

New Canaan thrived, then died

EDITOR'S NOTE — Essex County is dotted with hamlets that once were thriving communities, but have changed with the times. This is another in a series of stories on some of these areas.

Photos and Story

By Rob Van Nie

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NEW CANAAN — They called it "the happy land of Canaan," the end of the underground railway for escaped slaves.

At the turn of the century, New Canaan was a thriving black community where the Gesto Road crosses River Canard in Colchester North Township.

Now the descendants of the original settlers have scattered and a tumble-down cemetery and a reservoir partially filled in with dirt are the only signs of the original community.

"The city called," said Alvin McCurdy of Amherstburg, an authority on local black history who has been sought out by historians from across North America.

McCurdy explained his grasp of local history this way:

"I spent the biggest part of my life sitting and listening to people talk," he said, adding he's also "been blessed with a very good memory."

Escaped slaves built the road and cleared the land in the New Canaan area, McCurdy said.

The community began to die when "the trees petered out," he said. Many of the inhabitants had been employed in timber-related industries.

The settlement had been built on swampy, heavy clay land, and without modern farming techniques it was difficult to make a living by farming.

According to research by the committee for the centennial of Colchester North, there was a gradual immigration of blacks to the area, which increased after the U.S. passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850.

The escaped slaves were aided by abolitionists, some of whom bought the settlers small farms.

But New Canaan didn't live up to its biblical milk-and-honey image for all the fugitive slaves.

McCurdy said some of the settlers were tricked with phoney deeds. After they had done the backbreaking work of clearing the trees, the owners demanded their land back.

Melissa Turner, an aunt of McCurdy's, used to teach school at New Canaan.

She boarded near the school and her father brought her to New Canaan from Amherstburg by horse and buggy on Sunday night and returned Friday to pick



The black cemetery at New Canaan: The smaller headstones (inset) rest on their backs around the two upright monuments

her up.

One Friday as he was pulling up in his buggy, his daughter called out that she had gotten married.

The surprised and angry father whirled his buggy around on the road and headed back to Amherstburg without a word.

One of the early inhabitants of New Canaan was Delos Roger Davis, said to be the first black lawyer in Canada.

Davis was appointed one of Colchester North's first clerks in 1882.

He is listed in a period gazetteer as a lawyer, farmer, and real estate and loan agent who owned 150 acres worth \$6,000.

Another early resident was a Mr. Hyre, who had a pottery mill along River Canard and would walk

about 16 km to Amherstburg to sell his wares.

By 1867, both sides of the Gesto Road were lined with houses in the New Canaan area.

After the American Civil War and the end of slavery, some of the settlers moved back to the U.S., mainly because they found Canadian winters too rugged.

Others began to move to the cities to get jobs.

However, New Canaan continued to exist into the early part of the 20th century.

The centennial committee's records show that in 1900, New Canaan's population was 50 and by 1909 it had grown to 60.

In 1900, the community had a school, a grocery store with a post office, and two churches.