



BREAKING THE CHAINS



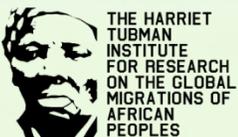
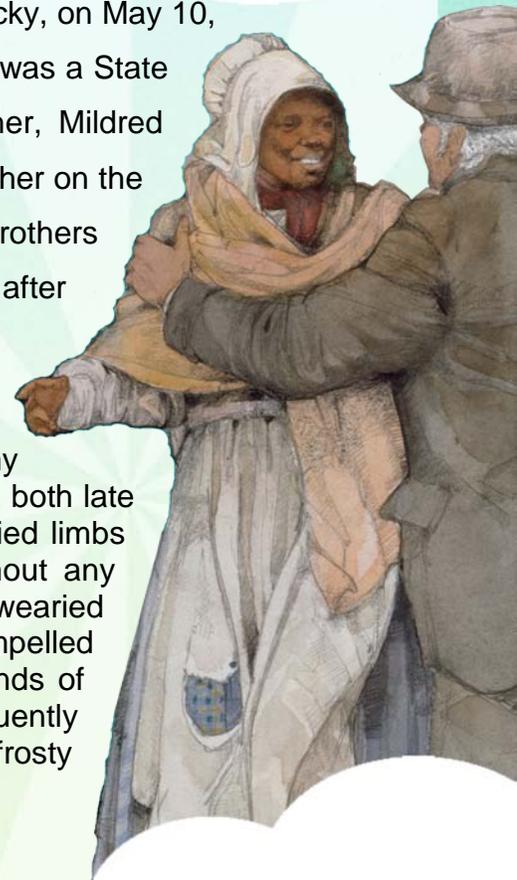
Henry and Mary Bibb

ESSEX COUNTY

Henry and Mary Bibb played a very important part in the history of African Canada. He had escaped from slavery as a young man and gained an education as an adult, while she was a free-born woman from Baltimore who was educated and a well-known figure in mid-19th century antislavery circles. Together they operated the first Black-owned anti-slavery newspaper in what is now Ontario. It was called the *Voice of the Fugitive*. Henry also published his autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (1848). This is one of the most important sources of information about the life of enslaved and free Black Americans from the antebellum (pre-Civil War) period.

Henry Walton Bibb was born in rural Shelby County, Kentucky, on May 10, 1815. He was the son of a white man named James Bibb, who was a State Senator, and an African American woman. Because his mother, Mildred Jackson, was enslaved, Henry was also enslaved and lived with her on the plantation of her owner, William Gatewood. He had several brothers and sisters but they were sold away to other owners, one after another. He later wrote of his experiences:

I was a wretched slave, compelled to work under the lash without wages and often without clothes enough to hide my nakedness. I have often worked without half enough to eat, both late and early, by day and by night. I have often laid my wearied limbs down at night to rest upon a dirt floor, or a bench without any covering at all, because I had nowhere else to rest my wearied body, after having worked hard all the day. I have been compelled in early life to go at the bidding of a tyrant through all kinds of weather, hot and cold, wet or dry, and without shoes frequently until the month of December, with my bare feet on the cold frosty



