



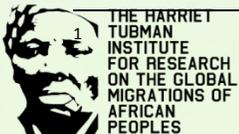
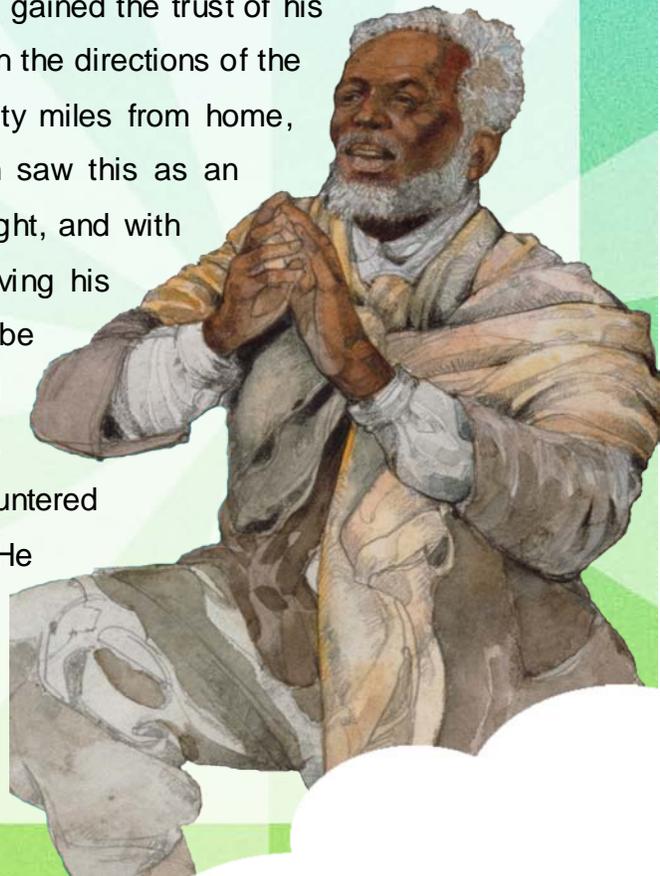
# John Hedgeman

## ESSEX COUNTY

John Hedgeman was born a slave in Fauquier County, Virginia, in August 1776.<sup>1</sup> While living in Virginia, he assisted in quarrying the stone for the building of the White House.<sup>2</sup> In 1797, Hedgeman married Charlotte Boyles, another slave who belonged to his master. Twenty-two years later, in 1819, Hedgeman and his wife moved to Kentucky where they remained under the galling chains of slavery for thirteen years.<sup>3</sup>

Hedgeman was separated from his wife when he was sold to a man in Alabama.<sup>4</sup> <sup>1</sup>At the time of the sale Hedgeman pleaded that his wife be sold to the same person who had bought him. His master refused and replied that he had sold John as a punishment by separating him from his wife. While in Alabama, Hedgeman worked diligently but continued to think about his wife and their premature parting. He would not see her for 13 long years from the time of their enforced separation.

According to a book by the Reverend William Troy, who knew John Hedgeman after he had escaped from slavery, by working hard on the plantation and running errands for his master for three years, Hedgeman had gained the trust of his master and overseer. The overseer, in accordance with the directions of the master, one day sent Hedgeman on horseback twenty miles from home, and gave him a "Pass" from the master. Hedgeman saw this as an opportunity to escape. Travelling mostly during the night, and with the help of Quakers, he first went to Missouri. Leaving his owner's horse by the side of the road so he could not be charged with horse-theft – a hanging offense – should he be caught, he continued to the vicinity of St. Louis. There he lost his way. A kindly slave man he encountered gave John both food and directions to the river. He again received help from Black men he encountered,



