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Proposed tour through black history would shed light on little-known past

By LORI CULBERT
Review staff writer

FORT ERIE — Plans are being completed for a car and bus tour of Fort Erie's black history sites.

April Noake, a history student at Brock University, has spent the summer verifying about 20 19th century landmarks and plotting them on a map.

Town hall and regional council are in deliberations with the province to make the 60 km route an official bus and car tour, Ms. Noake said.

Exiting the Queen Elizabeth Way at Netherby Road, the proposed route's first stop is the Black Creek Tavern which was allegedly once a safe house.

"There was a tunnel in the foundation to hide the slaves," Ms. Noake explained.

Then tourists would visit a former shipping yard which is now the Niagara Parks Marina on Niagara Blvd.

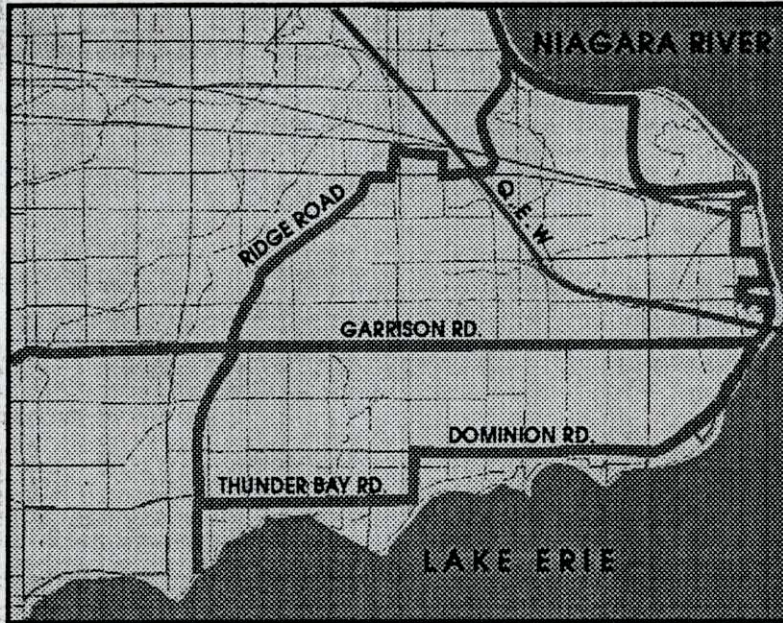
"Slaves used to work there. They came into the shipping yard (from New York) hiding in the boats," she said.

The trek turns onto Thompson Road where, just past the modern day Sports Complex, the farm of John Riselay used to be in the mid-1800s.

Josiah Henson, the non-fictional hero in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, worked on this farm for about a year.

At the end of Phipps Street sits Bertie Hall, now the Dolls House Gallery. It was reputed to have an underground tunnel — which has never been found — used for smuggling slaves.

Black people are included in the 19th century marital and burial records of St. Paul's Anglican Church on Niagara Boulevard, the next stop



Review Graphic - Grant Smith

The proposed tour of historically important sites related to the involvement of black people in Fort Erie's history could take this route.

on the tour.

"The minister performed the services...but no (blacks) were actually buried in St. Paul's cemetery," Ms. Noake said.

The now defunct Bertie SS#1 school, which had several black students in the late 1800s, is still nestled on John Street.

The ancient stone foundation building, dubbed the Alley School, was attended by children from the Bertie Hill Settlement which bordered Murray, John and High streets.

The former British Methodist Episcopal Church on Murray Street, which is now a private home, would be the next stop on the tour. The church's congregation was almost exclusively black, Ms. Lee said.

The route would also include the Old Fort on Lakeshore Road be-

cause blacks fought in the War of 1812 and the site of the former Snake Hill settlement, which stretched from Helena Street to Bardol Avenue.

The now defunct Erie Beach Hotel, located close to the modern day Waverly Hotel on Helena Street, was a landmark because meetings held there that led to the formation of what is now known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Detouring slightly, the route dips to the end of Windmill Point Road where a man allegedly smuggled slaves into Canada on a wagon.