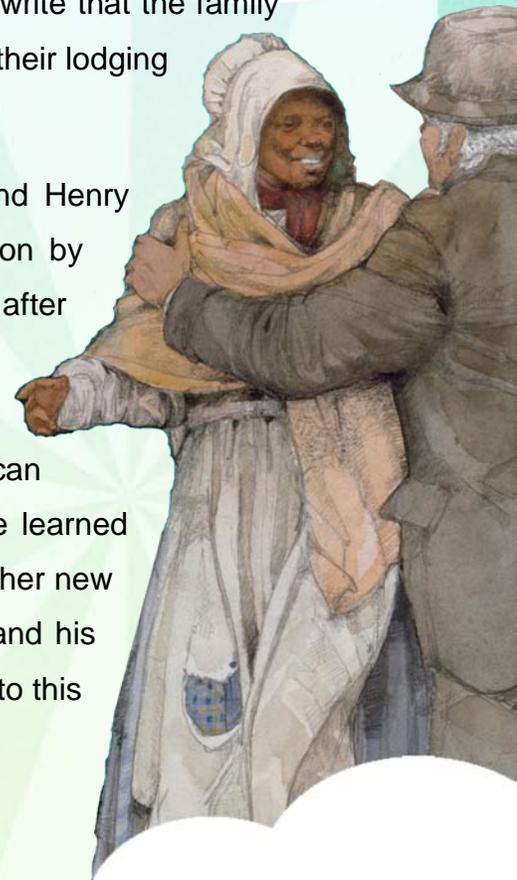


ground, cracked open and bleeding as I walked.ⁱ

Henry fell in love when he was about 19 with a beautiful girl named Malinda, who lived on another farm in the area. Her owner gave permission for them to become a couple on the condition that he also could continue to have relations with her, a stipulation which shocked Henry and which was a major factor in his decision to run away from slavery. He wrote: "A poor slave's wife can never be true to her husband contrary to the will of her master. She can neither be pure nor virtuous, contrary to the will of her master. She dare not refuse to be reduced to a state of adultery at the will of her master".ⁱⁱ

Despite his marriage, Henry needed to be free, and planned to rescue his wife at a later time. He fled first across the Ohio River to Cincinnati in 1837, and stayed a winter with a fugitive slave community at Perrysburg.ⁱⁱⁱ But he returned the next summer to rescue his beloved Malinda and their little girl, Frances. He was captured and ended up in jail in Louisville but managed to escape. He tried again the next year, but all three were captured, and the family was sold down the river to an owner in Vicksburg, Mississippi. They endured terrible conditions. Henry would later write that the family was "so much fatigued from labor that they could scarcely get to their lodging places from the field at night."^{iv}

According to Bibb's autobiography, Malinda, Frances and Henry made another attempt to get away together, but were set upon by wolves in the Louisiana swamps. The attempt ended tragically after they were all taken to a New Orleans auction house. Henry was whipped mercilessly and then sold away from his wife and daughter to gambler, who then bartered him to a Native American owner in Arkansas. Henry Bibb never saw his family again. He learned later that poor Malinda had been forced to become involved with her new owner, and, in despair, he ceased his attempts to rescue her and his child. No one knows what became of Malinda and Frances Bibb to this day.

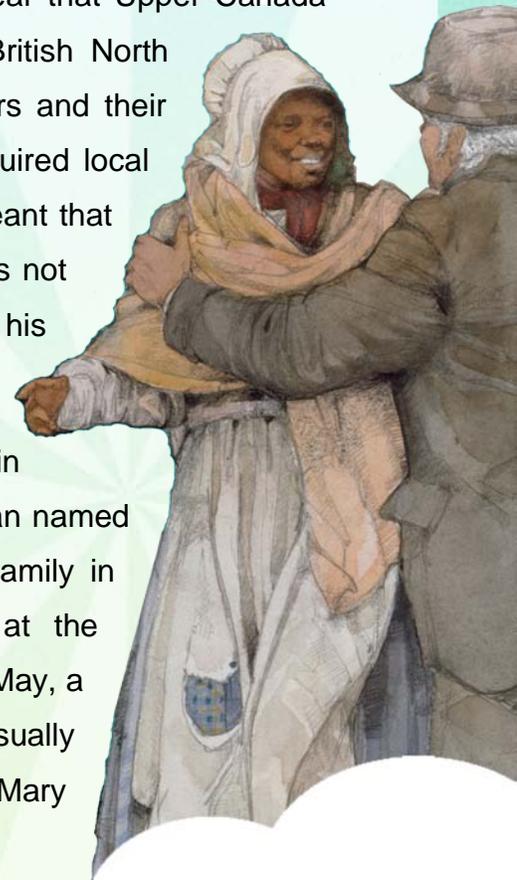




Henry Bibb eventually escaped again after the death of his owner and lived for a time in Ohio, where he learned to read from an abolitionist minister. By December of 1840, he had made his way to Michigan.^v He met important antislavery figures such as Frederick Douglass, who had been enslaved in Maryland but escaped, and William Wells Brown who was also born in Kentucky but escaped from Missouri. Both were prolific speakers and compelling lecturers who worked diligently to end slavery in the United States. Henry Bibb attended an African American abolitionist convention in Detroit in 1843. He became a lecturer and by 1844 was traveling in the Northern states agitating against the institution of slavery. Henry became a supporter of the new Liberty Party, which sought to run antislavery politicians for office and even put forward James G. Birney, a former slaveholder who operated an antislavery newspaper, as a candidate for the President of the United States. While speaking for the Party, Henry Bibb was quoted as saying: "American people have robbed me of my rights, of my friends, and three-fourths of my colour besides," referring to his light complexion.^{vi}

