



BREAKING THE CHAINS



# Albert Jackson

TORONTO

Underground Railroad Alumnus and the First Black Letter Carrier in Toronto

When Albert Jackson arrived in Toronto as a toddler, he was barely aware of the momentous trip he had just taken with his family on the Underground Railroad. His mother, Ann Maria Jackson, had just escaped slavery in Delaware with seven of her nine children. The oldest two sons had just been sold away from her, and her husband, John Jackson, who was a free African American blacksmith, had subsequently died of grief. Then, in the fall of 1858, Ann Maria learned at the last minute that her owner, Joseph Brown, intended to sell the next four oldest children away. She made a mad dash for freedom, travelling on foot from Milford, Delaware, with her children on a route toward Wilmington, and then on to Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania, a free state.<sup>i</sup>

Mrs. Jackson's children ranged in age from about three – little Albert – to about sixteen years of age. The littlest ones could not walk very far or fast on foot. As a three-year-old, Albert Jackson would have been particularly difficult to deal with because his cries could have easily given away the party. When Josiah Henson, the leader of the Black settlement at present-day Dresden, fled with his wife and four children from Kentucky, he carried his youngest two, who were two and three years of age, in a knapsack on his back. Two days before they reached Cincinnati, their food supply ran completely out. He later wrote: "All night long the children cried with hunger ... My limbs were weary, and my back and shoulders raw with the burden I carried. A fearful dread of detection ever pursued me..."<sup>ii</sup>

Fortunately for Ann Maria Jackson and her children, Underground Railroad agents were on the lookout in





Delaware. They were able to pick up the family in a carriage and transport them to safety in Pennsylvania, just on the other side of the Delaware border. One of these agents wrote to William Still, the African American secretary of the Pennsylvania Antislavery Society, informing him of the rescue:

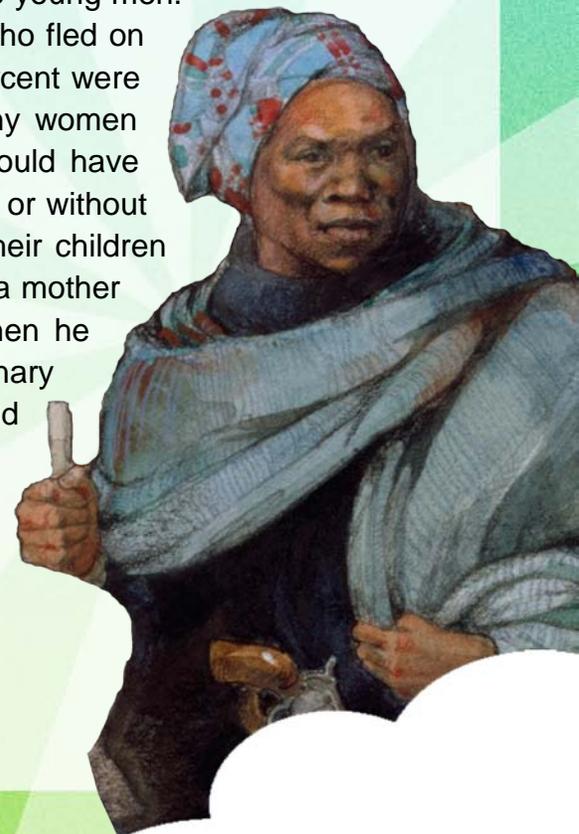
Wilmington, 11<sup>th</sup> mo., 21<sup>st</sup>, 1858

Dear Friends – McKim and Still: -

... we had some trouble in getting them safe along, as they could not travel far on foot, and could not safely cross any of the bridges on the canal, either on foot or in carriage. A man left here two days since, with carriage, to meet them this side of the canal, but owing to spies they did not reach him till 10 o'clock last night; this morning he returned, having seen them about one or two o'clock this morning in a second carriage, on the border of Chester county, where I think they are all safe, if they can be kept from Philadelphia....

THOS. GARRETT

William Still met with the family and recorded their story for posterity. It was an unusual party. Most “passengers” on the Underground Railroad were young men. In fact, it has been estimated that 80 percent of all those who fled on the Underground Railroad were men and only about 20 percent were women, for reasons that had to do with the fact that many women were either pregnant, nursing or had small children. It would have been far more difficult for them to escape from slavery, with or without their children, and most would not have wanted to leave their children behind.<sup>iii</sup> Stating that it was a special pleasure to aid such a mother and her family, Still paid tribute to Ann Maria Jackson when he wrote, “The fire of freedom obviously burned with no ordinary fervor in the breast of this slave mother, or she never would have ventured with the burden of seven children, to escape from the hell of Slavery.”<sup>iv</sup>