Rumors say Benjamin Baker hauled wagons of people, hidden under loads of grain, from his New York farm across the frozen lake. Mr. Baker maintained he was taking his grain to Canada to be ground, but apparently the crop always returned much flatter and un-

processed.

Visitors would also drive past the approximate location of the Charles Hibbard farm near Erie Road.

Josiah Henson's name pops up again here. He worked on this property for three years before moving to the Riselay farm, Ms. Noake said.

Next stop would be the "Colored" Cemetery on Curtis Road in which six members of the black Russell family were buried, Bertie Township census records for 1851 and 1861 show.

Finally, Miller Avenue lined the Little Africa settlement in which about 200 former slaves lived and forested until demand for wood declined near the turn of the century.

"There are records of slave owners trying to capture black people to bring back south, but a black couple from Little Africa legally fought to stay and won in the Supreme Court of Canada," Ms. Noake said.

Canadian laws were altered to ensure all slaves who escaped to British soil could remain free.

The town's economic development officer, Glenn Walker, said an official map of the route and accompanying tour books will eventually be completed. He estimated bus companies would not be offering tours until mid-1993 at the earliest.

Mr. Walker plans to install historic markers at the sites for people on private driving tours.

Provincial and regional governments are interested in pursuing the tour because rediscovering black history is "one of the only growing areas of tourism," Mr. Walker said.

Fort Erie is the first municipality in the Niagara Region to hire a student to investigate its black history, but landmarks have been recognized in St. Catharines, Niagara-on-the-Lake and Niagara Falls.

Slave refuge, war hostel for sale

by Margaret E. Teal

Reaching back into the past, if only for a brief span of time, brings a sense of renewed purpose to the uncertainty of life as we know it today.

Through stories and legends and tales handed down and through reading of customs and manners of other bygone days we are led to believe life was better then, and held a security which seems to have vanished in the rush of today's world. Viewed from a distance, of time, life in yesterday's world holds a certain enchantment.

Such is the feeling one experiences on a visit to one of Fort Erie's oldest dwellings. Built in 1828 along the Niagara River, in a landscaped setting of trees and shrubbery, it gives a lift to those of us viewing it.

The feeling of awe and appreciation deepens as one approaches the classical entrance between the white pillars reminding one of an ancient Greek temple portico, in the Doric tradition, a style of architecture popular at the time of the construction, of what is now known as Bertie Hall.

Built by William Forsythe, a Scotsman and inn keeper from Niagara Falls, Ontario, as a family home, it is constructed of stone and bricks, the bricks being hauled by horse and wagon from Hamilton. The deep cellar is hewn out of solid rock.

Named for Sir Peregrine Bertie, who supported the passing of the Canada Bill in the House of Lords, May 30, 1791, it is listed in the Canada Book of Architecture as an outstanding example of colonial structure.

Entering the building one is impressed by the winding staircase leading from the large hall to the second floor. Double parlours with high ceilings, splendid wood trim, and doors, open off the hall. Each parlour, the master bedroom, and one other room, no doubt the guest room, have a black Italian marble fireplace, adding to the general elegant decor within this home, which has become a historical landmark to the residents of old Fort Erie.

The very large paned windows afford a wonderful view of the river, especially from the upper floor. A narrow staircase leads to the attic, and a similar steep stairway leads down into the massive cellar with its many partitions and rooms of stone and brick. Many stories are told of this mammoth lower floor cut out

of the solid stone, supposedly having a tunnel leading into it from the river.

With the strong current in the water at this juncture, it is most likely the tunnel, not as yet discovered, was a secret passageway, beneath or adjoining the basement, for use in time of danger, or possibly to hide slaves escaping from across the border to freedom from slavery, under English rule.

The tunnel remains hidden, but it is known that a resident in the home, many years ago, related how she had overheard the master of the house, telling his daughter not to go in the tunnel.

