

Slavery and freedom: Black history in Northumberland

Cobourg Chronicle
By Richard Young
ryoung@northumberlandtoday.com
MAY 28/07

With March blustering into Northumberland, the *Cobourg Daily Star* says goodbye to February and Black History Month in Canada. Although it may be unknown to some, there is storied connection in Northumberland, as Port Hope resident Larry Hall tells it.

For years the retired journalist and former town councillor has tracked the history of blacks in North America and specifically the history of his family's time in the continent, which dates well back to the 1700s.

A pile of four-inch binders - labelled with his family name - are stacked in an undersized area of his home that he calls his office and filled with research and copies of documents.

The extensive contents don't all pertain to his family's history, he admits, as he leafs through the pages looking for particular speeches and copies of historical documents.

Not knowing exactly where to begin, he starts at the beginning.

"Why is the black person so different in North America than everybody else?" Mr. Hall asks rhetorically.

There are three types of citizens in this continent, he said.

There are natives, who were here first; there are Europeans who came here on their own terms for various reasons; and then there are the Black Africans, who were brought here as slaves.

"One group came here that didn't want to come - Black Africans," he said. "They didn't even know these land masses existed across the ocean."

Slavery, of course, dates back to biblical times, Mr. Hall notes. "But there's an element of respect in the bible that seems to be lost."

The first Black Africans landed in the



PHOTO BY TED AMSDEN

Port Hope resident Larry Hall, a local genealogist and historian, has studied extensively the black history of this region.

Americas early in the 1600s.

Huge profits were made from the slave trade during an era of passion for profits, regardless of human cost and cruelty.

Approximately 1.5-million Africans were brought to North America in all, as the need for unpaid labour increased when absentee owners demanded plantation managers increase profits.

When the slave population began to exceed the white population in some areas, particularly the Carolinas, draconian laws were put in place to prevent any uprising against slave owners.

It was at this time that Canada - or British North America - became somewhat of a haven.

Slavery escapees began to trickle into the country during the 1700s and 1800s.

"It was a land of freedom simply because, in British North America, slavery was not institutionalized," Mr. Hall said.

"It was not a structure of law. It was a practice in some places, but it was not backed up by law."

Roughly 3,000 slaves accompanied the United Empire Loyalists when they settled in southern Ontario.

Realizing there was no law backing the

ownership of slavery, many slaves simply walked away when brought into the country with the Loyalists, Mr. Hall said.

One of those slaves who walked away was a woman named Jude, who accompanied Elias Smith, one of Port Hope's founders, into Québec during the early 1790s.