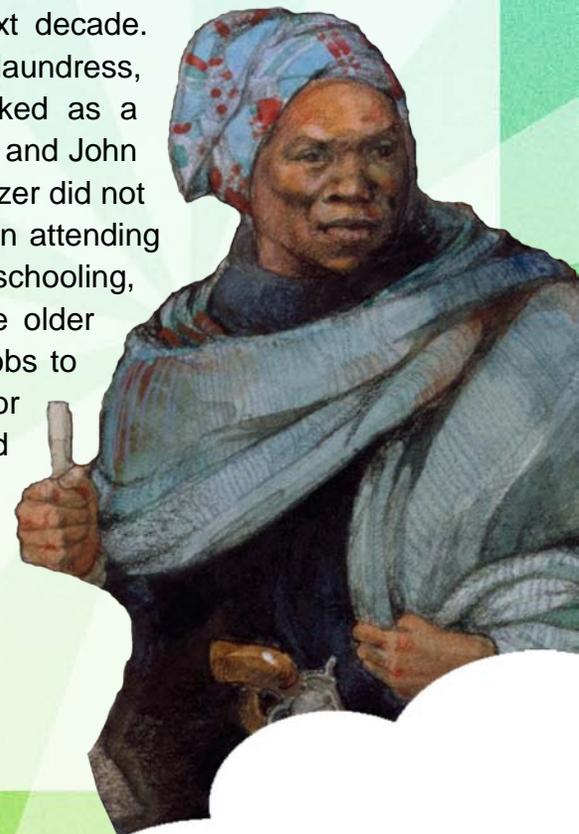
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The family's safe arrival in Canada was announced in a letter to William Still at Philadelphia from St. Catharines Underground Railroad agent, the Reverend Hiram Wilson. Albert Jackson and his siblings were equipped with an ample supply of clothing and sent on to Toronto with letters of introduction to members of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada there.<sup>v</sup>

By 1861, Albert Jackson was five years old and living on 93 Edward Street in St. John's Ward, in downtown Toronto. This was the part of town north of Queen Street between Yonge and what is now University Avenue, north of Osgoode Hall. There many of the formerly enslaved African Americans who came to Toronto before the American Civil War found homes.

Albert Jackson was now living in freedom surrounded by his mother and family members. It is unlikely he was even aware of the tremendous burden that had been lifted from his mother's shoulders in their new home. Albert met his older brother James, whose sale away from the family had precipitated the death of his father, probably for the first time. Happily, James had escaped slavery just prior to his mother's flight in 1858, and had been living near St. Catharines at the time that Ann Maria arrived in Canada. James Jackson was happily reunited with his mother and siblings after they settled in Toronto.

The Jackson family continued to live together for the next decade. According to the 1871 census, Ann Maria worked as a laundress, taking in washing for a living. Wilhelmina, 29, also worked as a laundress. James, 23, and William Henry, 21, were barbers, and John Edwin, 19, was a waiter. At 17 years of age, Thomas Ebenezer did not have a job, and twelve-year-old Albert was the only Jackson attending school. Albert grew up with the benefit of many years of schooling, which some of his older brothers and sisters did not. The older children, upon arrival in Canada, would have had to find jobs to help support the family. Wilhelmina, James and William, for example, were all listed as over twenty years of age and unable to read or write in the 1871 census.<sup>vi</sup>

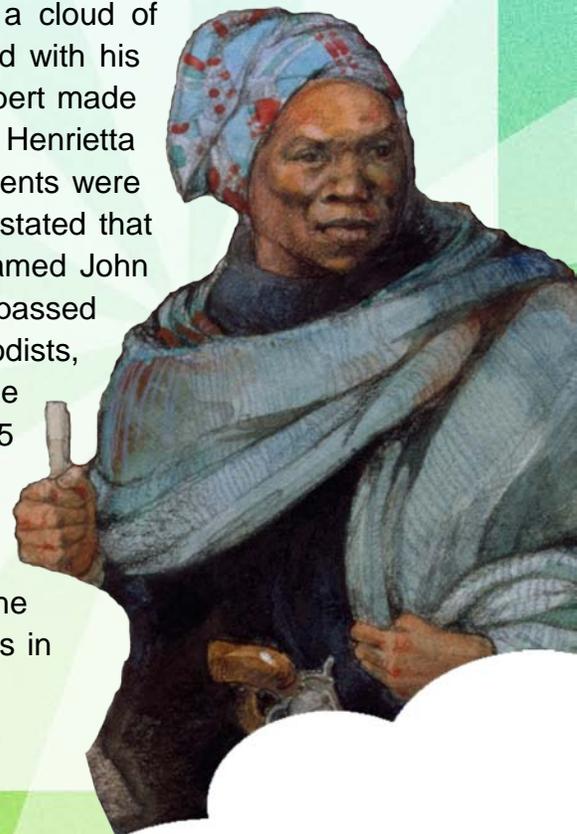




Albert matured into adulthood. In the year 1882, he received a coveted position with the government as a letter carrier for the federal post office, being the first African Canadian in Toronto to achieve such an office. In May of 1882, he was hired as a letter carrier, but the difficulty he encountered on the job indicates that white Canadians were not prepared to accept Blacks in certain positions, particularly highly-valued government appointments. Every white letter carrier refused to train him, and he was made an inside hall porter. However, the Black community vigorously objected to the situation, writing letters to the editors of the newspapers of the day, and holding a mass meeting at the Wesleyan Methodist church on Richmond Street. At the meeting, they established a five-member committee to look into the matter. Fortunately, a federal election was underway at the time, and the Liberal candidate, J. D. Edgar, made a case of the issue to gain support from Black voters.

