearlash factory.³² Ricketts also noted that Buxton had achieved international fame in its day. The numerous physical remnants of the settlement were still intact. Houses, churches, cemeteries and schools dotted the landscape of Buxton. Moreover, ditches marking out some of the original plots sold to refugees were still visible. In Ricketts' view, there was a lot more to work with in Buxton than in any of the other sites. She lamented that most of the buildings of significance "remain better-known internationally than they are nationally,"³³ pointing out how the Buxton Settlement had been "forgotten" since the closure of the Elgin Association. Ricketts concluded that the physical landscape of Buxton "creates a sense of place highly evocative of its historic roots," and that the settlement "embodies remarkable historical values."³⁴ But what were those remarkable historical values and why were they not so remarkable fifty years ago?

Every national historic site in the Parks Canada system has certain qualities that have been deemed historically significant to the nation. They also reveal the commemorative intent of the HSMBC and the Ministry of Canadian Heritage. For Buxton, the stated commemorative intent is split into two parts. Firstly, Buxton and its cultural landscape, "speaks to the successful realization of the block or planned refugee settlement in Canada." Secondly, Buxton continues to be a memorial to the "courage of every Underground Railroad refugee who took their life in their own hands and chose Canada as their home."³⁵ The memory of Buxton is used to emphasize two themes in Canadian collective identity – the settlement of immigrants and the tolerance of Canadian society as represented by the experience of the Underground Railroad. According to the pamphlet for the commemoration of the Underground Railroad in Canada, "ultimately the experience of the Underground Railroad helped to forge Canadians' sense of themselves as a democratic country."³⁶ Both of these themes can be contested and the use of the Buxton Settlement as an example of these values should also be called into question.

Which Buxton?

We have already seen that the Buxton Settlement has been commemorated in several different ways. Each plaque, including the national commemoration, purports to recognize the very same event – the founding of the Buxton Settlement –, yet they each tell different stories and commemorate different values. However, which Buxton was commemorated in 2000 when the three-plaque series was unveiled and which Buxton was not?

The story of the founding of the Buxton Settlement is without a doubt a remarkable part of the history of this country. Fugitive slaves and freed blacks from the US fled their homes in the hope of finding greater political freedoms in British North America. For the most part, the refugees received equal treatment under the law and were subject to a significantly reduced threat of violence. Nevertheless, the story of Buxton is replete with complexities, tensions and conflict. While the latest plaque places greater emphasis on the role of the settlers, one cannot "forget" the role of Reverend King and the Presbyterian Church.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, appendix C, 1.

³⁵ Parks Canada, "The Buxton Settlement National Historic Site: Commemorative Integrity Statement Workshop, September 28-30, 2000."

³⁶ Parks Canada, *The System of National Historic Sites of Canada: Commemorating the Underground Railroad in Canada*, 1.

King carried great influence in the community at the time of its founding and continued to do so until his death. Although King's efforts to settle blacks in this community gave many of the refugees a unique and rare opportunity, one must acknowledge King's motivations for establishing such a settlement. Roger argues that King held a paternalistic view of relationship with his slaves.³⁷ He believed that blacks could not achieve moral improvement outside of the institution of slavery, unless they could settle on land for a long period of time. King attempted to teach particular values to the settlers through religion, school and hard work. Howard Law argues that King hoped to build a community upon the principles of self-reliance, modesty and temperance.³⁸ The rules that were laid down by the Elgin Association highlight some of the expectations and intentions of King and the other members of the stock holding association.

These rules placed restrictions on settlement and land-use by refugees. The land could only be sold to blacks and potential settlers had to live on the land for a period of ten years or sell the land back to the Association.³⁹ This was the mechanism by which the Buxton Settlement was deliberately established as a segregated black township. The association also placed specific restrictions on the size of the houses that were built.⁴⁰ They had to be no less than 33 feet from the road and meet a particular minimum size. The fronts of these homes also had to be adorned with a white picket fence and a flower garden. While King did not explicitly ban alcohol from the settlement, he did encourage settlers to practice temperance and boycott the general store that had attempted to sell liquor. These rules and restrictions demonstrate some of the intentions and interests of King and the Elgin Association. As Roger states, "it can be argued that the Association took a paternalistic, and perhaps racist, approach regarding its proclaimed task."⁴¹ In fact, the proclaimed task under the legislation that incorporated the association was "for the settlement and moral improvement of the coloured population of Canada,"⁴² a point that does not figure prominently in the most recent commemoration of the Buxton Settlement.