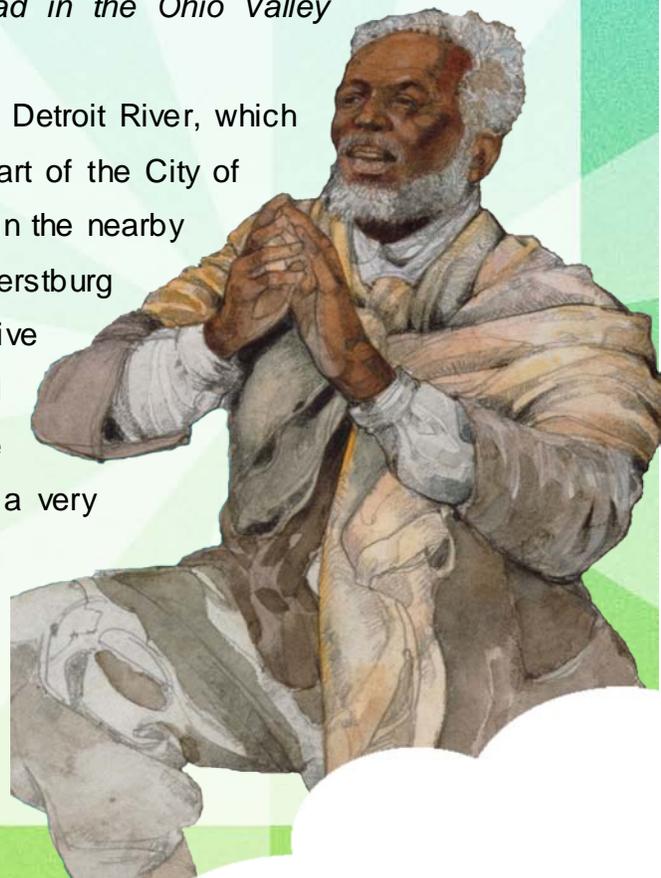


who sent him on to Alton, Illinois, and then to Michigan before eventually he was able to cross over the river to Canada.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, after several years in slavery, in 1832, John Hedgeman escaped to Upper Canada (what is now Ontario) and settled in Amherstburg, which was a village on the Detroit River where many Black families already lived.<sup>6</sup>

The story of Hedgeman's escape was recorded by Reverend William Troy.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that John Hedgeman reached Canada without the assistance of any formal Underground Railroad operation, but instead with the help of African Americans, slave and free, whom he encountered along the way. Black men, women and children risked far more than white conductors when they assisted a fugitive slave. This happened much often than most books or films about the Underground Railroad indicate, for the early history of the secret system was written by European Americans, who glorified the role of white conductors. This was done, though, at the expense of the hundreds, if not thousands, of African Americans who endangered themselves, their livelihoods and their own freedom to help refugee bondspeople find their way to the Northern US and to Canada. This mythologizing of the UGRR was first discussed by historian Larry Gara in his volume *The Liberty Line: The Legend of the Underground Railroad* (1961) and more recently by Keith P. Giffler in *Front Line of Freedom: African Americans the Forging of the Underground Railroad in the Ohio Valley* (2004).

John Hedgeman remained in Sandwich on the Detroit River, which was the capital of the Western District and is now part of the City of Windsor, for a few months. Then he moved to settle in the nearby village of Mount Pleasant, about five miles from Amherstburg in the township of Malden. Like most of the fugitive slaves, Hedgeman was a devout Christian, and donated part of his farm on the 8<sup>th</sup> Concession there for the construction of a Baptist Church.<sup>8</sup> This was a very





