

# Grafton residents speak for Tom

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GRAFTON — Along with the paving stones at Grafton's Heritage Park that commemorate people who have contributed to the community — such as murdered Cobourg Police Constable Chris Garrett and Golden Beach Resort founder Roger Chernuck Sr. — one mysterious stone commemorates a man whose last name is lost to history.

It says, "In memory of 'Tom,' last enslaved man sold in Grafton."

The stone was sponsored by several Grafton families: Lloyd and Ina Spence, Jeannette Jones, Lynnette Stoby and her late husband Vern, and Faith and Alwin Campbell.

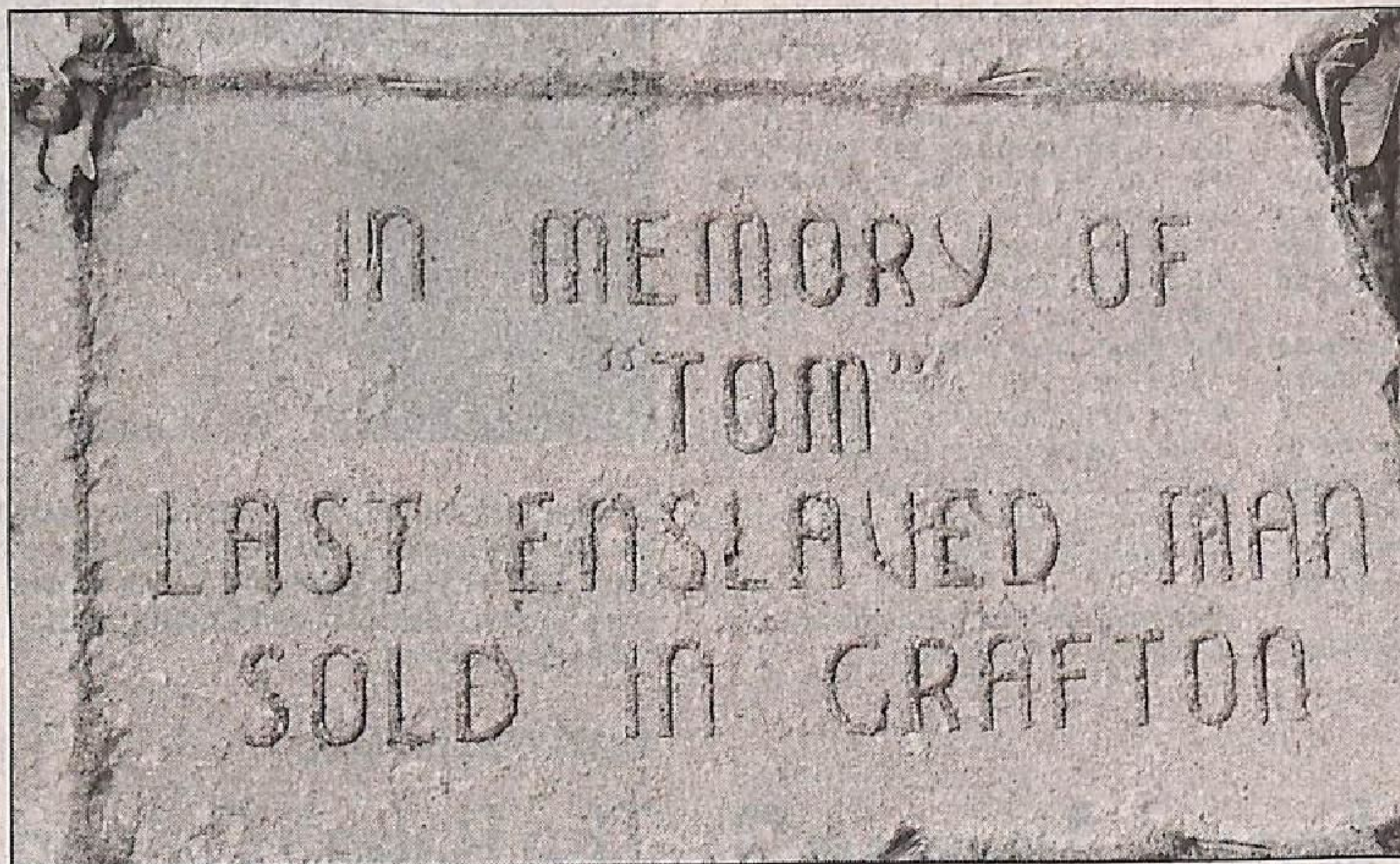
They opted for the term "enslaved man" rather than "slave," to restore some dignity to a man who lived in times that rendered him voiceless and invisible, Faith Campbell said in a recent interview on the occasion of Black History Month.