Another aspect of the settlement of Buxton absent from narrative in the 2000 commemoration is the role of local whites in the area especially in the town of Chatham. Chatham politician, Edwin Larwill figures most prominently in the resistance to the establishment of a black settlement at Buxton. William and Jane Pease argue that "some Canadians responded to the presence of the Negro much as did residents of the Northern United States."⁴³ Larwill and other people from nearby Chatham sent various petitions to the legislative assembly pleading that the settlement be blocked. Many white people from Chatham did not believe that the government should "sell large portions of the public domain, in settled parts of this province, to foreigners, the more so when such persons belong to a different branch of the human family and are black."⁴⁴ This incident during the founding of the Buxton Settlement does not demonstrate the legacy of tolerance among Canadians. In fact it reveals the racial tensions and sentiments of the time in Canada West.

My aim in making these points is not to suggest that Buxton is undeserving of its designation as a site of national significance; rather, it is to draw attention to how the national commemoration of this site has selected elements from the past to serve the interests of the present. Over the last fifty years, the memory of the Buxton Settlement has been used in a variety of ways. In the 2000 narrative, elements of the memory of the Buxton Settlement seem to fit into a greater collective narrative of plurality and diversity.

The most recent commemoration of the Buxton Settlement can be read as nationally significant because of its symbolic relevance to the history of immigration in Canada. Many have argued that Canadian national identity is represented by its multicultural nature and tolerance of different peoples. This concept is often referred to as the "mosaic" approach to understanding a multicultural society as opposed to the "melting pot" approach associated with the US. Buxton seems to now be considered as nationally significant as part of this greater narrative of the mosaic.

³⁷ Roger, "Slaves No More," 119.

³⁸ Law, "Self-Reliance is the True Road to Independence," 107.

³⁹ Ullman, *Look to the North Star*, 125.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴¹ Roger, "Slaves No More," 130.

⁴² *Debates of the Legislative Assembly of United Canada*, vol. IX, part II, 1850, 1560.

⁴³ Pease and Pease, "Opposition to the Founding of the Elgin Settlement," 202.

⁴⁴ *The Examiner*, 29 August 1849, 2.

The concept of the mosaic was first developed in the 1930s by John Murray Gibbon, a Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) publicist, as a metaphor to describe the diversity of the people living in Canada. Daniel Francis argues that this metaphor is a myth of Canadian national identity that ignores great racial inequalities and many parts of Canadian history that are characterized by white supremacy.⁴⁵ He says “the mosaic gradually came to replace the myth of the master race as a core myth used by Canadians to describe their society.”⁴⁶ Multiculturalism became an official government policy under Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau in 1971 and has since been seen as a defining characteristic of Canadian national identity, even enshrined in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Since Buxton has been commemorated as an example of the historical legacy of immigration and multiculturalism in Canada, does this merely weave African Canadians into a greater narrative and obscure the complexities of their settlement experience? This most recent commemorative event certainly has omitted and selected certain parts of the memory of Buxton to serve a greater national narrative of multiculturalism and immigration, though not without the consent of local black residents of Buxton.

Who Is Using the Past?

Looking back to the cairn, the local Buxton community has been readily involved in the various forms of commemoration that have emerged. The Buxton community played a tremendously significant role in the 2000 commemorative event, particularly in the design and text of the three-plaque series.

Parks Canada hosted a workshop to develop what they call the “commemorative integrity statement” for the Buxton Settlement, a statement that describes the national historic significance of the site and highlights what elements of the site are considered important. This included determining the text for the plaques. The commemorative integrity workshop included historians, community representatives, members of the Buxton Historical Society, and provincial and municipal representatives.⁴⁷

The state apparatus for the designation of national historic sites in Canada is the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, which advises the Minister of Canadian Heritage on sites suitable for commemoration. Much of the early work of the board was highly influenced by the character of the board members, but also by budgetary restrictions and the board’s lack of a clear mandate. It is evident in C.J. Taylor’s history of the HSMBC that the Canadian state was slow to commit itself (and public funds) to the pursuit of commemoration.⁴⁸ In the HSMBC’s recent work on the Buxton Settlement, the local community was complicit and active in the development of the commemoration of the site.