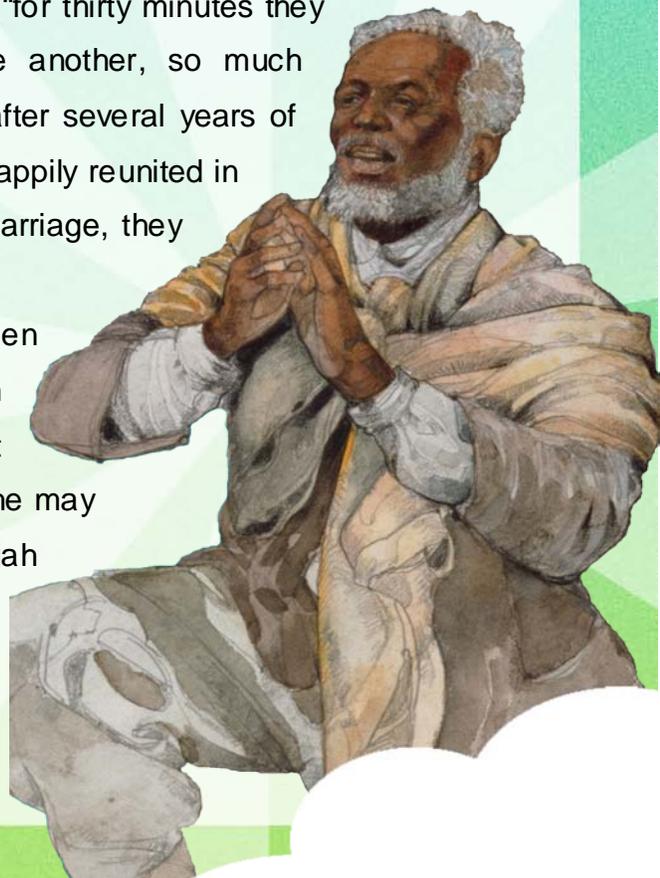
substantial gift for a former refugee from slavery to make, and must have represented considerable sacrifice. He continued to represent the church for some years.<sup>9</sup>

Hedgeman later rose to become a deacon at the First Baptist Church of Sandwich.<sup>10</sup> In all this time, Hedgeman and Charlotte, his wife, had not heard from each other. Neither of them had ever learned to read or write, which was very common for people who had been enslaved.

Twelve years after John reached Canada, his wife also managed to escape. She crossed by boat from Sandusky, Ohio, to Fort Malden (Amherstburg).<sup>11</sup> One September day, the newly-formed organization of Baptist leaders and lay delegates, called the “Amherstburg Baptist Association,” were meeting in annual session in Amherstburg. Among the delegates for the Sandwich Baptist Church on this occasion was John Hedgeman.<sup>12</sup> The organization had met in the morning at the Amherstburg Chapel, and Hedgeman was seated on the platform among the delegates. Meanwhile, Hedgeman’s wife, lonely and friendless, wandered about the streets of the town looking for a place to stay. She was attracted by the singing in the Baptist Church and was greeted there by Deacon Elijah Valentine.<sup>13</sup>

Charlotte entered the church and saw her long-lost husband sitting on the platform. Hedgeman immediately recognized his wife and they both ran into each other’s arms. According to Reverend Troy’s account, “for thirty minutes they remained so, without being able to speak to one another, so much overcome were they by this joyful re-union.” Thus, after several years of separation by slavery, Hedgeman and his wife were happily reunited in freedom. Having had doubts of the legality of their marriage, they had the ceremony re-performed in Sandwich.<sup>14</sup>

The Amherstburg Baptist Association had been founded in October, 1841. William Troy was born in 1827 and published his book in 1851, so he was not present to witness John and Charlotte’s reunion, but he may well have been told the story by the Deacon Elijah Valentine, whom he states was present at the Amherstburg Baptist Association meeting where