Mrs. Ralph Rehm of Ridgemount says her grandfather, Albert Danner, always said he had been in the tunnel and that it came in from the river. Evidently, it was used during the Fenian Raids. Fenian Raiders were unaware of the tunnel's existence although they occupied the house.

During the siege of Fort Erie in 1866 by the Fenian Raiders, the home was commandeered by

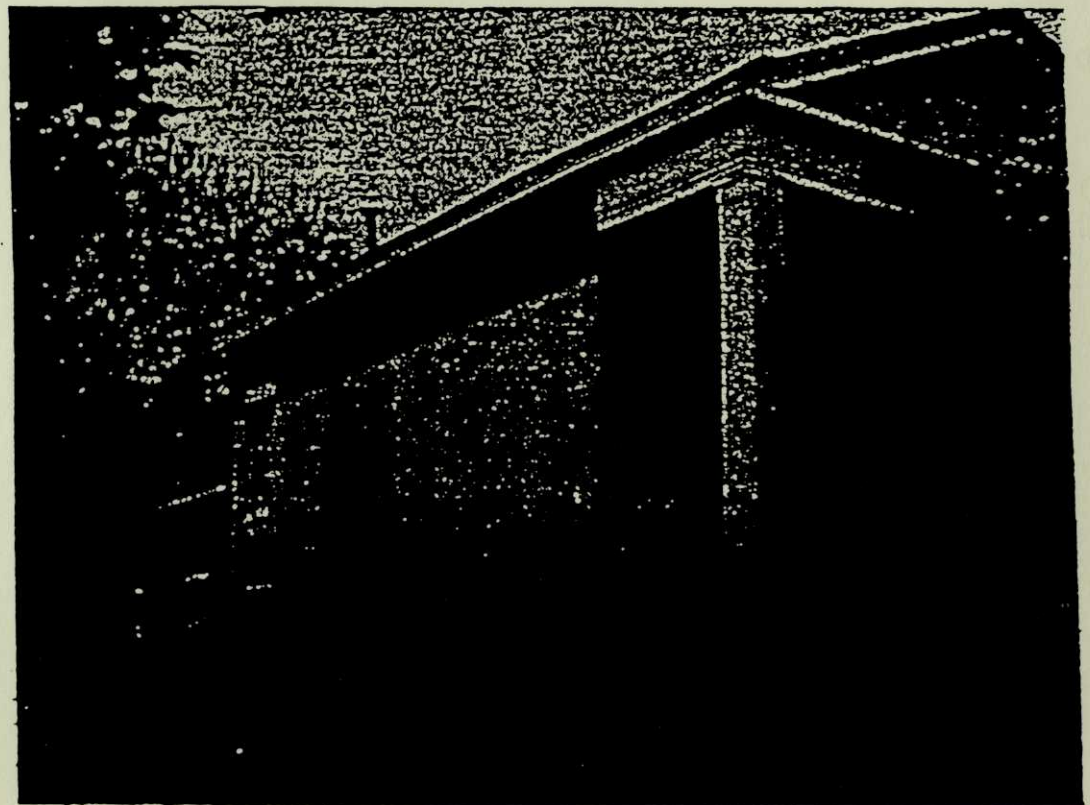
T-R July 9/5
enemy soldiers for three and the children were for stay in the cellar.

In this year also, the Prince of Wales, later Edward VI entertained, and spent the night during his visit to the coast. One can imagine what a fine occasion must have ensued with fine ladies and gentlemen, splendid evening apparel and times.

At one time it is understood there was more land than is present. Here again one can picture gardens and fields to the house, with a carriage house and a barn, with splendid livery.

Slaves hidden in the barn have stirred at the sound of barking, or a horse restless in its stall, thank a resting place, on their long fearful journey from the

Now up for sale, this house with all of its tales and memories must not be destroyed or altered. If possible the citizens of Fort Erie should find a way to preserve it as a part of history.