The situation in which Henry Bibb found himself was very dangerous, for there was a law passed by the US Congress in 1793 - the same year that Upper Canada stopped importing slaves and took steps to end slavery in British North America. The US Fugitive Slave Law empowered slaveholders and their agents to seek out refugees anywhere in the country, and required local magistrates to return alleged runaways to their owners. This meant that no fugitive in the northern states was safe. However, Henry was not recaptured and later on would write a famous letter back to his former owner, which he published in the *Voice of the Fugitive*.

In 1847, Henry Bibb attended an antislavery gathering in New York. There he met a very intelligent and interesting woman named Mary Elizabeth Miles. She had been born into a free Black family in Rhode Island in 1820, and was educated as a teacher at the Massachusetts State Normal School. The Reverend Samuel J. May, a well-known abolitionist and talented educator was principal. Unusually for this era, May was known for championing women's rights. Mary

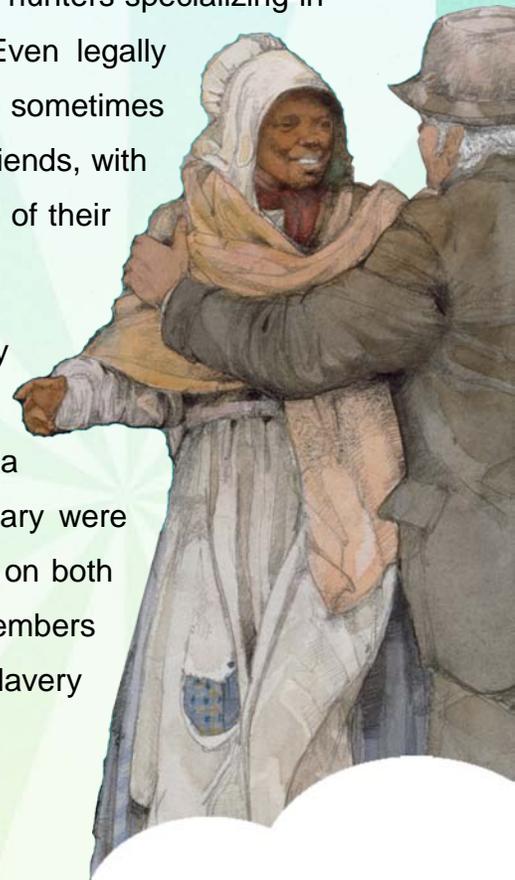




Miles was anxious to improve her own conditions and after her 1843 graduation taught school in a variety of places such as Boston, the New York state capital of Albany, and also at Cincinnati, just across the Ohio River from the slave state of Kentucky. She became very involved in the abolitionist cause and attended antislavery meetings in each place.^{vii}

Mary Miles and Henry Bibb married at Dayton, Ohio, in June 1848. At first they lived in Detroit, where Henry was active in the Detroit Vigilant Committee which was formed to help freedom seekers find their way across the Detroit River into Canada. But in September of 1850, under great pressure from the Southern states, US Congress passed a new and much more stringent Fugitive Slave Law. This new legislation placed the fines for helping African American refugees escape their owners at \$1,000, a huge sum, and appointed special commissioners to help local magistrates and constables to capture and hold people accused of being runaways. These commissioners were paid more money if they judged a Black prisoner to have been a slave, than to set the person free, so the deck was very much stacked in the favour of slaveholders. There were also unscrupulous men and women who made their livings as bounty hunters specializing in capturing fleeing bondspeople, the dreaded "slavecatchers." Even legally free Blacks living in the Northern states were not safe from them; sometimes they were kidnapped and sold into slavery, far from family and friends, with their manumission papers destroyed so there would be no proof of their free status.^{viii}

