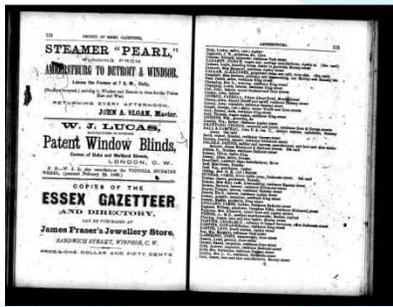




BREAKING THE CHAINS



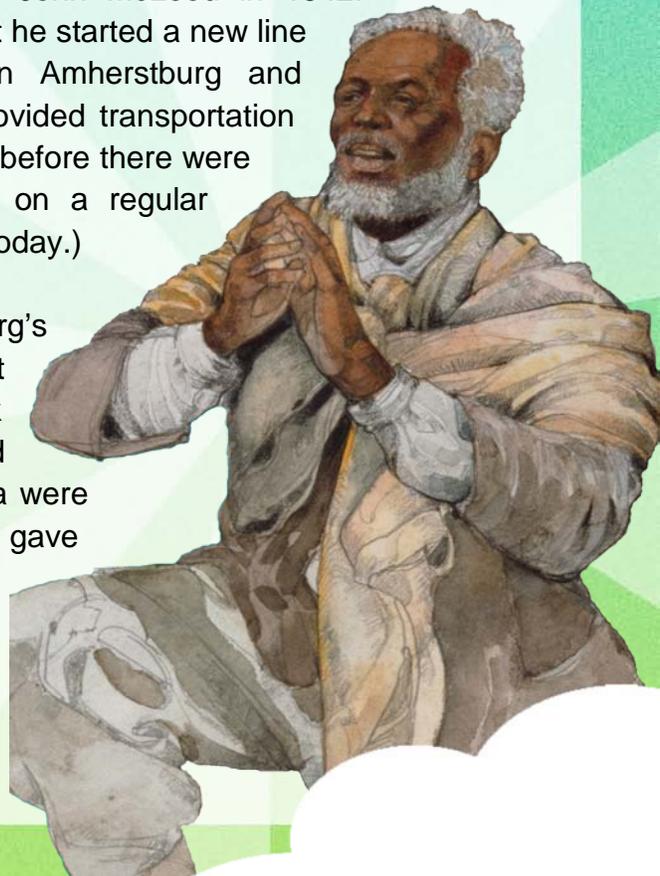
# Levi Foster

## ESSEX COUNTY

Levi Foster was an early Black resident of Amherstburg, Ontario, who became a successful businessman and a prominent figure in Amherstburg's Black community in the mid-1800s. Foster was born free in Stark County, Ohio, in the United States on March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1811.<sup>i</sup> He married Elizabeth Waring, daughter of David C. Waring and Mary Louisa Bannum, both of mixed African American and white ancestry. The family was originally from Essex County, Virginia.<sup>ii</sup> After farming for 24, and learning the plastering trade, Levi moved his family from Perrysburg, Ohio, to Amherstburg, in what is now Ontario, in 1838.<sup>iii</sup> He practised his trade for ten years, finishing the walls of houses so they could be painted, and then working as an innkeeper.<sup>iv</sup> Later, he started the first livery stable on Apsley (now Sandwich) Street in Amherstburg, a business in which he had horses and carriages available for hire and provided boarding for horses.

It is likely that Foster started his livery business in 1842. The earliest records show that Foster purchased the second lot south of Richmond Street on the west side of Apsley Street in the town of Amherstburg from John McLeod in 1842.<sup>v</sup> Foster's livery stable business flourished, so much that he started a new line of horse-drawn stagecoaches to operate between Amherstburg and Windsor in the late 1850s.<sup>vi</sup> (Stagecoach service provided transportation for people and a small amount of cargo, such as mail, before there were buses or trains. These horse-drawn carriages ran on a regular schedule much the way inter-city buses and trains do today.)

Foster was not only involved in Amherstburg's business and commerce. He was also an important participant of the local Black community. The Black communities in Canada West had long been annoyed at the way formerly enslaved settlers living in Canada were portrayed by "agents" and some ministers, who gave lectures in the United States and the British Isles to raise money for them. Many hardworking families