Bertie Hall built by William Forsythe

Bertie Hall, 667 Niagara Pkwy., Fort Erie has a long and mysterious history having been involved in major historical events shaping Canada and the Niagara Peninsula. This dwelling, on sale at the moment, has been a terminus for the Underground Railway and Fenian Raiders headquarters.

(T-R photo by Barnat)

Controversy followed William Forsyth

By CHARLES DAVIES

FORT ERIE — William Forsyth, the builder of Bertie Hall, was constantly involved in controversy and litigation before he came to this community.

Disliked by his neighbours at Niagara Falls he was the subject of rumor and innuendo that "hung over his head like the mist over the falls" but to this day the accusations remain uncorroborated.

Born in Tryon County, N. Y. in 1754 he was the son of James and Mary Forsyth, Loyalists who came with their five children to settle on the west side of the Niagara in 1783.

William lived on the family farm in Stamford Township until 1796 when he first petitioned for land as a member of a Loyalist family.

In 1799 he was described by historian Robert L. Fraser as a yeoman, a small landowner and farmer of the middle class. At this time he came into conflict with the law, standing trial for a felony.

After winning an acquittal he was arrested again on March 7 and jailed for a capital offence. In a daring escape he tried to make his way to the United States but was apprehended and returned to prison. He appealed to Administrator Peter Russell to set him free on condition that he would "banish himself". Russell could not make a decision regarding prosecution, there were "so many questions of Prudence, Policy and Law." After several months the matter was dropped.

THE PAVILION

Forsyth had acquired prime land next to the Horsehoe Falls and there he built the Pavilion Hotel in 1822. It was a large frame structure three stories in height with piazzas on each side. Described as a splendid establishment, "unequaled in this new country," it was the fashionable place for noblemen and gentlemen to visit.

Forsyth's location at Table Rock was the best for visitors wishing to gain a close look at the cataract which was only yards away, a short walk through a wooded area. A stairway led down into the gorge; at the bottom he conducted tours behind the Horsehoe Falls. For 50 cents visitors were outfitted with Dunstable hats, shoes, frocks and waxed pantaloons. Everything possible was done to add to the comfort of his guests.

Sometimes referred to as "the founder of the first tourist trap in Upper Canada" he was involved in many enterprises including daily stage runs to Buffalo and Niagara-on-the-Lake, a ferry service across the lower river, and the rental of carriages and post-horses.

"THE OUTRAGE"

Forsyth was determined to hold his position as leading entrepreneur at the Falls; everything possible was done to eliminate competition. Steps were taken to prevent Americans from operating stage lines and ferries to the United States.

Competition for tourist dollars was intense. When rivals Thomas Clark and Samuel Street were awarded the rights to operate a ferry below the falls in 1825 Forsyth was enraged. The owners mysteriously lost three of their boats in 1826 and the stairway to their landing was damaged in 1827.

Between Forsyth's hotel and the edge of the gorge was a narrow strip of land, 66 feet wide, referred to as the chain reserve or military reserve. Although he had no right to do so, Forsyth tried to stop other operators from using it. When neighbor John Brown built a plank road on a reserve and a stairway to the gorge Forsyth constructed a fence from his property to the edge of the gorge denying access to all but his own clients.

Clark encouraged Brown to take the matter to the authorities on grounds that Forsyth "had no right to put the fence where he did." Lt. Governor Maitland sent Capt. George Phillipotts of the Royal Engineers to assess the situation. "The Outrage", as it became known, occurred when Maitland ordered Phillipotts to tear down the fence after determining that it was on military land.

Cries came from many quarters claiming that the matter should have been settled in the courts, not by military force. William Lyon Mackenzie condemned the action in his paper.

Mackenzie had Joseph Hume raise the issue in Parliament in

1832, but Forsyth, claiming he had "been harrassed by Law, injured by Government, persecuted for the sake of his property and embarrassed in his business" decided to sell his holdings. Land, 407 acres and buildings were deeded to Clark and Street for 10,250 Pounds Sterling, a small fortune at that time. However, he continued to run

~~the same year that he made arrangements to start the construction of Bertie Hall. It is clear that he wanted to leave all the controversy behind and settle on~~

upper Niagara as a gentleman farmer in Bertie Township. (The question remains - Did he die quietly in his new mansion or did he become involved in other money-making pursuits?)