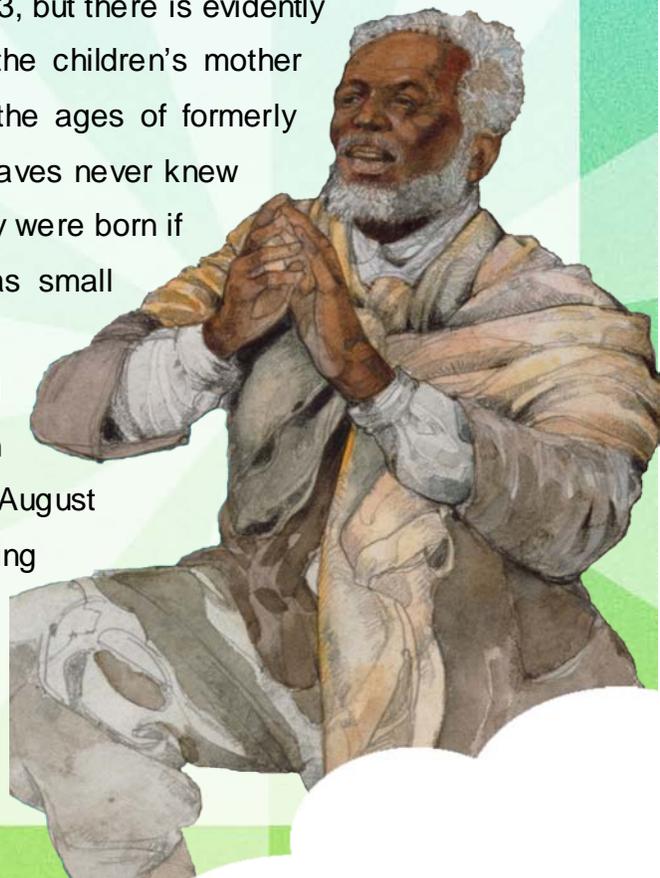


Charlotte found her long-lost husband. The Amherstburg Baptist Association was established between churches in Detroit (17 members), Amherstburg (19 members) and Sandwich (11 members) to distinguish churches serving people of African descent from the Baptists who “fellowshipped” with slaveholding churches in the American South. There was a rift in the organization in the 1850s, leading to some churches joining the Canadian Anti-slavery Baptist Association instead, an organization of which John Hedgeman’s home church of Mount Pleasant was a member. However, the congregations merged in 1856. By 1861 the group included churches in Michigan as well as fourteen more in Canada West (Ontario).<sup>15</sup>

The 1847 Census for Essex County, Malden Township lists John Hedgeman and his wife as both living there. It shows that that they were Baptists, and they had three young children. John was a farmer who owned his own land, according to the census. It also indicates that both John and the other adult in the household, presumably his wife, Charlotte, are both resident aliens who were born in the United States, and that John has been in Canada for 14 years.<sup>16</sup>

The census of 1851 for Malden Township lists John as a “Farmer” and he and Charlotte appear with children, John (aged 13); Jane (12); and Caroline (10). Both he and his wife are listed as having been born in Virginia, with each of the children born in Canada West. He was 64 years old and his wife was 63, but there is evidently some mistake as Charlotte clearly did not become the children’s mother starting at age 50.<sup>17</sup> There are frequent errors in the ages of formerly enslaved African Americans living in Canada; many slaves never knew how old they were. Some didn’t even know where they were born if they had been sold away from their own parents as small children.

John and Charlotte Hedgeman eventually had fourteen children and many of them lived in Amherstburg and Detroit.<sup>18</sup> Mrs. Hedgeman died on August 28, 1868, leaving a total of nine living children, including Jane, who married James Wright; Caroline who was the wife of the Reverend Joseph Holbert; John J. who



