

The Road That Led To Somewhere

Personal Reflections On How A Family Chapter In Underground Railroad History Can Be Used To Celebrate And Forge Freedom 200 Years After The Abolition Of The Transatlantic Slave Trade

by Dr. Bryan E. Walls C.M.O.Ont.

The Quest For Justice For All of Humankind

ALL ABOARD!

The last stop on the Underground Railroad was Canada, and terminals like the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum.

There is a saying about democracy. Democracy might not be the best form of government, but show me a better one. Canada may still have problems in terms of race relations and diversity, but according to a United Nations study, Canada is considered one of the best countries in the world in which to live.

As individuals, we must work to keep our country in the lead, we must remain committed to celebrating diversity and promoting mutual respect and reconciliation. And collectively we must obtain guarantees from our institutions – law enforcement, economic, educational, faith communities and government leaders to make certain that there is justice for all and that the foul ideology of racial hatred is not part of any institution's psychological profile.

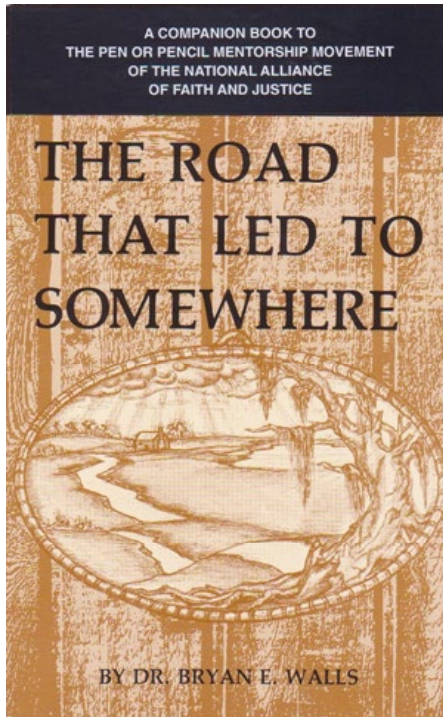


Photo by Anna Davis Walls

As founder of the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum and as Chair of the Proverbs Heritage Organization, I thank you for this opportunity to share with you my passion to use history and personal family struggles to seek justice and empower our minds to help change our world.

Proverbs Heritage Organization is a federally registered charitable not-for-profit organization founded in 1985 and is able to issue tax receipts for donations. Its mission is to celebrate diversity and promote mutual respect and reconciliation in innovative and creative ways.

In brief, Proverbs does this by creating and providing educational resource materials and units of study to teachers, schools and libraries. A primary focus is the development of the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum as a world class tourist attraction and educational field studies destination. Proverbs also publishes books, videos, T-shirts, music CDs, screenplays and librettos. Through key partnerships, Proverbs Heritage Organization is able to fulfill its mission statement on a national and international level.

For nearly twenty years we have been in partnership with the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development. Mrs. Rosa Parks, the legendary mother of the Civil Rights

Movement in the United States, was a personal friend and mentor during her lifetime, and a major sponsor of The John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum. Other key partners are Addie Richburg and the Pen or Pencil movement (Penitentiary or Academic Achievement at PenorPencilMovement.org which features the our organization and the *Road That Led To Somewhere*¹), the National Alliance of Faith and Justice out of Washington D.C. (nafj.org), Motown Historical Museum, aka Hitsville U.S.A., of Detroit Michigan, NASA (the National Aeronautic and Space Administration) out of Washington D.C. and Mickey Yannich, genius record producer of Century Productions in Sayreville, New Jersey. Mr. Yannich produced such notables as Jon Bon Jovi and Teddy Pendergrass. In Bon Jovi's *Slippery When Wet* album he lists Mickey as number one of his 100 top heroes. We have also partnered with schools, churches, museums and historic societies such as the Ontario Historical Society founded in 1888. The OHS serves as an umbrella organization and assists more than 360 societies incorporated through its charter. I am honored to be a Past President. As a concerned citizen and consultant through Proverbs Heritage Organization, I have continued an over ten year partnership with the Toronto Police Services. We believe that one can flee a thousand and two ten thousand² and that the right partnerships can work. I know that Professor Dino Doria, head of the Justice Studies Program at the University of Guelph-Humber, would agree with me as we go back over ten years working together.