Forsyth family lived at Bertie Hall

By CHARLES DAVIES
 FORT ERIE. Jane Forsyth looked out of her window at the constantly changing waters of the Niagara: mallards and rednecks bobbed about and drifted along with the current, occasionally turning tail upwards to scavenge for food beneath the surface. The big front bedroom at Bertie Hall was "her room" and from it, beyond the narrow stretch of water, she could see smoke rising from the chimney pots at Black Rock on the opposite shore.

William Forsyth, at age 62, tired of the endless conflict with neighbors and authorities at Niagara Falls over land rights, sold off his holdings and left the Pavilion Hotel at Table Rock in December of 1833. This was the same year that he petitioned local authorities to remove stone from the shore of Lake Erie to build a foundation for his home. Allowing for construction time it is likely that he moved into the new building in the mid 1830's, using other quarters until it was ready for occupancy.

The pillared house was a mansion compared to others of the period in Bertie Township. It was a symbol of wealth that generated much talk among the less affluent and raised speculation about his source of income. The old rumors and innuendo that plagued him over the years at the Falls were not forgotten; they continued to rest on his doorstep.

LARGE FAMILY

William Forsyth married twice and fathered 19 children. His first marriage to his cousin, Mary Ackler, produced 10 children and his second marriage to Jane gave him nine more.

Those born between 1801 and 1828 were: William Jr., Nelson, Collingwood, Sophronia, Samuel, Betsy, Melissa, Isaac Brock, and Rodney. Having only two large bedrooms on the second floor, Bertie Hall could not accommodate the entire family; some of the children were married with homes of their own at the time of the move.

NELSON FORSYTH

Most prominent in local affairs was Nelson Forsyth who married Archange Warren; both had streets in Fort Erie named after them.

They lived on Forsyth Street, just west of the Niagara Boulevard on land owned by his father.

In the 1871 census he is listed as a "trader" but, following in his father's footsteps, he was involved in many activities. As a co-owner he operated the Forsyth Hotel (later called the Anglo American), ran a private bank for a time, and worked in the ferry business as Col. Kerby's assistant. He served three terms as reeve of the village - 1863-1865, 1875 - 1877 and 1883 - 1884 and was a Justice of the Peace.

After a disagreement with Col. Kerby he established a private dock at the foot of Phelps Street near Bertie Hall. Kerby, as Collector of Customs, insisted that all ferries land at his own facility so that he could check cargo and assess duty. Forsyth, along with other operators, Lewis and Mackenzie, refused to comply with his orders. The Collector was constantly plagued by such actions and by his inability, even with the aid of several deputies, to control the passage of goods across the border. Smuggling was a common practice in the area.

ISAAC BROCK

Isaac Brock, usually referred to as Brock, lived at Bertie Hall and managed the farm for his mother after his father died at age 70 in 1841. Jane died three years later. In her will she left her bed and bed-

ding to her son Collingwood, at the time remaining in culture in the town of Fort Erie. He had the Province of Ontario was not four