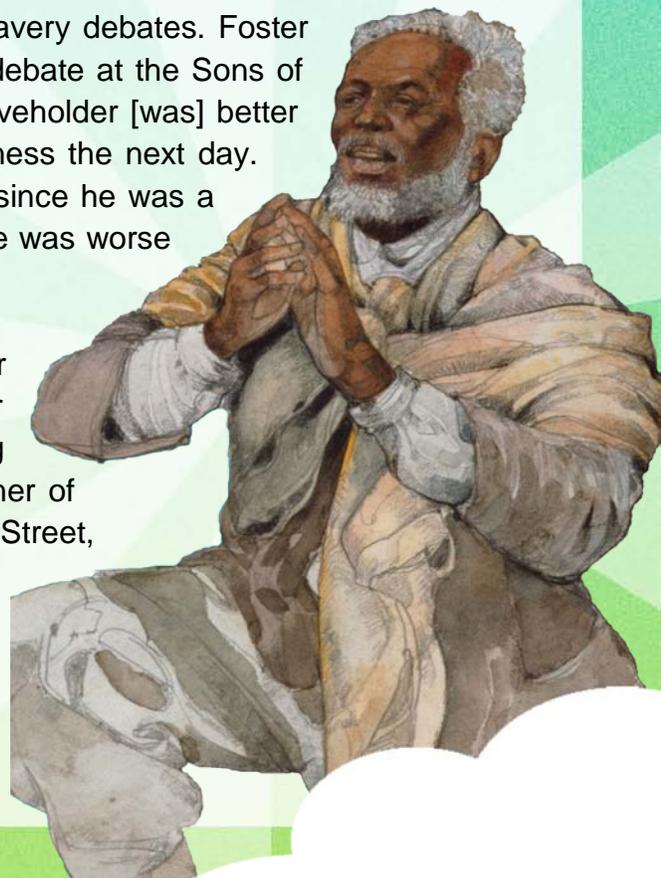
believed this was demeaning and that African American immigrants in Canada West could take care of the needs of incoming fugitives themselves. Also, not all of the “agents” were honest and much of the money donated never reached the communities.

In 1854, African Canadian residents of Amherstburg formed the first True Band Society – an organization formed in the fall of 1854 to promote self-sufficiency, provide mutual aid, and to discourage Blacks who found themselves in financial difficulty from appealing for funds from unscrupulous agents (“or beggars”, as irritated locals called them). Levi Foster was appointed a member of the board of managers. He later helped the organization to draft its constitution, (“Report and Circular”) which was published in the *Provincial Freeman*, in March 1855.<sup>vii</sup> Foster was also a subscription agent for the two major black newspapers in Canada West during this period: the *Voice of the Fugitive* and the *Provincial Freeman*.<sup>viii</sup>

Levi Foster was a strong supporter of temperance and moral improvement. Temperance was a movement of people who did not support the consumption of rum or other alcoholic spirits such as whiskey, brandy, gin and vodka. Some temperance supporters agreed with the occasional drinking of wine. Moral improvement had to do with encouraging a better life for African Americans who had migrated to Canada. This consisted of marriage, work, attending church, adhering to the Ten Commandments, not getting drunk, educating oneself by going to school or reading, and being able to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong. Many members of the Black community believed this was how people of African descent would prove themselves equal to whites and to dispel the slaveholder propaganda that people of African descent were not human beings.

Levi Foster also participated regularly in antislavery debates. Foster hated slavery so much that, after attending a public debate at the Sons of Temperance Hall, where it was resolved that “the slaveholder [was] better than a tavern keeper,” he shut down his tavern business the next day. Levi hung a notice on his closed tavern stating that, since he was a former slave himself, he could not let it be said that he was worse than a slaveholder.<sup>ix</sup>

After closing his tavern for good in 1856, Foster continued his livery business and amassed a number of valuable properties and farms in the Amherstburg area. In 1861, for example, he was listed as the owner of Lot # 38 on George Street and Lot #17 on Apsley Street, although he may have purchased these properties earlier than 1861.<sup>x</sup> In 1872, he purchased 18 acres of land in Malden.<sup>xi</sup>





BREAKING THE CHAINS

Levi Foster died in Malden in April, 1875, and his sons, George H. Foster and James W. Foster, continued to run their father's livery stable business. Foster's obituary announcement, which appeared in the *Amherstburg Echo*, stated that he had four sons and five daughters with his first wife, Elizabeth, who, although not named in the obituary, was reported to be the daughter of David C. Waring of Coshocton, Ohio. She had died in 1855. The obituary also noted that Foster's funeral was largely attended, and that he was a "peaceable citizen and was respected by all who knew him."<sup>xii</sup>

Foster's last will, which he drafted on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1874, confirms some of the information about his family and properties. In the will, Foster named his second wife, Lucy A. Foster, as the sole executor, and the beneficiary of all his lands and property as long as she lived. The will also stated that upon the death of his wife, Foster's assets should be shared among his children as follows: Part of an eighteen acre parcel of land (Lot # 24) lying in Malden was to be given to his son John A Foster, and the remainder equally divided between his sons, David W. Foster, George H. Foster, and James W. Foster. Finally, his two daughters, Louise Jacobs and Mary E. Foster, and his son, Levi W. Foster, were each to be given ten dollars to be paid by their brothers George, James, and David.<sup>xiii</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> There is some uncertainty regarding Foster's place of birth. It has often been reported that he was born into slavery in Lexington, Kentucky, while others believe he was born in Virginia. Perhaps the most reliable source is his obituary in the *Amherstburg Echo* of April 23, 1875, which states that he was born on March 29, 1811 in Stark County, Ohio, which supports the idea that he was born free. This is also recorded in his Death Certificate, Register of Deaths for Malden, 1875, 260.