After the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, Henry and Mary Bibb moved across the Detroit River where they would be safe. They settled in the village of Sandwich, Canada West, which is now part of the city of Windsor. Henry and Mary were well-known in the area, for the Detroit River Black communities on both sides of the border were very close. Many people had family members living on the opposite shore, and the churches and antislavery

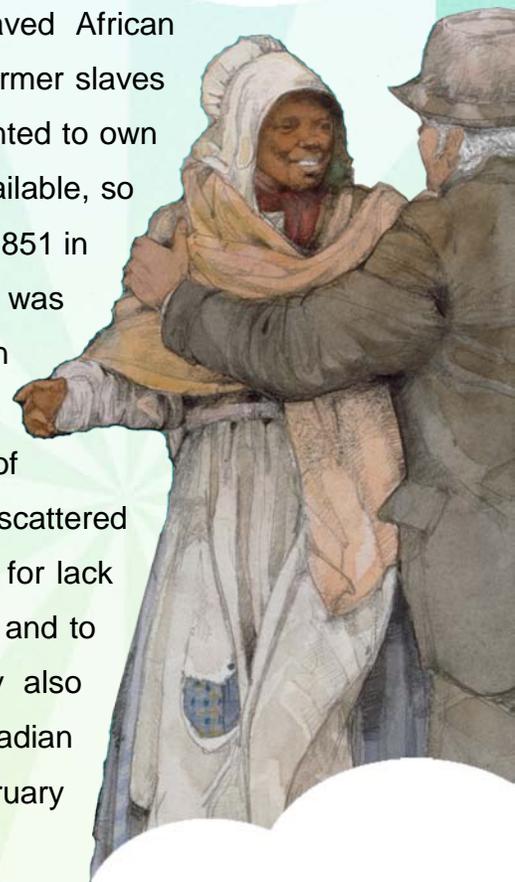




organizations worked together to provide passage for freedom-seekers traveling secretly to Canada.

Once in Canada, the Bibbs set about establishing a school and a newspaper. Mary taught a private school for Black children, who could not attend the local public schools because of white prejudice. It was located on Peter Street in Sandwich.^{ix} Henry and Mary also started the first African Canadian antislavery newspaper in Canada West, the *Voice of the Fugitive*. The flagship issue was printed on January 1, 1851, and promoted the three themes of antislavery, agriculture and temperance, the latter a popular 19th century cause that tried to stop people from drinking alcohol. Henry and Mary believed strongly in integration; that is, they believed Black Canadians should assimilate as much as possible to the dominant white culture of British North America, rather than allowing separate schools or keeping independent Black churches.^x They also supported the concept of colonization, and were friendly with another refugee from Kentucky slavery, Josiah Henson, who had come to Canada in 1830 and who by the late 1840s was operating an agricultural colony at Dawn (Dresden).

The Bibbs were very active in helping formerly enslaved African Americans find new homes once they reached Canada. Most former slaves who entered the province came from rural backgrounds and wanted to own their own land. But there was no more free government land available, so a group of businessmen from Detroit joined the Bibbs in May of 1851 in founding a new organization - the "Refugee Home Society". This was to acquire land for distribution to formerly enslaved African Americans. It was unlike other fugitive slave colonies like Buxton and Dawn in that it was not a large contiguous area of land, but rather farm lots comprising some 2,000 acres in total scattered what is today Essex County, Ontario.^{xi} Mary's school had failed for lack of funds so she and Henry devoted their time to his newspaper and to managing the affairs of the Refugee Home Society. Henry also became the President of the Windsor branch of the Canadian Antislavery Society, an organization founded at Toronto in February