Dino and I began at the Toronto Police Service Hate Crimes Division, proactively going into schools and using creative ways that the youth could relate to, planting positive seeds in their minds in order to instill good behavior. We found that in elementary school, specifically Grades 5 and 6, their hearts and minds were most receptive to diversity training techniques. However, we would not give up on high school students who, despite the baggy pants, cool demeanor and negative peer pressure, wanted to succeed in life.

¹ Dr. Walls refers to his book, *The Road That Led to Somewhere*, about his family's story in slavery and escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad.

² Deuteronomy 32:30



Bryan Walls and Beth Hanna of the Ontario Heritage Trust, August 2007. John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum. Photo by Adrienne Shadd

I recall Dino helping with a tour of high school students on a rainy day. He started the tour on the bus and was told by one student who had visited the John Freeman Walls Historic Site the previous year that before he visited the site, he was a racist. But now he was promoting diversity. Dino met Rosa Parks and found that she had a special gift, that she was a true angel. After I returned from New York City and 9-11's Ground Zero, Dino and I met and the seed of the Mutual Respect CD-ROM was sown. It is very layered and effectively promotes mutual respect with new police recruits and students. Let me read to you former Police Chief Julian Fantino's forward to the CD-ROM:

As the tragic events of September 11, 2001 were unfolding, members of the Toronto Police Service were visiting the Underground Railroad Museum in Puce, Ontario, in an effort to better understand the historical injustices of enslavement of black people. The valuable history lesson in this visit was how people, black and white and of different races and faiths, worked together to assist the fugitive slaves gain their freedom and promote "mutual respect" ... It is our hope that the message of "Mutual Respect" in this CD inspires all People to strive for harmony and respect of the differences of others....

I agree with Dino that it takes a multi-disciplinary and creative approach to solving today's problems. Thus, these initiatives, my book entitled *The Road That Led To Somewhere* and the historic site are one author's humble yet proud attempt to make a difference.

The John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum is located near Windsor Ontario, in a rural area off the 401 Exit 28, North one mile. At the entrance there is plaque that reads:

IN 1846 JOHN FREEMAN WALLS A FUGITIVE SLAVE FROM NORTH CAROLINA BUILT THIS LOG CABIN ON LAND PURCHASED FROM THE REFUGEE HOME SOCIETY. THIS ORGANIZATION WAS FOUNDED BY THE ABOLITIONIST HENRY BIBB PUBLISHER OF THE *VOICE OF THE FUGITIVE* AND THE FAMOUS JOSIAH HENSON. THE CABI SUBSEQUENTLY SERVED AS A TERMINAL OF THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AND THE FIRST MEETING PLACE OF THE PUCE BAPTIST CHURCH. ALTHOUGH MANY FORMER SLAVES RETURNED TO THE UNITED STATES FOLLOWING THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, WALLS AND HIS FAMILY **CHOSE** TO REMAIN IN CANADA. THE STORY OF THEIR STRUGGLES FORMS THE BASIS OF THE BOOK, "THE ROAD THAT LED TO SOMEWHERE" BY DR. BRYAN E. WALLS

I am often asked why I was inspired to write and dedicate my life to promoting *The Road That Led To Somewhere*. I answer by saying that while I believe there is innate goodness in humanity, still today we face the same challenges as our ancestors; the age-old challenge to follow the golden rule to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Through the multicultural story of my ancestors, a story which, for the period of the time in which they lived, was stranger than fiction, I wanted to say that there is hope for today, especially in this post-9-11 world. History tells us that there are always good people willing to help those who are oppressed. Certainly this applies to a hero of mine and should be yours as well, John Graves Simcoe. Allow me to go off on a tangent and explain more fully by sharing with you a personal experience that I had while living in Nassau, Bahamas.