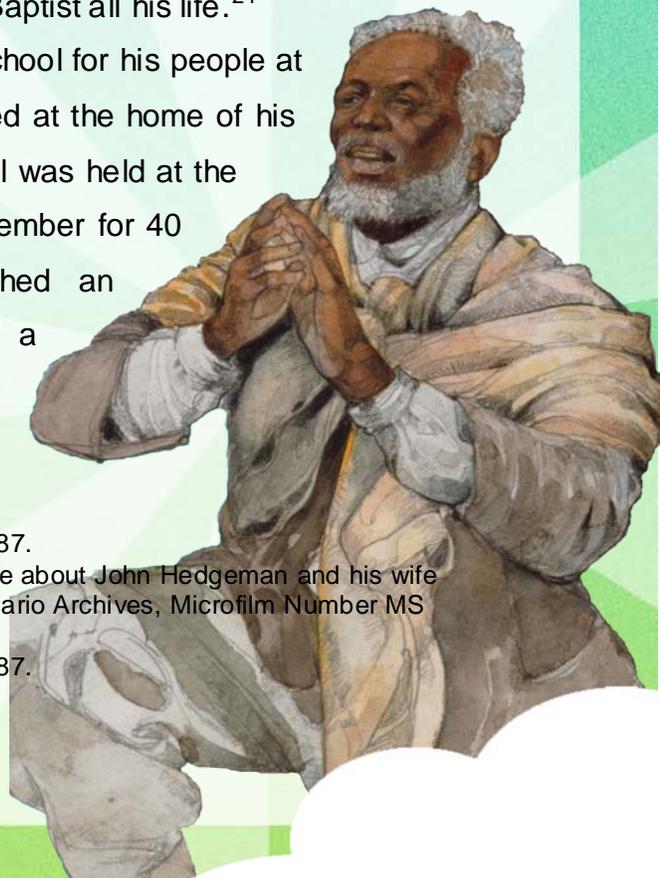


BREAKING THE CHAINS

moved to Detroit; Moses; John, who married Ellen Holbert and moved to Stillwater, Minnesota; George; Sarah; Dorcas; and Clara.<sup>19</sup>

Following the death of his wife, Hedgeman moved again, to settle in Amherstburg where he lived for about fifty-four years, engaging in farming and shoe-making alternately.<sup>20</sup> Towards the latter part of his life, he succeeded well as a farmer. The 1871 Census shows John as a “Conference Baptist” in religion, reflective of his ongoing relationship with the Amherstburg Baptist Association. He was living at the time in Amherstburg, was aged 81, and is listed as a “labourer”.<sup>21</sup> The term “labourer” was frequently erroneously used by census takers even for very successful people of African descent; this is a reflection of racial stereotyping on the part of the government officials. He is also listed as a “labourer” in *Charleton’s General Directory for Windsor, Amherstburg and Sandwich* for the years 1875-6, where his shown as residing on Brock Street.<sup>22</sup> He had remarried, this time to a woman called Mary, for in the 1881 census of Essex County he is shown as being 100 years old, a farmer, and married. Both he and his wife, who was 75 in that year, were Baptists.<sup>23</sup> She passed away at the age of 78 on February 26, 1882. Her death certificate shows as her place of birth “In Slavery, United States.” Her husband, John Hedgeman, signed the document with an “X”, as he had never learned to write even his own name. Interestingly, Mary’s faith is listed as “British Methodist” rather than Baptist, although John remained a faithful Baptist all his life.<sup>24</sup>

John Hedgeman helped build a church and a school for his people at Mount Pleasant in Malden Township.<sup>25</sup> Hedgeman died at the home of his son in Detroit on September 18, 1887, and his funeral was held at the Amherstburg Baptist Church where he had been a member for 40 years. The *Amherstburg Echo* newspaper published an account of his life in an article entitled “Death of a Centenarian, on September 23, 1887.”<sup>26</sup>



<sup>1</sup> “Death of a Centenarian,” *Amherstburg Echo*, September 23, 1887.

<sup>2</sup> “Death of a Centenarian”. This fact is also recorded in a brief note about John Hedgeman and his wife written by Alvin McCurdy. Check Alvin D. McCurdy Collection, Ontario Archives, Microfilm Number MS 1169.

<sup>3</sup> “Death of a Centenarian,” *Amherstburg Echo*, September 23, 1887.

<sup>4</sup> “Death of a Centenarian.”

<sup>5</sup> Troy, 60.

<sup>6</sup> H. W. Barker, "Reminiscences of Slavery Days," *Amherstburg Echo*, September 4, 1936; also "Death of a Centenarian."

<sup>7</sup> William Troy, "Hair-Breadth Escapes from Slavery to Freedom" (Manchester: W. Bremner, 1861), 60.

