

# BLACK HISTORY MONTH

## KING HERITAGE & CULTURAL CENTRE

FEBRUARY 27, 2023

### TRACING THE ROLLING FAMILY TO ORO: A DIVE INTO ONTARIO'S EARLY BLACK SETTLEMENTS

The 19th century marked a rise of early Black settlements across Upper Canada in areas such as Windsor, Chatham, London, St. Catharines, Hamilton, Toronto, Barrie, Owen Sound, Niagara, and Guelph. Approximately 15,000-20,000 African Americans settled in Canada, which was largely driven by the 1834 Slavery Abolition Act; which made slavery illegal in Canada, and the American 1850 Fugitive Slave Act; which encouraged the re-capture of free Blacks and refugees living in the Northern States. When Black refugees and settlers arrived in Canada, they looked to these early settlements for a sense of self-sufficiency, security, and community.



WALTER ROLLING, 1936  
DESCENDANT OF  
BENJAMIN ROLLING SR.

While there wasn't an early Black settlement in King Township, there is a unique tie to the settlement of Oro through King resident Benjamin Rolling Sr. Readers might be familiar with Rolling's more renowned descendant, Walter Rolling (b. 1873–d. 1943), who was a teacher at King Heritage & Cultural Centre's schoolhouse Kinghorn S.S. #23; and, was the first Black teacher in York Region. Benjamin Rolling Sr. (b. 1797–d. 1871), was Walter Rolling's grandfather and led the Rolling's permanent move to King Township.

Rolling Sr.'s journey started in Alexandria, Virginia where he was born in 1797. It is unknown whether Rolling was enslaved or a free Black person in Virginia; however, records show that he moved with his wife, Almira, to Ohio in 1822. In 1831, they moved to Oro in Upper Canada and shortly thereafter, relocated to King Township in 1835.

What drove Rolling, like many other Black settlers, to move to Oro instead of other, much larger Black settlements in Upper Canada? What would Rolling have experienced moving to Oro? And, why would Rolling, like many other settlers during the 19th century, leave Oro to resettle elsewhere? To understand his journey, we need to explore the history of Black settlements in Upper Canada and the creation of the Wilberforce Street settlement in Oro.

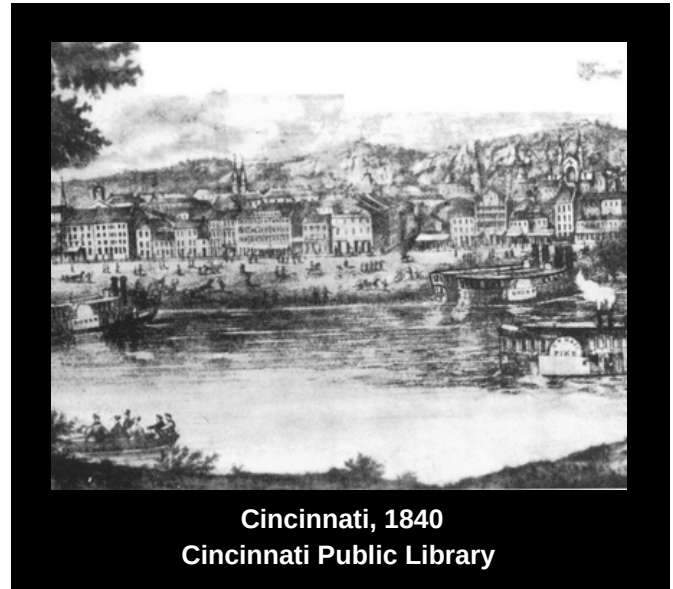
In 1819, the road from Kempenfelt Bay to Penetanguishene was developed to connect the two areas and promote settlement. Prior to 1819, there was no European agricultural settlements in Simcoe County, although there were established trading, missionary, and military outposts at Nottawasaga and Penetanguishene to guard against an American attack from Lake Huron. Therefore, when considering to establish the settlement of Oro on the road's west concession in 1819, the government of Upper Canada offered land grants to Black veterans of the War of 1812. Of these veterans, only nine families settled by 1831.

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Oro's second wave of settlement is attributed to an exodus from Ohio from 1829 to 1831. In 1829, Ohio strictly enforced its "Black Code", which regulated the movements and liberties of Black citizens and led to race riots breaking out in Cincinnati on August 22, 1829. In response, a group of Black Americans, led by James C. Brown, petitioned Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Colborne to seek asylum in Canada. The community relocated to Oro and other Black settlements, during which an estimated 460 Black Americans immigrated to Canada. It is believed that Benjamin Rolling Sr. and his family played a role in this story, serving motivation to relocate to Oro with this group from Ohio in 1831.