What then does this say about the local community in Buxton? The community helped to form the text and images on the two plaques. While the most recent commemorative plaques place emphasis on the contribution of the settlers to the development of the site, they do not point to some of the criticisms that I have highlighted above. This might not seem so surprising if one considers the marginality of African Canadian history as part of the collective national memory. Had this community in Buxton put forth a critical reading of its history it might have jeopardized its designation as a national historic site. A clear and coherent narrative of the Buxton Settlement poses less of a threat to the collective memory of the local community than a more critical one.

Conclusion

⁴⁵ Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), 83.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Parks Canada, “Buxton Settlement National Historic Site of Canada: Commemorative Integrity Statement,” 13-14.

⁴⁸ C.J. Taylor, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Canada’s National Historic Parks and Sites* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990) provides a very comprehensive history of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.

The Buxton Settlement is the second largest national historic site in Canada. From the local commemoration of the settlement in 1950 with the erection of a small cairn in South Buxton to its designation as a national historic site in 2000, the commemoration of the Buxton settlement has undergone various transformations that reflect contemporary values and interests. The first commemorative acts in 1950 and 1965 were closely connected to the processes of collective local and regional identity formation. They portrayed the site and Canada as a haven for refugee slaves under the freedom of the British flag. However, they were no more self-serving than the most recent attempts to incorporate African Canadian history into the narrative of the mosaic. The latest commemoration of the Buxton Settlement portrays the site as an early example of immigration history and racial tolerance in Canada. Missing from this narrative are the racist assumptions of Reverend King and the Presbyterian Church and the resistance of local whites to the establishment of a settlement for black people in Buxton.

After having looked at several different commemorations of the Buxton Settlement over the course of fifty years it is difficult to say that the HSMBC commemoration will be the definitive reading of this site of memory. While the commemorative integrity statement seeks to preserve the meaning of the Buxton Settlement according to the present, there is no guarantee that future generations will see the Buxton Settlement in the same way. The meanings of past commemorations remain almost entirely forgotten and have blended into the background of the cultural landscape of Buxton. Buxton may be forgotten or it may be “discovered” once again.

Appendices

Appendix A – Text of the 1950 plaque on the Rev. William King Monument

1949, In memory of Rev. Wm. King who founded Buxton Settlement, 1849, and built St. Andrew's Church
1859

Appendix B – Text of the 1965 plaque by the Archeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario

The Buxton Settlement 1849

In 1849, the "Elgin Association", founded by a Presbyterian Minister, the Reverend William King (1812-95), purchased 4,300 acres of land in this area on which were settled freed and fugitive Negro slaves. Under King's direction the settlement prospered and in 1851 Buxton post office, named after Sir T.F. Buxton, the British emancipator, was opened. By 1864 the community contained about 1000 persons, a combined saw and grist-mill, a brickyard and other small industries. During the U.S. Civil War, seventy Buxton settlers served in the Union forces. Following that conflict a number of settlers returned to their former homes in the US, but descendants of those remaining still live in this region.

Appendix C – Text of the 1967 centennial plaque in front of the Buxton Museum

1867-1967

Centennial Of Confederation

North Buxton Park And Museum

Erected By The Township Of Raleigh

In Permanent Commemoration Of

The Centennial Of Confederation In Canada In 1967

Construction Was Made Possible Through The Co-operation Of The Province Of Ontario And The Government Of Canada

Appendix D – Text of the 2000 Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada three-plaque series beside the Buxton Museum

First Plaque

The Buxton Settlement

From the shores of Lake Erie to the seventh concession, from Dillon Road on the east to Drake Road on the west, Buxton's ordered fields are dotted with churches and homes from the epic experience of the Underground Railroad. In 1849, Reverend William King arrived with fifteen former slaves at a 9,000-acre tract of swampy, forested land. More refugees followed, buying and clearing 50-acre homesteads, establishing industries, churches and schools. The settlers created the regular pattern of roads and drainage ditches seen today, transforming the landscape into the prosperous Elgin Settlement, as it was then called, where neat cottages spoke of industry and thrift, and children received a classical education. Buxton lives on today through descendants of these determined immigrants who carved out a free life for themselves and their family on the tranquil plains of southwestern Ontario.

Second Plaque

This plaque features an image of the settlement plan for the Elgin Settlement with the layout of the roads, fields and houses

Third Plaque

The third plaque features an image of the "Freedom Bell" donated to Reverend King and the settlers form a group of blacks in Pittsburgh. The inscription on the bell reads, "Presented to Rev. Wm. King by the colored inhabitants of Pittsburgh for the Academy at Raleigh C. West"

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