I lived in a very stimulating corner of the island in an area known as Old Fort. They told me that at one time pirates used to stand on the coral rocks and watch for ships easing their way along the coral reefs – along the devil’s backbone as it was called – into Nassau Harbour and they could warn the pirate Black Beard and others of impending danger. As I stood on these same rocks, I could not help but appreciate the unique history that had taken place here, history that in the year 1492 held great world significance. So when I was asked to come here and speak to you today, I felt compelled to compare in terms of world significance the well-known drama that took place on the shores of the Bahamas in 1492 to the almost forgotten drama of my ancestors that lay buried in a small cemetery at what is now the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum. The almost forgotten drama contained within the pages of *The Road That Led To Somewhere*.



Original log cabin built by John and Jane Walls. John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum. Photo by Anna Davis Walls

As I stood on these coral rocks, soon in my mind’s eye I could also see ships with masts fifty to 100 feet high. And as my mind’s eye turned back even further through the pages of world history, instead of large ships I could see long canoes and in these canoes I could see the Lucayan Indians. Now many of you – and I was one – are not aware of

who the Lucayan Indians were. They were a group of the Arawak tribe, an Amerindian people who came from North America, Central America and across the Antilles chain of islands to where the present day Bahamas is located. All that my historical research would tell me of these people is that they were a meek, loving and kind people, and they were the first people that the explorers encountered when they first sighted this new land in 1492. There were 50,000 of these people. They greeted the explorers with open arms but fifty years later they were extinct, fifty years later they could literally be seen jumping from the highest cliffs into the waiting waters below to quench their thirst for freedom through death. They had been taken to the gold mines of Haiti as enslaved people and they could not endure. My second book, *The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth*, written while living and visiting Nassau, Bahamas deals with the Lucayan Indians and their connection with the African Diaspora. It is my intent, God willing, to publish it following a movie and play based on the pages of the *Road That Led to Somewhere*. The screenplay and libretto have been completed after study at Ryerson University Film School. My musical concept album *Only The Rainbow* was developed in collaboration with record producer Mickey Yannich of Century Studio in Sayreville, New Jersey.

Fifty years after these significant people - significant in terms of world history – became extinct, greed necessitated the initiation of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the carrying of millions of enslaved Africans to the New World. This act of man's inhumanity to man continued throughout the 15th and 16th centuries. However, at the end of the 17th century a hero of mine (and should be of all Canadians) walked onto the stage of history and said, 'Enough is enough.' His name was John Graves Simcoe, and he was the first Lieutenant- Governor of Upper Canada, as Ontario was then named. In the first Legislative Assembly at Newark (Niagara-on-the-Lake) in 1793, this abolitionist-minded leader and man of great piety toward God said these words: "There should no longer be discrimination between those of African, European, and Native ancestry." There was slavery in Upper Canada at that time. In fact, members of Simcoe's own government owned slaves. One such person was Matthew Elliot, who lived near Amherstburg. The Act that was passed was therefore a compromise piece of legislation, but the first time that a credible leader of a nation in the New World had the courage to begin to strike down slavery. The legislation stated that any enslaved person born after the Act was passed would be free upon turning twenty-five and that the children of these children would be free at birth. It also stated that any enslaved person coming from the United

States or any other country would be automatically free. This clause allows me to stand in front of you today as a proud fifth-generation descendant of nineteenth-century freedom-seekers and fighters. Thus began the first great freedom movement in the Americas since the time of the Lucayan Indians. At last the fugitive slaves from the United States had somewhere to run and seek true freedom. And again I am able to stand before you today and proudly say that because of the vision of John Graves Simcoe, my ancestors were able to become early pioneers in Canada. The Underground Railroad was the first great freedom movement in the Americas and the first time that good people, Black, white and of different races and faiths, were able to work together in harmony for freedom and for justice.



John Graves Simcoe Building at the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum. Photo by Anna Davis Walls

Just to give you a few highlights, I am told that the Underground Railroad was not a train running under ground from the South to the North. However it was a secret network of courageous people willing to risk their lives for the cause of freedom. I am told it was first formally organized in 1787 by a young Quaker abolitionist by the name of Isaac T. Hopper in Pennsylvania. The Quakers were very witty people who believed that

all men should be treated equal, that they were not animals but human beings. After the war of 1812, the soldiers went back south and reported that they did not see slavery in Canada. In fact, some even reported fighting against “coloured” free regiments in the Niagara and Detroit areas. By the early 1800s, there were definite routes of the Underground Railroad making their way to freedom. This is a fascinating period in history, made more personally exciting for me because in 1846, my ancestors crossed the 49th parallel to freedom.