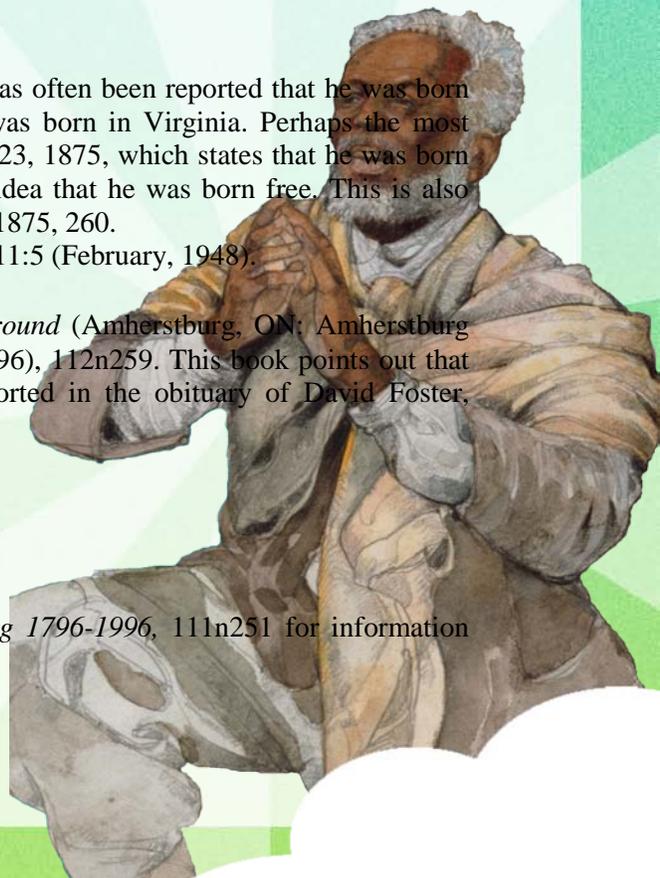
<sup>ii</sup> C. G. Woodson, "The Waring Family," *Negro History Bulletin*, 11:5 (February, 1948).

<sup>iii</sup> *Amherstburg 1796-1996: The New Town on the Garrison Ground* (Amherstburg, ON: Amherstburg Bicentennial Book Committee and Marsh Collection Society, 1996), 112n259. This book points out that information about Levi Foster's move from Perrysburg is reported in the obituary of David Foster, *Amherstburg Echo*, January 15, 1897.

<sup>iv</sup> *Amherstburg 1796-1996*, 112n260.

<sup>v</sup> *Amherstburg 1796-1996*, 71.

<sup>vi</sup> *Voice of the Fugitive*, March 12, 1850. See also *Amherstburg 1796-1996*, 111n251 for information about the location of Marie's Tavern.



<sup>vii</sup> Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 226-27. Also, Daniel Hill, *Freedom Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (Agincourt, ON: Book Society of Canada, 1981), 180-81.

<sup>viii</sup> Foster was one of two agents in Amherstburg for the *Voice of the Fugitive*, which was based in Sandwich, Canada West (Ontario) and published by Black abolitionist Henry Bibb. The other agent was David Hotchkiss. From the Fugitive Slave file: Marsh Collection Society. See also *Provincial Freeman*, August 5, 1854 announcing that Levi Foster and John Hatfield would henceforth be acting as agents for the paper in Amherstburg.

<sup>ix</sup> Hill, 172. It is likely that this debate occurred sometime in 1856. Assessment records show that Foster was an innkeeper until 1856. *Amherstburg 1796-1996*, 239 and endnotes.

<sup>x</sup> *Amherstburg 1796-1996*, 215.

<sup>xi</sup> *Amherstburg 1796-1996*, 112n261. In 1861, his property included livestock worth one thousand dollars, seven carriages worth seven thousand dollars, and forty-four acres of land. Jesse Carney Smith, ed. *Notable Black American Women* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992), 141-2.

<sup>xii</sup> *Amherstburg Echo*, April, 1875. Indeed Foster's obituary announcement in the *Amherstburg Echo* shows that George and James took over their father's business 18 months before his death. James married Elizabeth Butler and they moved to Monroe, Michigan, where they raised their daughter, Myrtle Cook Foster, who later became a prominent figure in Michigan. See *Notable Black American Women*, Volume 2, 141-2.

<sup>xiii</sup> A copy of Foster's will is shown courtesy of the North American Black Historical Museum, Amherstburg, Ontario.

