

The Hawkins Family History Part 1 – The Rifle

This month's family history will highlight the Hawkins family beginning with James Hawkins and his wife Sarah Scott. According to a note found in the Museum's family history collection, James was born circa 1805 in Kentucky, but some records say he was born in 1817. It also says that he came to Essex County circa 1832. James' 1892 obituary shares further details and says "In Anderdon, on Friday, June 10th, James Hawkins, aged over 70 years. Deceased was born in slavery, but made good his escape and came to this country about 40 years ago and has resided in Anderdon ever since." James was a farmer who owned roughly 8 acres in the Gore on Concession #1 in Anderdon which was worth approximately \$1,000. James' wife Sarah Scott Hawkins, according to her death record, was born in Kentucky and passed away at the age of 78 on December 11, 1894.

Before discussing James and Sarah's children, we are going to share an interesting article from the *Amherstburg Echo* from February 23, 1934 titled "Rifle Presented to 'Burg Museum Recalls Escape of Slaves." This lengthy article shares several significant details about James' life and says "Perpetuating a period in American history when colored humanity was just so many pieces of flesh to be auctioned off, or retained at the will of the owner, a rifle has been presented to the Amherstburg Historical Sites and Museum Association. It is only a gun. There are perhaps hundreds of other similar models in existence, but few have such a tragic history surrounding them. A story of down-trodden human beings; slinking, cowering slaves' dauntless courage, undying love; stoicism under inhuman cruelty; torture wracked bodies; and romance surmounting all obstacles. Flights in the dark of night and baying bloodhounds hot on the scent of fear-filled but determined blurb of humanity. Such are the threads that are woven in the story of the gun to make it a valuable acquisition to the Amherstburg Museum."

The story continues with the reaction of the bounty hunters who were tracking the Hawkins family including James whose reputation as a marksman deterred them from continuing their search, saying “‘If that’s the mark of Jim Hawkins’ gun I’ll stir not a step further. It’s as much as our lives are worth. Come! We’ll return.’ The speaker stood on the bank of the Ohio River in the cold, gray dawn of the morning. Surrounding him in a shivering semi-circle was a group of his slaves, being jerked to and fro by baying blood-hounds straining at the leash to follow on the scent of their human quarry. They had followed four fugitive slaves only to be balked at the brink of the river when only a few hours separated from their prey. But the mark of the rifle and Jim Hawkins’ reputation as a marksman rendered futile their pursuit and enabled the fleeing party to escape to freedom.”

James’ life of enslavement is also detailed in this article and says “Jim Hawkins had been a slave owned by Vincent Hamilton. A fine figure of a man, broad-shouldered and strong, and possessed of an intelligence above the ordinary slaves. His accomplishments earned him the confidence of his master and he soon became a trusted foreman on the Kentucky plantation. When Hamilton became privately favorable towards abolition he freed Hawkins but retained him as an employee. Hawkins was a devoted servant and went with his master on his many trips. He had also become an expert shot with a rifle and displayed his prowess on various occasions, earning him recognition among even the slave owners of the county. Toiling from daybreak to darkness, sweating in the merciless sun, backs unnaturally bent in harvesting the tobacco, flax and barley crops, the slaves were glad of the little recreation grudgingly accorded them on Saturday nights. Gathered at one of the plantations their spirits would rise with the little touch of freedom and they would make merry as only downtrodden humanity can when it forgets for a

moment the torments of the week. Mellow-voiced harmony, light-footed dances, soul-stirring spirituals, lifted the negroes slaves above their unenviable plight.”