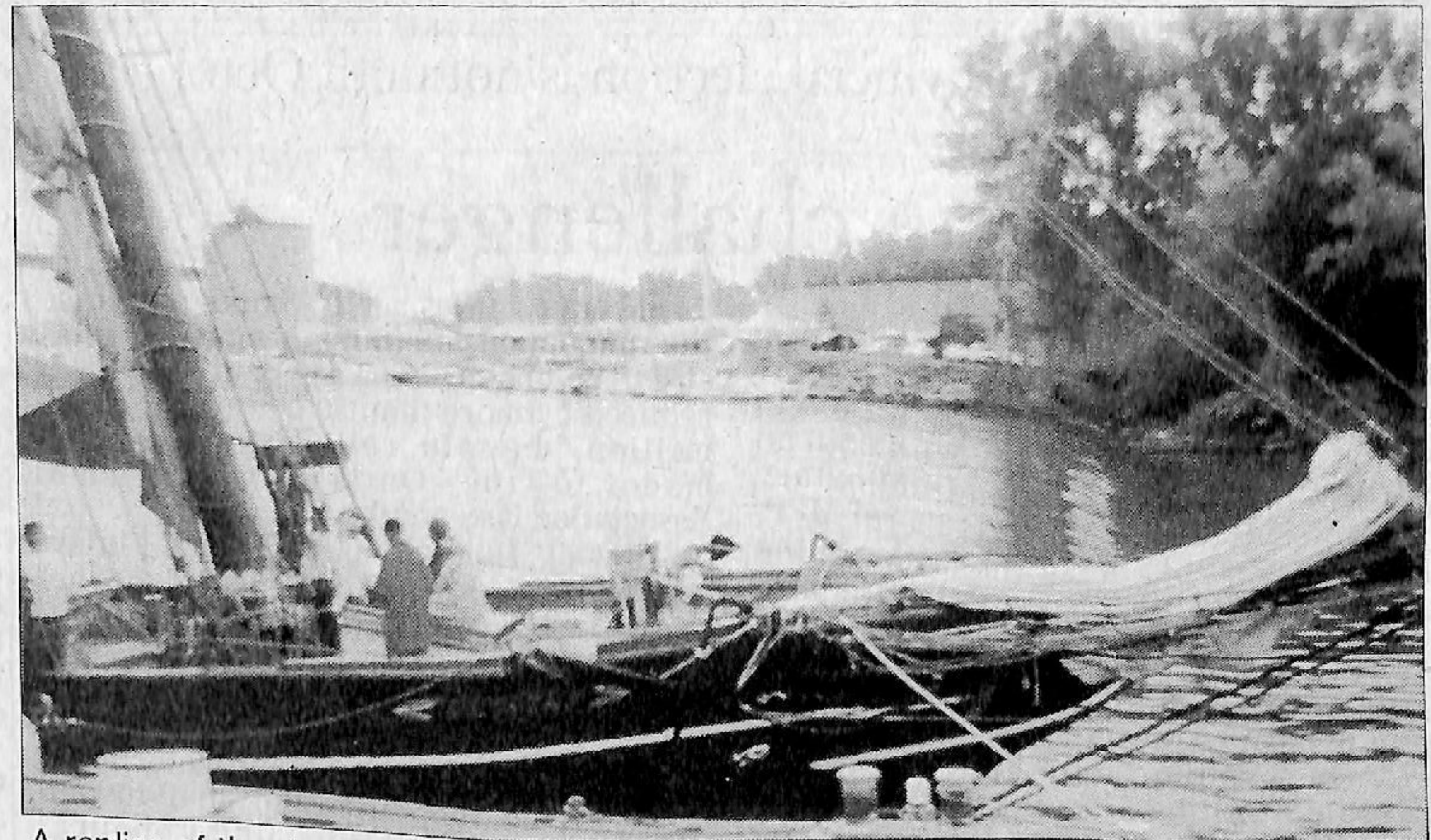
The ensuing events would prove to be monumental.

Smith, an Empire Loyalist and New York merchant, brought with him slaves into Montreal.

"Jude barely set foot in Montreal and she walked away," Mr. Hall described.

"Smith had her arrested and jailed. But she was quickly released on a writ. Smith insisted she be brought to trial."

But the judge would have none of it, noting that the country did not possess



A replica of the *Amistad* vessel in Buffalo in 2003. The vessel was taken over by the very slaves it was transporting. The slaves later obtained their freedom through court action.

laws supporting slave owners.

Any dispute between a slave and their owner was between the two people and not for the court to decide.

"That really freed every slave in the province of Quebec," Mr. Hall said.

Things were beginning to change around that period of time in Upper Canada under the tenure of the first Lt-Gov. John Graves Simcoe - who in the early 1790s introduced a bill eventually passed at Niagara-On-The-Lake, saying slave owners could keep their slaves, but not the children of slaves.

"While it didn't abolish slavery, it weakened it considerably," Mr. Hall said.

The results of this were evident locally, when black families began establishing businesses in the Cobourg area, he said.

Some became barbers, some became hotel proprietors and others operated coach companies.

"They brought with them nearly all the skills necessary for the society we had," Mr. Hall said. "A few descendants of those families are still in our area."

Their businesses functioned well into the 1800s, spanning a couple of generations, he said.

The reason those families ran their own businesses?

"People didn't want to hire them," Mr. Hall said.

Some moved to the city, some ran their businesses, and others cleared a spot in the bushes to run modest farms.

There they stayed until surveyors

reached them and townships were established.

"The government asked the families for a nominal amount to own the land," Mr. Hall said.

"It wasn't unfair, but the families had absolutely no money.

"They had to abandon their homes and head north."

It is believed a small black settlement of a handful of families occupied land in the northern part of Haldimand township as well, Mr. Hall said. But since they could not read or write, there is no written record of them being there.

Much of the black population has left this area, Mr. Hall observed.

"There's no evidence of these old families," he said. "Many inter-married (with whites)."

"Then some families brought down the curtain on the fact there ever was black ancestry."

In some parts of Ontario, old tombstones linking black and white families have disappeared, though Mr. Hall says that is not evident in this region.

His expertise has led him to lecture at local schools, churches and historical societies. It has made him subject of a half-hour documentary about his search for his families past.

"I have a great deal of genuine interest in this, even though this history doesn't really touch on local families," Mr. Hall said. "There is some history here, but little as compared to some areas."