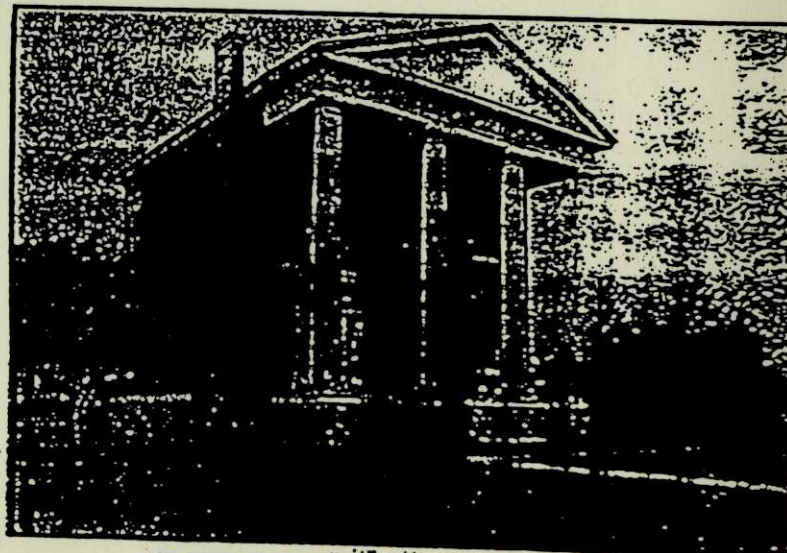
Brock's daughter, Olivia, is remembered by some local residents as a gentle lady, small stature, courteous and well-liked by all who knew her. She married Patrick Everett and they had five children - Alvin, Laura, Florence, Grace and Ernest.

In her later years she lived with Laura and Alvin at 14 Highland Ave. When she died there in 1919 the next-door neighbor, Beatrice Davies, was asked to go over and bathe and dress the body for burial. It was not uncommon in those days to take care of such matters at home. This writer, at age four, can remember seeing Olivia. Grandmother Everett as she was called, lived in the front parlor of the Ever-

A RESPECTED LADY

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BERTIE HALL PRE-1900

home.

FOLLOWED TRADITION

Olivia's daughter, Laura Hale, was like her mother in many ways. As a widow she managed her household with confidence and pride, drove a Model-T in the 1920's and 30's, a time when most women were not supposed to be self-sufficient, managed her own finances and hired help to maintain her large home.

The house on Highland Avenue was a grey frame building on the style of the early larger farm houses in the area. It had a double parlor, two bathrooms, a large kitchen with a woodburning stove, and a summer kitchen at the rear. A bay window in the second parlour looked out on a beautiful garden that Mrs. Hale designed and tended on her own. Like a park it took up the space of two lots where the Kirkland and Harvey houses now stand. In it she had almost every flower that you might name but took the greatest pride in her roses. The flowers were meticulously labelled for the edification of her visitors.

Al, her brother, was a ship's captain operating yachts for wealthy Americans. In the back yard by the barn rested a relic of past endeavours, an old dory similar to those used as lifeboats on a large vessel. His interest in the river was also a carry-over from the Forsyth line.

Laura, in her eighties, drifted into senility. Her brother, not accustomed to managing a household, sat by the kitchen window drinking and listening to his radio. He failed to buy food or to show any concern for his sister's well-being. In her last months she lived on bread and lard and when discovered in her second floor bedroom by a neighbor she was in a tragic state. She was moved to Douglas Hospital where she lived for only a few weeks. Arrangements were made for her brother, who was beyond caring for himself, to enter Sunset Haven.

This was a pathetic ending for two descendants of the Forsyth family, a family that added to the color and history of Fort Erie and left a monument in Bertie Hall that will remain for many years to come.

NEXT WEEK: WAS THERE A SECRET TUNNEL AT BERTIE HALL?

TUESDAY, MAY 6, 1990

Does Bertie Hall have a secret tunnel?

By CHARLES DAVIES

FORT ERIE- It was a dark night on the River Road. Scant illumination spilled intermittently through rents in the clouds casting light across the round white columns of Bertie Hall; fifty yards away it revealed a dark figure standing at the top of the bank looking down on some activity below.

A musket shot from the orchard behind the mansion shattered the silence. The dark figure turned as a second shot from the same location narrowly missed his head and struck the water beyond him.

This was not the first time that someone had tried to take Col. Kerby's life. As a military man he had faced death many times but his battle now, as Collector of Customs, was with a different enemy, smugglers who engaged in the illicit transfer of goods across the narrow Niagara River.

Also the object of harassment, his deputy, Orange Schryer, had one of his horses stabbed and another hamstrung to discourage efforts to enforce the law.

