

## **More Than Just Your Negro Wench**

Until recently it's been assumed by historians that the slaves in upper Canada between 1793 and 1803 were meek victims, defenseless to their environment. We will take a look at "Acts of Resistance" by Afua Cooper, where she portrays that the contrary is in fact true, that the men and women enslaved were defiant of their captors and in doing so achieved great progress in the abolition of slaves in Canada. Through the stories of some of these individuals it will be demonstrated how one person's actions, big or small can lead to a monumental change in society, such as the Underground Railroad.

"Slavery was an inhumane system in which one group of persons permanently owned the life and labour of another group, and had the power of life and death over them". (Cooper, 2007, p.7) During this time black skin was a token slavery and thus men and women of colour were treated with very little respect, and enslaved people had little to no social status at all, and faced an array of different kinds of abuse and assault. A law was passed that made it so the slave children inherit their mothers slave status guaranteeing that the system could maintain itself. At the time there were a profusion of laws pertaining to the ownership of slaves, it was legal to have them arrested, physically abused, tortured and even killed.

A former slave named Peter Martin had witnessed a young slave lady named Chloe Cooley being forcibly tied up by her master Vrooman, thrown into a boat, and shipped across water to New York "...she screamed violently and made resistance, but was tied in the same manner..." (Grisley, p.9) Cooper believes this is a prime example of the slaves resisting their captors, and fighting for their own liberation. This display had upset Martin so much that he decided he wanted to present this imperative information to the council at the Upper Canadian Legislature, and brought along an eyewitness of caucasian descent

that was a former war veteran because he believed that it would make himself appear more reputable.

Although Vrooman wasn't persecuted because he was within his legal rights, it did spark the change that eventually led to the Underground Railroad.

The vast majority of African slaves at the time opposed their captors as best they could. Henry Lewis was a slave who had managed to escape from his master, and later sent back a letter offering to pay for his own freedom. This is an example of the lengths that he felt he needed to go to maintain his integrity as a human being, even after being held captive by this man and his wife for years of his life. A woman named Elizabeth Russell had owned a slave named Peggy who proved to be very problematic for her, she would run away constantly, and in turn nobody wanted to purchase her or her children, running away was only one of the many ways that a slave could oppose the white supremacy movement going on at the time. Nevertheless, not all slave owners were monsters, sometimes they would see their slaves as a part of their family. In the cases of Dorinda Baker and her family this was certainly true. Her master had written into his will that when he died he wished for Dorinda and her family to be set free, and additionally left her property and money to support them with. Lastly I have the example of Sophia Pooley, she was sold to Mohawk Chieftain Joseph Brant at a very young age, and he treated her like family, often sending her to hunt with his own daughters. One record shows when Brant's wife had treated Pooley unfairly Brant responded by telling her "you know I adopted her as one of the family, and now you are trying to put all the work on her."

We see through Coopers "Acts of Resistance", and "Enslaved Africans in Upper Canada" that the slaves at the time were doing everything in their power to achieve freedom but the odds, and the law was heavily stacked against them. They did not lie down and accept defeat because of the colour of their skin. "Cooley and Martin resisted slavery on an individual basis, but their actions eventually led to a freedom

with vast collective outcomes". (Cooper, 2007, p.17) It was the actions of many brave Africans in Canada that lead to the Underground Railroad and the complete abolition of slavery, which demonstrates what you can accomplish when a group of people comes together for a certain cause.