

Simpson Family History (James' Line) Part 1 – The Veteran

Several of the families that have been written about in our family history series have connections to the Amherstburg Freedom Museum, but none are more connected than the one featured in this month's family history: the Simpson family. As mentioned in last month's family history, there was extensive information available for two branches of the Simpson family: the first for Levi and this month's branch for James Simpson who is the ancestor of Museum founder, Melvin 'Mac' Simpson. As a result, Levi Simpson's line was discussed throughout February, while James Simpson's line will be featured this month. Before moving forward, I would like to express my gratitude to Allen Simpson and Derrick McBounds for sharing information about their ancestors.

According to James Simpson's obituary from August 18, 1893, James passed on August 11th and was "born in Mt. Pleasant, Belmont Co., Ohio, and came to Amherstburg in 1885. He served in the American war as a member of Co. L. 5th Regiment Massachusetts for 22 months, and at the close of the war was honorably discharged. During his service he received a bullet wound and was put on the pension list under the Act of 1890. After the close of the war he lived for two years in Adrian, Michigan, then came to Essex County and in November 1867, was married to Miss Matilda Brooks of Anderdon. Since then he has lived on Grosse Isle, Hickory Island, Detroit, Anderdon and Colchester South, and for the past 9 years has been a resident of Amherstburg."

The article continues, "Deceased has been in poor health for over two years, and for seven months past was confined to the house with dropsy. Besides a widow, he leaves eight children of whom seven are living at home – James, William, Carrie, Thomas, Roman, Oswald, and Mary, the youngest being but a baby. Mrs. Moses Kirtley is the eldest daughter. Four

children are dead, three dying quite young and one son, John, being accidentally shot about two years ago. Two brothers are living: Thomas, in Detroit and Albert, in Cleveland. Deceased was a member of Lincoln Lodge No. 8, A.F. & A.M. The funeral took place from his late residence on Fort street, on Sunday last, to the A.M.E. church, King street, and the remains were interred in the Amherstbrg [sic] cemetery. Rev. J. O'Bayon of Chatham, officiated as was assisted by Revs. J.A. Holt, Daniel Robertson and Joseph D. Holbert. The pall-bearers were Sim. McDowell, Geo. Thomas, Wm. Brantford, John D. Brown, Luther Bush and Philip Alexander."

This obituary provides substantial information including James' military service, when he arrived in Essex County, the names of his two (living) brothers (Thomas and Albert), when he married his wife Matilda and the names of their children. Allen Simpson also mentioned that James had a sister named Anna. As mentioned, James married Matilda Brooks. In the 1881 Census, James and Matilda are listed with their children: Ann, John, Lucinda, James, William, Caroline, and Thomas. The 1891 Census lists additional children including Claire (likely Caroline because of her age), Roman, Osborn (Oswald), and Mary.

Before we discuss James and Matilda's children, we want to share more about James and Matilda. An article that was published decades following James' life titled "The History of the Colored Folk In District Filled With Humor, Pathos, Industry" mentions that James worked at a job firing the boiler at the mill, but the article also mentions the discrimination that Black Canadians experienced in Essex County. It says "On another occasion the late Jim Simpson was trudging home one noon hour from his job of firing the boiler at the mill and as he weaded [sic] his way homeward he was thoughtfully puffing away at his old clay pipe when 'zing!' the bowl of his pipe flew away. It was just another joke of the wild Irish who from the porch of the tavern took this way of proving their marksmanship!" Although this article refers to this incident as a

joke, this was sadly not an isolated incident. The lives of Black Canadians were threatened daily and this is just one example. A family tree for the Simpson family from the Museum's collection provides a few more details about James' work and says that, in Anderdon, he was a 'fireman' tending boilers at the Thomas Mill.

Matilda passed away several years after James and according to her obituary from August 12, 1910, "Mrs. Matilda Simpson, relic of the late James Simpson, passed away at her home on Fort street Friday last, following an illness extending over a number of years, and the funeral took place Sunday afternoon to the A.M.E church, which was packed to the doors with friends of the deceased lady, who was held in high respect by all who knew her. Rev. A.W. Hackley, the pastor, preached impressively from the text: Rev. 2:10 – 'Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee a crown of life,' and music was rendered by a special choir. A number of members of Ruth Chapter, Order Eastern Star, No. 4, of which chapter she was a Past Matron, assembled and took part in the services. Interment was in Rose Hill cemetery, the pallbearers being Thomas Chavis, John R. Dickerson, Peter Brookes, Gary Hurst, George Taylor and Newton Bell. Deceased's maiden name was Matilda Brookes and she was born in Augusta, Bracken county, Ky., May 4th 1848. She came to Canada about 54 years ago and eleven years later was married to James Simpson who predeceased her 17 years. Their family originally consisted of thirteen children, of whom the following are living: Mrs. Charles Bird, of Windsor; Mrs. Carrie Banks, Jerome, Oswell and Mary, of Amherstburg, and James, of New York. She was a very industrious woman, and was highly esteemed. Her brother is Rev. Peter Brookes, of Harrow."

The Museum's collection also offers further details not mentioned in Matilda's obituary. A Simpson family tree states that Matilda was the daughter of Susan and Edmund Brooks (1798-1873). More information for Edmund Brooks is found in an article from the *Amherstburg Echo*

titled “60-Year-Old Pupil” which talks about a segregated school in Marble Village. The article refers to Edmund as Edwin Brooks and says “In the early years the school boasted the oldest student in the country attending regular classes, Edwin Brooks, grandfather of Jerome Simpson, King Street, hungry for knowledge, attended classes there at the age of 60, carrying his lunch daily to the schoolhouse along with his grandchildren. And Mr. Brook’s patience were rewarded for he received a fair education. Some years after the court battle, the ‘white’ school was destroyed by fire. It was not rebuilt and the pupils were compelled to attend either the colored school or the Separate School on Darragh’s Hill, Texas Road. When the Brunner Mond Company began to flourish about 1917 a colony of workmen with families congregated near the quarry. The school accommodations were inadequate and the company resolved to erect a new school. The colored school by this time had outlived its usefulness and it was decided to construct a new building. For this purpose the Brunner Mond leased to the School Section a plot of land on the second concession, south of the Texas Road. In the Spring of 1918 a new public school without color distinction was opened with Miss McCormick as teacher. And with the erection of the new building there passed from the scene one of the oldest centres of learning in the district.”

What we publish is not a complete history of any family and is based on the documents that are available. We welcome photos and information to fill in the gaps. See you next week for part 2.