T. C. Patterson, the Toronto post master, who also happened to be a close political ally of conservative Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, decided to succumb to the protests to help his friend the prime minister. When Macdonald came to Toronto he was greeted by a number of citizens who insisted that Jackson be put on the mail route. He replied that Jackson would be delivering mail as soon as possible. He had already been assured of this by Patterson. On June 2, 1882, Albert Jackson was sent out without incident with one of the letter carriers to learn his new job. Thus began his career as a mailman, the first known Black postman in Toronto.<sup>vii</sup>

With his situation as letter carrier secured, albeit amidst a cloud of controversy, Jackson was now in a position to move ahead with his life. At a comfortable beginning salary of \$600 per year, Albert made plans to take a wife. On March 5<sup>th</sup> 1883, Albert married Henrietta Elizabeth Jones, a Canadian-born Black woman whose parents were Henry and Martha Jones. On the marriage certificate, it is stated that Albert's father, who died when he was still a baby, was named John Jackson.<sup>viii</sup> Unfortunately, Albert's mother, Ann Maria, had passed away in 1880. Although the couple were professed Methodists, they were married by Reverend George W. Brown of the Baptist Church on Chestnut Street.<sup>ix</sup> They lived at 95 Chestnut Street and went on to have four sons: Alfred, born August 5, 1888; Bruce, born February 27, 1891; Richard, born March 16, 1893; and Harold, born February 24, 1895.<sup>x</sup> Jackson purchased a home on Brunswick Avenue which he rented out, and the family would later own numerous homes in





Harbord Village (near Spadina and Harbord Streets, close to the University of Toronto).<sup>xi</sup>

Albert Jackson remained with the post office for the rest of his career, retiring upon his death on January 14, 1918, after 36 years of service. He was about 62.<sup>xii</sup> He had experienced many of the benefits that Black people enjoyed in freedom in Canada. He had also witnessed firsthand the realities of the Canadian asylum when it came to people of African descent. Equality before the law did not necessarily mean equality in practice. It took concerted community action – and in Albert’s case, the intervention of a vote-hungry politician – to ensure that African Canadians could achieve similar civil and economic rights to those available to Canadians of European ancestry.

<sup>i</sup> William Still, *Underground Rail Road Records, with a Life of the Author, Narrating the Hardships, Hairbreadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in the Efforts for Freedom* (Philadelphia: William Still, 1883), 512-14.

<sup>ii</sup> Josiah Henson, *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (“Uncle Tom”) From 1789 to 1883*, John Lobb, ed., Revised and Enlarged (London, UK: Christian Age Office, 1882), 83.

<sup>iii</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Females Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York and London, UK: W.W. Norton, 1987), 70; Adrienne Shadd, “The Lord Seemed to Say “Go,”” in “Women and the Underground Railroad Movement,” in Peggy Bristow, et al, *‘We’re Rooted Here and They Can’t Pull Us Up’: Essays in African Canadian Women’s History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 42-43.

<sup>iv</sup> Still, 513-14.

<sup>v</sup> Still, 514.

<sup>vi</sup> 1871 Census of Canada, Province of Ontario, West Toronto, Div. 3, 49-50.

<sup>vii</sup> Colin McFarquhar, “Blacks in 1880s Toronto: The Search for Equality,” *Ontario History*, 99:1 (Spring 2007), 66-72.

<sup>viii</sup> Ontario Canada Marriages, 1801-1928, Schedule B, Marriages of York, Division of Toronto, #014362, 215, Archives of Ontario, MS932, Reel 45.

<sup>ix</sup> Ontario Canada Marriages, 1801-1928, Schedule B, Marriages of York, Division of Toronto, #014362, 215, Archives of Ontario, MS932, Reel 45; R. L. Polk & Co., *The Toronto City Directory for 1883* (Toronto: Hunter, Rose & Co., 1883), 828.

<sup>x</sup> 1901 Census of Canada, Province of Ontario, Toronto Centre, Ward 3, 13.

<sup>xi</sup> Isobel Teotonio, “Black History Month: The Unknown Story of Toronto’s First Black Postman,” *Toronto Star Fri.*, Feb. 10, 2012.

<sup>xii</sup> Ontario Canada Deaths, 1869-1938, Schedule D, County of York, Division of Toronto, #1257; McFarquhar, “Blacks in 1880s Toronto,” 72.