"Tom is not here to put his name there, but we are here. We are Tom's representatives," Campbell said.

They learned about Tom through the chapter on slavery contributed by Cobourg historian Karen Walker to the *Memories of Haldimand Township: When The Lakes Roared* history book.

It was the spring of 1824, Walker wrote, when a 14-year-old boy named Tom was sold for \$75 in Haldimand Township — not only the last enslaved man sold in Grafton, but one of the last sold in Canada's 200-year history of slavery.

The slave trade grew freely in Upper Canada until July 1793, when legislation was enacted that would be a first step toward abolition. It did not emancipate



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This paver stone honouring Tom, the last enslaved man sold in Grafton, was donated to the Grafton Heritage Park by several local families who want to ensure he is not forgotten.

the slaves of Upper Canada, but it did provide that all slave children be freed upon their 25th birthdays.

As Walker pointed out, however, this meant Canadian slaves now had to give away their most productive working years and the many children likely to be born to women under the age of 25.

At any rate, over the next two decades, society came to disapprove of the institution on its own. It had become a rarity by 1820.

A copy of Tom's assignment (or agreement of sale) that survived said Tom had been born in Upper Canada in 1809. His mother, whose name was unknown, arrived in Upper Canada prior to the 1793 law. Tom's assignment records him as a mulatto, which means he was likely one of the many sons and

daughters born to slave women and their masters. Despite their paternity, mulatto children remained in slavery.

Tom was sold by the Eli Keeler family (who had a modest Haldimand Township farm) to a distinguished Hastings County gentleman named William Bell. As a 66-year-old man with a 52-year-old wife, Bell may have wanted help around the house — and he likely learned Tom was for sale from his daughter Amelia who, with husband John Hogaboom, ran an inn in Grafton.

Tom's \$75 price was probably high, since a modest log house could be built in those days for \$40. Walker suspects he was of such value because slaves were becoming scarce. But she also expects he was a good investment for Bell. Tom had been learning a trade under Keeler

and, as his masters, the Bells would have the right to rent out these skills and pocket the proceeds for the 10 years they would own him.

At any rate, nine years after Bell purchased Tom, he died. This would have resulted in Tom's freedom, had not slavery been abolished throughout the British Empire that same year.

Losing her voice recently for several weeks, Campbell discovered what it was like to be unable to express a thought or state an opinion. It's not far from there to a feeling of invisibility, she said, and she found it easier to imagine what people in Tom's predicament may have felt.

She has seen a more modern example recently in the film *The Help*, which portrays the lot of black working women in Southern homes in the 1950s.



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Grafton resident and author Faith Campbell displays the history book where she found the story of Tom, the last enslaved man sold in Grafton.

"Invisibility and voicelessness are two words that come to mind, and the risk it takes to tell people the stories," Campbell summed up.

To an extent, she said, many black people still feel they must live on constrained terms.

"You still have to be on pins and needles. You have to try not to offend. You meet, greet, eat and leave," she said.

A gentle and judicious dropping of some of those habits that allow one to, as Campbell put it, continue to play the game is the only way to move beyond the constraints.

"We owe it to ourselves not to just dance around life," she said.

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