

The Harding Family History Part 1 – Settlers of Queen’s Bush

In last month’s Henderson family history, I shared information about the Harding family with the promise to expand on their history this month. Curator Emeritus, Elise Harding-Davis once again has shared memories and photographs to enrich this month’s family history about the Harding Family. We are grateful for her contributions.

The Harding family begins with Major Harding (sometimes spelt Harden) and his wife Martha (some records say Maria Hammett). According to the 1861 Wellington County Census, Major Harding was a farmer and Baptist, who was born in the United States circa 1798 and married in 1820. Martha/Maria’s details are similar. She was born in the United States circa 1801, was a Baptist and was married in 1820.

Their children include Robert, Martha, Rachael, and Sarah Jane. I was not able to find information for Rachael or Sarah Jane, but did uncover documents for Martha and Robert. Elise shared a marriage record for Martha Brown, the daughter of Major and Maria Harding, who married Thomas Parks, the son of John and Ann Parks, on December 13, 1864 in Wellington, Prince Edward County. Martha Park’s death record states that she passed away on November 9, 1914 in North Buxton at the age of 88. At the time, Martha was widowed.

According to Robert’s marriage record, he married Elizabeth Travis, the daughter of John Travis (sometimes spelt Travers/Traves) and Christina Brumer (some records say Boomer), on February 26, 1860 in Waterloo. They settled in the Queen’s Bush settlement. Approximately 1,500 Freedom Seekers and Free Black persons settled there. According to Linda Brown Kubisch’s book *The Queen’s Bush Settlement: Black Pioneers 1839-1865* (pages 52-53), “By the late 1830s the Queen’s Bush community comprised an area eight by twelve miles in what would eventually become the southern section of the Township of Peel in Wellington County and the

northern half of the Township of Wellesley in Waterloo County. However, the highest concentration of settlement occurred in the southern half of Peel Township between Concessions 1 and 6. Although many regarded the Queen's Bush as a fugitive slave community, its residents during the ensuing years would continue to be a diverse group of people, that included, not only runaway slaves, but free Blacks from the United States, Canadian-born Black and white settlers. The community's Black residents maintained a network of family and friends with other Black communities in the province and in the United States. These links of communication provided a foundation of mutual support in adapting to their new homeland and, in many cases, to their new-found freedom."

On February 3, 1846 the Mount Hope Mission School was built on four acres of land in the Queen's Bush Settlement. Samuel White, who was previously enslaved in Maryland and came to Canada by 1834, gave the land on a long-term loan, but if the school ever closed he wanted the land returned to him. The school was described as a "noble school-house, which is fit for a church, or a large dwelling." On the first day of operation, the school had 16 children, which increased to 54 students in attendance. A cemetery is all that remains of the Mount Hope Mission.

The 1871 Wellington County Census lists Major and Maria Harding along with their children Martha, Rachael, and Sarah Jane. A few spots down on the Census, under a separate household, is Major and Maria's son Robert with his wife Elizabeth. Also listed with Robert and Elizabeth are their children Malvena, William, Robert, Morris and Helen. The following Census from 1881 for Robert and Elizabeth Harding lists William, Robert, and Morris H., with the addition of Elyence (likely Elsin/Ellen), Mary and Elizabeth C. The next Census lists Robert

and Elizabeth with their son Benjamin. Before discussing Robert and Elizabeth's children, I'm going to share a few more details about them.

The website for the Buxton National Historic Site and Museum says the following about Robert: "Robert Harden was born a slave between 1833 and 1841 to Major and Maria Harden on a plantation in Virginia. Robert, along with his parents ... first settled in the Queen's Bush area of Wellington County. In 1860, Robert married Elizabeth Travis. In 1866, the couple settled in the Buxton Settlement, purchasing 50 acres on the 7th Concession to support their family of seven children farming. The children of Robert and Elizabeth were Malvina, William, Thomas, Morris, Ellen, Elizabeth & Victoria. Robert served in the Militia in 1866 to 1867 ... Descendants of Elizabeth (Travis) and Robert Harding Sr. are still members of the Buxton community." Elise adds that Robert and his father Major Harding fought during the rebellion of 1837-1838 and, along with several Black residents, petitioned for property.

According to Robert Harding's death record, he passed away on September 30, 1917 in Raleigh, Kent County, at the age of 87. This record also mentions that Robert was born circa 1830 and his occupation was farmer. The informant was his daughter Ellen (Elsina) E. Jackson. Elise shared that Robert's wife Elizabeth Travis Harding helped to found the British Methodist Episcopal Church in Buxton and she married five times.

Robert and Elizabeth Harding's children include Martha, William, Robert, Morris H., Elsina/Ellen, Mary, Elizabeth, twins Lavina and Malvena/Melvina, and Benjamin. I could not find any information for Malvena, Mary, and Benjamin, but did find information for Martha, William, Robert, Morris, Elsina, Elizabeth, and Lavina.

Martha Victoria Harding was born on January 20, 1873 in Raleigh, Kent. Martha married James E. Steele, son of Irwin Steele and Mary Foster, on December 29, 1898 in Chatham. Martha also married William Abraham Shadd, the son of Garrison Shadd and Harriet Poindexter, on April 22, 1927 in Raleigh, Kent. Her marriage records states that Martha was a widow at the time of her second marriage. The 1911 Census for Martha Steele lists her children Benjamin, Thelma, Myrtle and Ervin. This record lists Martha as a widow, meaning that James passed away before 1911. Martha and James' daughter Myrtle Florane Steele married Earnest Stanley Moore, the son of William Moore and Elmira Malone, on September 21, 1912 in Raleigh, Kent County. According to a US Social Security Information Record for Myrtle, she was born on September 22, 1894 in Raleigh Township and she passed away on October 31, 1987.

Myrtle's brother Charles Irving Steele was born on June 12, 1900 in Raleigh. He married Laura Belle Travis, the daughter of James Travis and Annie Roberson, on August 10, 1923 in Dresden. It's important to note that Irvin and Laura Belle's son Eugene was the first Black Fireman in Windsor and he married Freida Parker who is among the first Black Nurses to graduate from Hotel Dieu of the St. Joseph School of Nursing in Windsor.

Charles Irving's sister Thelma Arreta Steele was born on September 10, 1910 in Raleigh, Kent. Myrtle, Charles and Thelma's mother Martha passed away on May 30, 1936 at 63 years old in Romulus, Michigan. Her death record also states that she was born on December 2, 1872 in Buxton. This record also indicates that Martha married a third time because she is listed as Martha Thompson, not Shadd or Steele. The first name of her third husband is not listed.

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.