Slaves hidden in wagon. John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum. Photo by Anna Davis Walls

The story of their journey for that time was stranger than fiction. Here is their story told to me by the *griot* of my family, *griot* being an African term for keeper of the oral tradition. I refer to Aunt Stella Butler. I purchased the ancestral homestead from my Aunt Stella in 1976, which is now the Historic Site and she told me many stories of old time days. Aunt Stella passed away in 1986 at 102 years of age, but her mind was sharp up to the end. This is what she told me:

John was born in 1813, on the same day Daniel, the slave master's son, was born and his mother died in childbirth. So John's mother, Jubil, suckled both boys and a close bond of friendship developed that would

strengthen throughout their lives, made stronger by mutual respect. When John grew up he married Sarah, an African American woman on a nearby plantation. The couple had two children. But John lost Sarah and his children when they were sold and forced to move farther south. Meanwhile, his boyhood friend, Daniel married Jane King Walls of Irish and Scottish descent and they produced four children. However, Daniel took seriously sick. On his deathbed, Daniel asked John to take care of his family, because he knew that John would guard them with his life. After Daniel died, John and Jane fell in love. Although Jane also had an abolitionist spirit, they could not marry due to slave laws in North Carolina of 1715, and reinforced in 1838, preventing interracial marriage. So they left with Jane's three daughters and son and a fourth young slave girl who helped Jane with the children. They made their way to Indiana, where white Quaker abolitionists by the name of Ephraim and Mary Stout, hid them. They stayed with the Stouts approximately one year, then continued on to Toledo, crossing over to Amherstburg, Ontario. They stayed in Amherstburg for about a year, but John was worried that slave catchers were coming to take him back, so they moved inland to the Puce road, which in those days was a full day's ride away on horseback.

The log cabin that John built in 1846 still stands along the Puce Road in the town of Lakeshore (formerly Puce). So does the small family cemetery where John and Jane and Aunt Stella, along with other descendants and fugitive slave friends, are buried. I am proud to say on the occasion of the 200th anniversary celebration of the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade that I have become a modern day griot and freedom fighter for justice. The oral legend handed down from Aunt Stella has been turned into documented family history. *The Key To The Road That Led To Somewhere*, is a genealogical manuscript to support the truth of the story told to me by Aunt Stella and contained within the pages of my book, *The Road That Led To Somewhere*. A key piece of the puzzle came from our own Ontario Historical Society publication, by historian

Malcolm Wallace, in an article entitled “Pioneers of the Scotch Settlement on the Shore of Lake St. Clair.”³ Wallace confirmed the interracial relationship and more.

I stand on the shoulders of great men and women who have gone before. The personal story of the Underground Railroad has become my shield and my sword is words like mutual respect, reconciliation, cooperation and love against which, in our perilous post-9-11 world, there is no argument. I thank you and God bless!



Walls family cemetery. John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum. Photo by Adrienne Shadd

³ Malcolm Wallace, “Pioneers of the Scotch Settlement on the Shore of the Lake St. Clair,” *Ontario History*, Vol. XLI, No. 4 (1949).



One of the "stations" of the Underground Railroad at the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum. Photo by Adrienne Shadd



Path to Freedom. John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum. Photo by Adrienne Shadd

Dr. Bryan Walls C.M. O.Ont. is an educator and founder of The John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum in Lake Shore, Ontario. He is author of The Road That Led To Somewhere, a book which chronicles the story of his great grandfather who made the trek on the Underground Railroad to Canada. Dr Walls holds many honours, including the Cruikshank Medal of Distinction from the Ontario Historical Society and the University of Toronto, Faculty of Dentistry Honouree of Distinction Alumni Award of Merit. He is also the recipient of the Order of Canada and the Order of Ontario.

For more information, or to contact Dr. Walls, visit the website at <http://www.undergroundrailroadmuseum.com>.