<sup>8</sup> Carol Jenson, *History of the Negro Community in Essex County, 1850-1860* (unpublished dissertation, University of Windsor, 1966), 27-28. This church had 52 members in 1858 but was closed in 1906.

<sup>9</sup> *Voice of the Fugitive*, October 21, 1852. John Hedgeman is listed as representing the Mount Pleasant Church at the Canadian Antislavery Baptist Convention. He was the Church Clerk, although he was not, as far as documentation shows, a literate man.

<sup>10</sup> It was at the First Baptist Church in Sandwich where Hedgeman met the Reverend William Troy. According to Troy, so devoted was Hedgeman to the church that he earned the respect of all members and was made a deacon. This was not the National Historic Site known as the "First Baptist Church, Sandwich" today, but an earlier congregation founded in the 1820s by fugitive slaves living in Sandwich, and formalized as a church in 1840. The current property is a brick building constructed in 1851.

<sup>11</sup> Barker, "Reminiscences."

<sup>12</sup> See James K. Lewis, "Religious Nature of the Early Negro Migration to Canada and the **Amherstburg Baptist Association**," *Ontario History* 58 (June 1966), 117-131; James K. Lewis, "Religious Life of Fugitive Slaves and Rise of Coloured Baptist Churches, 1820-1865" (unpublished dissertation, McMaster University Divinity College, Hamilton, 1965); Dorothy Shadd Shreve, *The AfriCanadian Church: A Stabilizer* (Jordan Station: Padeira Press, 1983); Reverend H. Talbot, *A History of the Amherstburg Regular Baptist Association, its Auxiliaries and Churches, Compiled from the Minutes and Historical Essays Written By the Members* (1940).

<sup>13</sup> Valentine is listed as a "cordwainer" in the 1847 census of Malden Township, Essex County. A shoemaker who made fine leather shoes of soft hides, this "cordwainer" was from North Carolina and had reached Amherstburg by way of Ohio. Valentine worked for several years as a cook on the lake steamers that made the circuit of the Great Lakes ports, and sometimes in hotels, and he and his family were well respected members of the community. See Troy, 17.

<sup>14</sup> "Death of a Centenarian." It is probable that Hedgeman and his wife moved to Amherstburg sometime in 1870. Hedgeman's name did not appear in the Amherstburg's Assessment rolls until 1870.

<sup>15</sup> The Amherstburg Baptist association was formed October 1841 at the home of John Liberty, who lived at Amherstburg. The organization continues today and is known as the Amherstburg Missionary Baptist Association.

<sup>16</sup> Census of Upper Canada, 1847 Malden Township, Essex County Copyright (c)2002, Joanne Noble, OntarioGenWeb's Census Project (<http://ontariocensus.rootsweb.ancestry.com>) <accessed Feb. 15, 2012>

<sup>17</sup> Census of Canada West, Essex County, Malden Township, 22

<sup>18</sup> "Death of a Centenarian."

<sup>19</sup> "Death of a Centenarian"; also John Hedgeman" in Alvin McCurdy Papers, MS1169, Archives of Ontario.

<sup>20</sup> Both the 1870 and 1872 Assessment Rolls for Amherstburg listed Hedgeman as a laborer. It is also possible that he worked as a farmer for someone else before starting his own farm.

<sup>21</sup> Census of Canada, Ontario, Malden Township, 92.

<sup>22</sup> *Charleton and Co's General Directory for Windsor, Amherstburg and Sandwich, for 1875-6* (London, ON: Charleton and Co., 1876, 75.

<sup>23</sup> Census of Canada, Essex County, Amherstburg, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Ontario, Canada, Deaths, 1869-1938 and Deaths Overseas, 1939-1947, Ancestry.ca <accessed Feb. 11, 2012>

<sup>25</sup> "Death of a Centenarian."

<sup>26</sup> "Death of a Centenarian."