The first time James met his wife Sarah is also documented in this article and says “It was at one of these gatherings that Jim Hawkins met a young girl from a neighboring plantation who aroused his slumbering emotions and they slipped apart when the occasion afforded to whisper their love to each other. Despite the ties of bondage that held Sarah Scott the chattel of the white man, they plighted their truth? And were married by Edmund Brooks, a colored preacher who afterwards lived in Amherstburg, on October 16th, 1841. He was 26 and she 16 years old. For nine years they lived in comparative happiness. Restricted as they were to only Saturday night meetings they still were very much in love and to them were born in slavery two children, Jessie, born in 1843, and Susan, in 1847. Sarah Hawkins was employed as a cook by her master, John Curtis ... John Curtis was a gambler and drinker, and after drinking and gambling bouts there would be sure to be a number of slaves taken away the following day to a new master, their bodies gambled away with dice or cards as though they were just pieces of flesh. Employed as she was in the household Sarah Hawkins could overhear conversations and knew that the owner was being pressed for money. It was in one of these conversations with his wife that Sarah heard a remark that came as a blinding, heart-wracking sentence of doom. She was to be sold ‘down the river.’ To a cluster of men and women who were already little more than beasts of burden it would seem that their plight could not be worse. But to the Kentucky slaves, ‘down the river’ was a hell of torment. Blistering heat in the cotton fields, where death was not a feared, but a welcome, visitor. The stinging lash of brutal overseers cutting their backs into ribbons of raw flesh. Left shackled in the stocks unable to move hand or foot while pestilential insects sucked the blood oozing from the naked wounds. An object of pity for angels

to weep over, but not for their fellow-man to reach out a helping hand. He who moved to render assistance, even if it were only a word of commiseration, would be thrown in the stocks and treated in the same manner. Slaves cowering on the auction block while a raucous-voiced auctioneer bellowed ‘How much am I offered?’”

The last details mentioned in this article state “It was a vision of such torment that was created by the words ‘down the river’ and Jim Hawkins and his wife vowed they would risk their lives, gladly give them up, rather than be separated and allow their beloved children and themselves to be subjected to such cruelties. They had heard the shrieks of the slaves who were forced to go to the southern plantations and the thought of freedom nerved them to brave the perils of flight rather than die in bondage. They laid their plans well and with the help of Leonard Baker, another slave on the Curtis farm, and the assistance of Jim Hawkins’ owner, Mr. Hamilton, they managed to secure three horses. The flight was scheduled for a Saturday night when Jim would be visiting his wife. There was no hitch to the proceedings and they set off without their escape being discovered until they had had a good start. A boatman was hired to ferry them across the river at Ripley, O., and there they found shelter in the home of an abolitionist. Lying hidden in the houses in the daytime and travelling by covered wagons under cover of darkness they reached Cleveland after a six weeks’ journey through the woods. There they took a boat for Windsor and arrived without mishap. Jim Hawkins secured work near Amherstburg and by his willingness to work and saving habits acquired a farm of his own. Here he raised his family, free from the shadow of the slave-owner’s whip and as respected citizens. One of their daughters, Mrs. J.M. Brantford, who lives on George Street, Amherstburg, presented her father’s gun to the Museum and told her father’s amazing history. She can remember her father’s owner, who paid a visit to his favorite slave, and she can remember when her father

visited the old plantation in Kentucky on the occasion of the golden wedding of Mr. and Mrs. Hamilton. The story is but a fragment of those dark days in American history and would never have been retold but for the presentation of the gun to the Amherstburg Museum.”

After Clara (Hawkins) Brantford donated the rifle to the Amherstburg Historical Sites and Museum Association, the *Border Cities Star* wrote “The historical collection that has been assembled in the Public Library Museum at Amherstburg is a summary in symbols of the evolution of the district ... Not the least interesting of the exhibits is the rifle with which a fugitive slave Jim Hawkins, defied his pursuers and their bloodhounds when he escaped from slavery in 1847, and made his way to Amherstburg via the underground railway.” You may be wondering where the rifle ended up. After contacting several historical sites in Essex County including Fort Malden, the Park House, the Marsh Collection, Museum Windsor and Parks Canada, we could not find the location of the rifle, but we are still searching. If you have any details that could help us find James Hawkins rifle, we would love to hear from you. Hopefully we can solve this mystery.

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.