Kerby's surveillance on the night of the shooting was an attempt to confirm his suspicions regarding clandestine activities there. He was certain of the Forsyth brothers' involvement in the movement of contraband but was unable to apprehend them in the act or find willing witnesses to testify against them. Most people, down on the Collector because of his over-zealous efforts against minor offenders, were on the side of the smugglers.

In 1844, in a letter to Deputy Inspector General Joseph Cary, he stated, "Mr. N. Forsyth" would have you believe "that the limits of my Port of Entry extend from this (my dock) to his landing place (near Bertie Hall), which is a rendezvous for Smugglers owning small boats. And both he and his brothers I have good reason to know, own a host of them for that purpose, and practice it daily." In the same correspondence he wrote, "Mr. N. Forsyth... would lead you to suppose, that both he and his brother were still my Deputies appointed to his landing place to receive duties on imports: that ap-

pointment of my own making for the due protection of the Revenue was mutually rescinded in the month of Dec. 1841, as I am prepared to show."

SECRET TUNNEL

Some people are convinced that there was a secret tunnel leading from the bank of the river to the casement of Bertie Hall.

In her book, "Niagara - Hinge of the Golden Arc", Marjorie Freeman Campbell states:

"If the river's span and current here promoted legitimate enterprises, it also inspired more questionable pursuits as witness the old Forsyth cave, the so-called Smuggler's Home, an extensive underground passage running back from the river, capable of accommodating large quantities of contraband stores, and reputedly constructed by the notorious "Colonel" William Forsyth of Bertie Hall."

Rev. Walter Kern of Buffalo is convinced of the tunnel's existence, agreeing with others who suggest that the Hall was used as a "Safe House" for escaped slaves who came to

Canada via the "Underground Railway", aided by people such as Harriet Tubman. He brings bus-loads of school children to the house every week during the open season. In a study of Black history Rev. Kern helps the children to understand their heritage and to learn more about the hardships and routes of escape used by Blacks in their journey from bondage to freedom. At the site they search for signs of an opening in the deep cold basement and along the river bank.

Then there is the late Albert Danner of Bertie Township. He claimed that he stood in the tunnel and said that it came up to the house from the river.

Another story, based only on hearsay, suggests that one of the Forsyth children was drowned in the tunnel; there is no verification. Rodney died at age 14 in 1842 and Isaac Brock was drowned in the Niagara River in 1850 at age 31 but the exact location of their demise is not known.

SEARCH CONTINUES

People like to believe that there was a secret tunnel at Bertie Hall. Local



Students examine the basement walls of Bertie Hall in search of the legendary secret tunnel.

(Photo by Charles Davies)

school children have visited the location, tapped the basement walls and scoured the river bank for signs of a depression that might signal the existence of a hidden cave. Nothing of a significant nature was found. In the basement there is no sign of a difference in stone or mortar to indicate the sealing of an old opening.

It has been implied that the alleged tunnel was used in two ways—to assist escaped slaves and to provide a safe enclave for smugglers.

Once escaped slaves reached the shores of Upper Canada they did not have to hide. After 1793 they were

protected by the Provincial Anti-Slave Act. Slave hunters rarely crossed the border after that time and there were few here who would consider sending someone back into a life of bondage.

Smuggling, rampant along the border from Point Abino to Black Creek, was carried out quite openly. There was little need for subterfuge as the distance was too great for Kerby and several deputies to patrol effectively.

Reason would suggest that there was no need for a tunnel at Bertie Hall; under cover of darkness, contraband could be brought up over the river bank, across the River Road and into the basement through an outer cellar door on the north side of the building.

The stories appear to be pure conjecture on the part of theorists. No charges were ever laid against the Forsyth brothers and no one has come forth with definite proof of the existence of a secret passage.

However, it is an interesting legend, one that conjures up all sorts of mental images. Curiosity seekers will continue to probe and ponder over the possibility of what might have been. They may gain some satisfaction in the search even though they do not arrive at any firm conclusions based on physical or historical evidence.