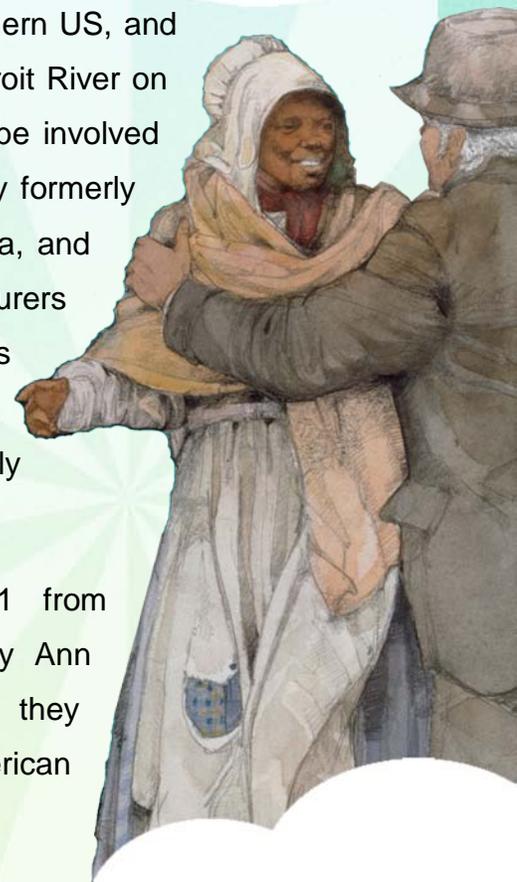


of the same year in response to the passage of the new American Fugitive Slave Law.

Later that same year, Henry published an announcement in his paper that the "North American Convention" would be held in Toronto in September to discuss what the response of free Black Americans and Canadians ought to be to the Fugitive Slave Law. Opened by Toronto's Mayor, this took place in St. Lawrence Hall at King and Jarvis, which is still standing. It was also known as "the Convention of Coloured Freemen" and brought together more than 50 delegates from the Great Lakes region. A number of important resolutions were passed including one stating that all the various Black-led antislavery groups across North America ought to join together to help fight slavery and assist refugees in escaping to Canada. This was an idea put forward by James Theodore Holly, a minister who later moved to the Detroit area to help edit the Bibbs' newspaper.^{xii}

The *Voice of the Fugitive* became a very important voice for the African Canadian community, and also had many subscribers south of the US border, although it never did well financially. It published news of events, political decisions and other matters of importance to Black people in Canada and the Northern US, and also openly described the "passengers" coming across the Detroit River on the so-called "Underground Railroad." The Bibbs continued to be involved with Black American antislavery activities as well, helping many formerly enslaved men, women and children to cross over in to Canada, and welcoming in their own home and abolitionist travelers and lecturers traveling through Canada West. Happily, they included Henry's own mother, Mildred, who joined the couple in Sandwich, and three of his brothers who also escaped from slavery in the early 1850s.

One associate of the Bibbs who arrived in 1851 from Pennsylvania was a vibrant, outspoken woman named Mary Ann Shadd. Mary Ann's family had never been enslaved, for they descended from a German mercenary who fought in the American



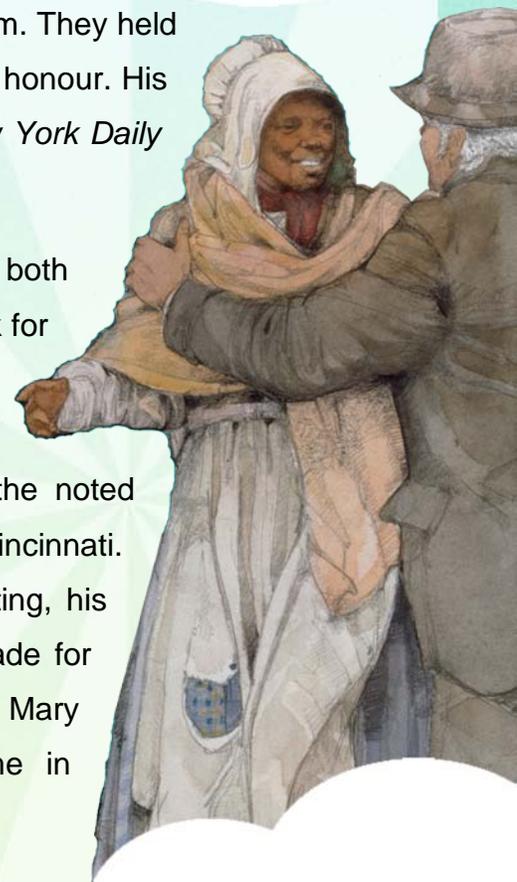


Revolution and the free Black woman who nursed him after he was wounded. Mary Ann's father, Abraham D. Shadd, was a noted Black abolitionist who attended the Convention of Coloured Freemen at Toronto along with his oldest daughter, and subsequently resettled with his extended family in Canada, near Buxton, at the edge of the Elgin Association Settlement south of Chatham. Educated in Quaker schools, Mary Ann, however, believed in what the Bibbs were doing and moved to Sandwich to open a school. For a time it flourished with the help of funds from the American Missionary Association, but the Bibbs and Mary Ann Shadd quarrelled over methods of fundraising to assist former slaves when they came to Canada. There was eventually a very public rupture which never healed.^{xiii}