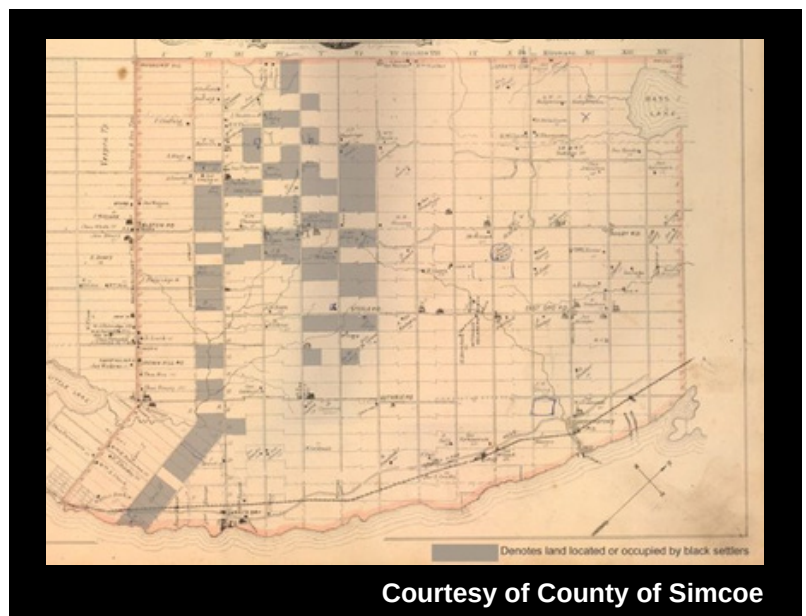


Cincinnati, 1840  
Cincinnati Public Library

Therefore, the Wilberforce Street lots in Oro became home to approximately sixty Black settlers and their families by 1831. Lots were sold for one shilling per acre and were paid after the owner had cleared the land, as well as constructed a house of adequate size with adjacent roads. Only then would the owner receive a patent, or deed, to the land; or, if these requirements were not complete, they would be evicted from the land.

While the census records indicate that Rolling was registered for a property in Oro on the East half of Lot 8, Concession 5, it is unknown what role he would have had while living there. In 1831, records report that he had had left the lot and moved on.

This was not uncommon, as many of the initial Black settlers did not stay long in Oro and relocated to more urban areas or larger communities such as Collingwood, Barrie, Toronto, Chatham, or in Rolling's case, King Township. In fact, when Samuel Richardson assessed the state of improvements to Oro's properties in 1831, he noted that 19 lots had been either abandoned or were never occupied; and, that of 5,800 acres allotted, only 144 had been cleared.



Courtesy of County of Simcoe

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Oro African Episcopal Methodist Church  
County of Simcoe

Like most Black settlements in Upper Canada during this time, the focus was on its community to retain cultural characteristics and to create a distinct community, including: styles of worship, music and speech, family structures, and group traditions. This can largely attribute to Oro's initial appeal for settlement. Chief institutional support in most Black communities in Upper Canada was led by a separate church, most often Baptist or Methodist. The church's influence extended into daily life as the clergy often assumed more active social and political roles, while also supporting many fraternal organizations, mutual assistance bands, temperance societies, and antislavery groups. In Oro, the community was centred around its congregation, established in 1838 by Rev. Ari Raymond, a Methodist and abolitionist; and, later led by its first black minister Rev. R.S.W. Sorrick. Together, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was built to serve Oro Township.

What drove Rolling to move, like many other Black settlers in Oro? A variety of factors could have influenced this decision including Oro's: poor soil conditions, harsh climate, and remote location. On the other hand, Upper Canada opened Oro Township and Wilberforce Street to white settlement. This influx drove up land values in the area prompting Black families to sell their properties.

For Rolling, the answer might also lie with King Township as land was cheap, soils were excellent for agriculture, populations were growing, and mills and industries were booming. It is also suggested that Black settlers may have more easily adapted to settlements in King, which were largely inhabited by Quakers; who, were known to condemn slavery and had played a role in the Underground Railroad.

Since Rolling was not a farmer, it is safe to assume that a more industrious and populous community would better serve his interests. This proved to be the case for his descendants, Benjamin Rolling Jr., who owned a successful general store and was Postmaster in Laskay; and, Walter Rolling, a beloved educator in King Township.

However, the legacy of early Black settlements like Oro, played a role in the lives of Black settlers like Rolling, whether it be a stepping stone to self-sufficiency in Upper Canada or a welcoming home for a community.

**Do you have story to share about Black History in King Township?  
Let us know at [kingmuseum@king.ca](mailto:kingmuseum@king.ca) and be featured in the next newsletter!**