

Beamsville resident finds Black history in 1871 census

BY JOANNE MCDONALD
THIS WEEK

BEAMSVILLE — Time has covered the footsteps of the pioneers who followed the north star along the trail of the underground railroad and laid the original path for what may well become the route of Niagara's mid-peninsula corridor.

Walter Cromwell doesn't have the calluses to show for it, but he has walked each step with them during 16 years of research and now, writing the Canadian version of *Roots*, a book that will light the path for his family members who landed at the doorstep of Bertie Hall in Fort Erie in their courageous quest for freedom.

Cromwell was bent on a genealogical hunt to find his roots and it was no surprise when he traced his mother's family to London, England. But the trail went cold far short of the British Isles when he tried to find his Cromwellian connection.

Scrolling through 1871 census records at the St. Catharines Library, he found a missing link to his past through his forefather Joseph Cromwell and an even bigger surprise to find it stated his racial origin as African.

"I didn't know we had black heritage," Cromwell said. His early forefather had come to Ontario by way of Nova Scotia in 1846 with his wife Celia and three children. Historians estimate that up to 40,000 people escaped slavery in the United States to find shelter behind Upper Canada's humanitarian policies between 1833 and 1865.

"It gave me shivers to stand in that basement and to know that my family had passed through there," Cromwell said, of Bertie Hall, believed to have been a "safe house" for fugitive slaves prior to the American Civil War. Local legend claims that slaves were brought across the river under the cover of darkness and were kept in the basement until arrangements could be made to take them to safer quarters further away from the border.

"Too often when we think of pioneers we have a picture of people who were European, but some of our early pio-

neers who cleared the land were those who had gone through the adversity of seeking their freedom from slavery," Cromwell said.

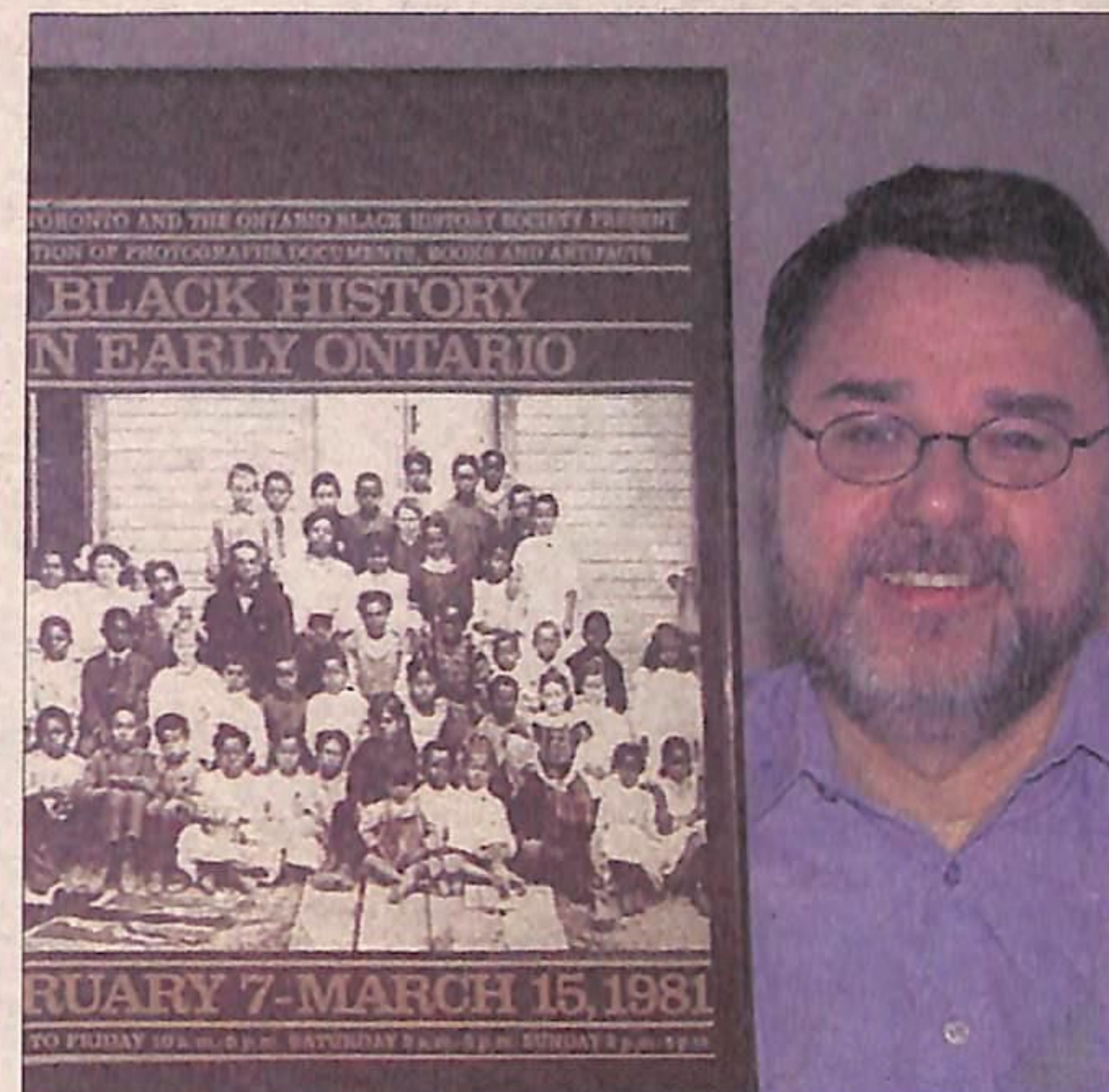
An even earlier forefather, Sambo Cromwell, who would later change his name to Joseph was a foreman on the Cromwell plantation in Goose Creek South Carolina. It was during a family wedding in 1778 that he escaped with his wife Phyllis and two children to the promise of a British General who said that any black slaves who escaped their masters and found their way to the British boats in Charleston Harbour would be free.

From Charlton Harbour the family sailed to New York City, one of the last pockets under British control and remained there until 1783. They set sail in November, headed to the Bay of Fundy, but a severe storm kept them from landing in Nova Scotia and after a short stay in the Bahamas, returned to settle in Birchtown, Nova Scotia, in Shelburne County. Sambo, which means son of a prince, changed his name to Joseph, the name of the ship, and landed as a United Empire Loyalist.

His grandson and namesake Joseph with his wife Celia, left Nova Scotia in 1846. They passed through Fort Erie and as Cromwell was able to trace, continued along the pioneer highway, the old Quaker Road (named for Quakers who provided help along the way) passing through Cook's Mills, Fonthill, St. John's (Shorthills), Campden, and connecting with the King's Highway (Hwy. 8) on their way to Yatton, north of Kitchener in Wellington County. There, they bought 100 acres, cleared the Queen's Bush and built a log cabin. Ten years later, in 1856, representatives from the Canada Company told the black population they were squatters and had to leave.

The next move was to Guelph. Joseph, the father of 21 children, was widowed and married three times, to Celia, to Elizabeth Lake Erie Lewis and Susan Miller. It was through Susan Miller that Cromwell was able to trace his lineage.

February was Black History Month and marked a four-week celebration of African American history.



Walter Cromwell of Beamsville is writing his family history, a Canadian version of *Roots*.



Forefather Joseph Cromwell and his wife Celia left Nova Scotia in 1846. They passed through Fort Erie, Fonthill and Lincoln before settling in Wellington County.