Sadly, the *Voice of the Fugitive* newspaper office mysteriously burnt to the ground on October 9, 1853. Although Henry and Mary tried to revive the publication, Henry died in the summer of 1854 after a short illness. He was only 39 years old.^{xiv}

Henry Bibb's funeral was held during the Emancipation Day celebrations, August 1, 1854. His Detroit friends paid tribute to this great man, a former slave who spent his life working to end slavery and assist its victims in finding freedom. They held a torch-lit boat procession down the Detroit River by night, in his honour. His obituary was published in many newspapers, including the *New York Daily Times* of August 19, 1854, p. 3.

Mary Bibb eventually opened another school which taught both Black and white children. She also offered lessons in needlework for girls and then opened a store that supplied needles and thread, fabric and ladies' accessories to the people of Windsor. Eventually she remarried. Her second husband was one of the noted Black abolitionist Cary family, originally from Virginia and then Cincinnati. Isaac Cary married Mary Bibb and settled in Windsor. Interesting, his brother George married Mary Ann Shadd which must have made for rather uncomfortable family relations. After her husband's death, Mary (Bibb) Cary returned to the United States, making a home in





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Brooklyn, New York, where she died in 1877. She had no children and her estate went to help the poor.

ⁱ Henry Bibb, *The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, An American Slave* (published by the Author, 45 Spruce Street, New York, NY), 14-15.

ⁱⁱ Bibb, 191.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred Landon, "Henry Bibb, a Colonizer," in *Journal of Negro History*, 5: 4. (October 1920), 437.

^{iv} Bibb, 117. This is discussed in Maria Diedrich, "My Love is as Black as yours is Fair," Premarital Sex and Infidelity in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," in *Phylon* 47:3 (3rd Quarter, 1986), 238-247, 243.

^v John K.A. O'Farrell, "Henry Walton Bibb," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, 8.

^{vi} William Wells Brown, *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius and His Achievements*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863), 86-88; Reinhard O. Johnson, *The Liberty Party 1840-1848: Anti-Slavery, Third Party Politics in the United States* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), n.p.

^{vii} Mary's story is taken from three sources by Afua Cooper, whose PhD thesis on the Bibbs is the landmark scholarship on this important woman. Afua Cooper, "Doing Battle in Freedom's Cause": Henry Bibb, Abolitionism, Race Uplift, and Black Manhood, 1842-1854," PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2000; "The Search for Mary Bibb, Black Woman Teacher in Nineteenth Century Canada West," in *Ontario History* 83:1 (March 1991), 39-54; and Afua P. Cooper, "Black Women and Work in Nineteenth Century Canada West: Black Woman Teacher, Mary Bibb," in Peggy Bristow, Dionne Brande, et al., eds., *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 143-170.

^{viii} The law is available at The National Center for Public Policy Research, Washington DC. <http://www.nationalcenter.org/FugitiveSlaveAct.html> <accessed January 10, 2012>

^{ix} Alvin McCurdy, "Henry Walton Bibb," *Negro History Bulletin* 12:1, (Jan1958), 19-21, 19.

^x Daniel G. Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (Agincourt, ON: Book Society of Canada, 1981), 185-6, 201-2.

^{xi} McCurdy, 20. See also S.J., "Refugee Home Society," in the *Voice of the Fugitive*, July 298, 1852

^{xii} Farrell, DCB; "Proceedings of the North American Convention," in *Black Abolitionist Papers, vol. 2 Canada* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 149-169. See also Jane Rhodes, *Mary Ann Shadd Cary, The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1998) for the life of Mary Ann Shadd Cary and her relations with the Bibbs.

^{xiii} Fred Landon, "The Work of the American Missionary Association amongst the Negro Population in Canada West, 1848-1864," in *Ontario History* 21 (1924), 198-205. See also Hill, 155-156.

^{xiv} Hill, 201-2.

