

PLEASED TO CELEBRATE THORNTON BLACKBURN – A FORMERLY ENSLAVED PERSON WHO BECAME AN ENTREPRENEUR IN TORONTO

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Thornton Blackburn was a formerly enslaved person who became an entrepreneur in Toronto — and whose case set the precedent that Canada would not return slaves to the United States.

Thornton was born into slavery in Kentucky in 1812. He was just three years old when he was sold away from his mother. At 19, he married a nursemaid to a rich white family known as “Ruthie”. She was 28-years-old and known for her beauty, so when she was sold to someone in the Deep South, the newlyweds feared she was destined for a market for enslaved sex workers.

On July 3, 1831, they made a daring escape aboard a steamboat to Detroit, using forged documents to set up new lives. But just two years in, Thornton was recognized as an escaped enslaved person, and the pair were tried as “fugitive slaves”. They were convicted and jailed. But before they could be sent back to the south, the local Black community helped them escape and flee to what was then Sandwich, Upper Canada (Windsor, Ontario).

When the governor of Michigan at the time demanded their return, the lieutenant governor of Upper Canada — abolitionist Sir John Colborne — asked the Attorney General to find grounds to protect the couple and keep them in colonial Canada. Eventually, British colonial courts ruled the couple could not be returned to a jurisdiction where they would face a harsher sentence than Canadian law would allow — a principle and precedent that underscore Canadian extradition law to this day.

That nascent refugee policy also enshrined Canada as a safe haven for formerly enslaved persons who escaped north, and allowed for the establishment of the Underground Railroad.

“Ruthie” changed her name to “Lucie” as a celebration of her freedom and the two moved to Toronto, where Thornton was reunited with a long-lost brother who had also escaped. They settled near what is now Toronto’s Distillery District. Thornton worked as a waiter in the law courts at Osgoode Hall and learned about the burgeoning taxi system in Montreal. Eventually, he and Lucie established Toronto’s first hackney cab company

and “Blackburn cab” was known for its red and yellow logo — which is echoed in today’s Toronto Transit Commission iconography.

The couple used their wealth to benefit the community, donating funds to help build a local church and build affordable housing for freedom seekers who made their way to Toronto. Thornton spoke out against slavery, was a delegate to the North American Convention of Colored Freeman at St Lawrence Hall in 1851, and was an advisor to abolitionist George Brown.

The couple retired following the American Civil War, and their legacy is honoured at historic sites across Toronto. They are buried in the city’s Necropolis Cemetery.

McMillan LLP recognizes Thornton Blackburn as an Agent of Change. Not only did his case set an important precedent that Canada would not send enslaved persons back to slavery, but he gave back to his community and provided affordable housing and sanctuary to dozens of other freedom seekers who came to Canada to build a new life.