

Matthew Elliott

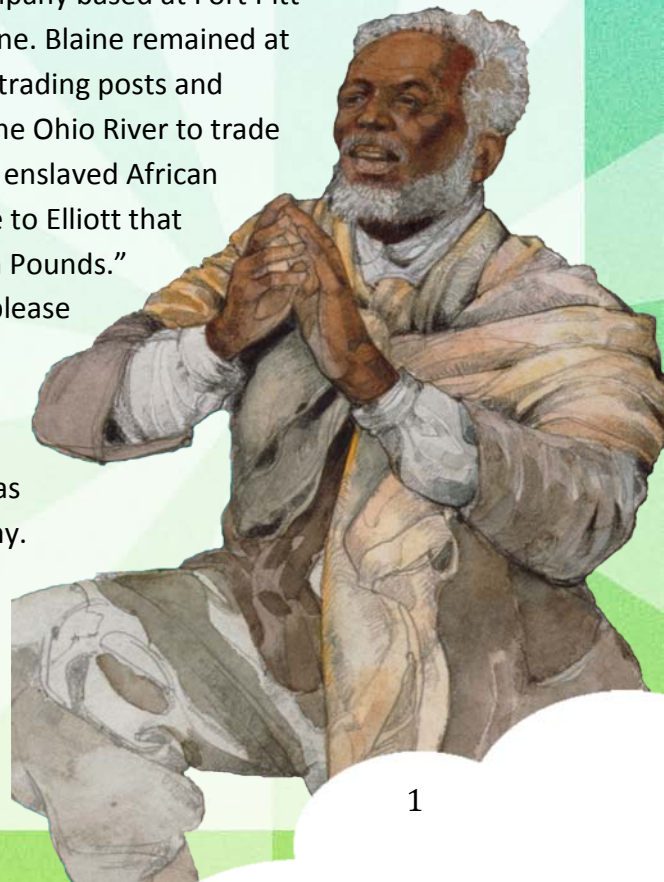
ESSEX COUNTY

Matthew Elliott was a United Empire Loyalist who lived for thirty years in what is now Southwestern Ontario. He made his home at Malden in Essex County. His loyalty to Britain during the American Revolution, and his service to his community are commemorated by a provincial plaque erected on his property beside the Detroit River, near the town of Amherstburg, Ontario.¹ His career as a successful slave trader and slaveholder is not mentioned.

INTRODUCTION

Matthew Elliott sailed to North America from his native Ireland in 1761 when he was a young man in his twenties. He established a trading company based at Fort Pitt (later renamed Pittsburg) with a partner, Alexander Blaine. Blaine remained at Fort Pitt, while Elliott travelled into the interior, visiting trading posts and Native settlements in western Pennsylvania and along the Ohio River to trade European goods for furs.² Elliott and Blaine also dealt in enslaved African Americans. In 1775, Blaine (a slaveholder himself) wrote to Elliott that he was sending him “a young man I bought” for “Fifteen Pounds.” Hinting that Elliott could be cruel, the letter requests, “please spare him a little at first.”³

In 1775, the American colonies began a revolt against Great Britain. The Revolutionary War boosted business as Elliott and Blaine provided supplies to the American army. However, in 1778, Elliott was accused by the Americans of being a traitor. Along with trader





Alexander McKee and Simon Girty, he fled to Detroit and joined the British.⁴

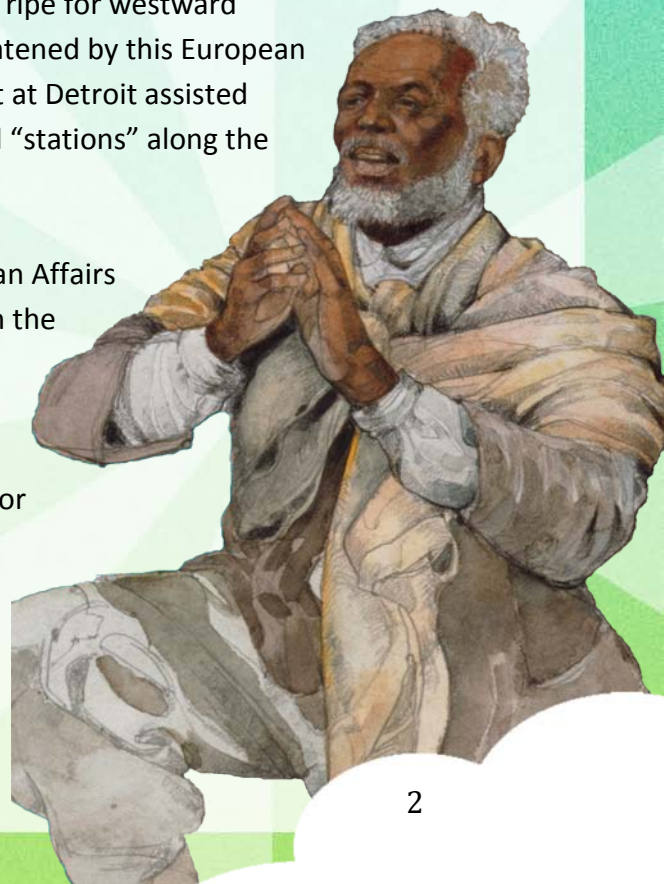
ELLIOTT IN CANADA

The British government appointed Elliott and McKee to the Indian Department. This was an important institution within the British colonial government. Indian Agents were responsible for establishing and maintaining good relations with the First Nations. First Nations alliances with Britain were reinforced by the Indian Department's annual distribution of "presents" on behalf of the British Crown. Although they were not enlisted in the army, Indian Department officers were given a military rank.⁵

Men who had connections with Native groups were invaluable to the Indian Department. Matthew Elliott and Alexander McKee both had Shawnee wives, and had lived in Native communities. Their understanding of Native languages and customs made them "skilled practitioners of forest diplomacy."⁶ McKee was made superintendent at Detroit, and Elliott was appointed his assistant. Even when the American Revolution ended, tension continued between Britain and the newly formed United States. Britain regarded "the Northwest"⁷ as a possible new territory to which Aboriginal people could be moved, thus freeing up land north of the Great Lakes for British settlement. The Americans saw the same area as ripe for westward expansion by European settlers. Native groups felt threatened by this European encroachment. Elliott and the British Indian Department at Detroit assisted with Native raids on American settlements and fortified "stations" along the Ohio River and south into Kentucky.⁸

In 1796, Elliott was promoted to Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the District of Detroit. However, he did not remain in the office for long, as Captain Hector McLean, commander of Fort Amherstburg, petitioned to have him dismissed from the position. In 1797, MacLean wrote to Captain James Green, military secretary to the Canadian Governor General, Lord Dorchester:

... If the question should be asked... how [Elliott's] wealth has been accumulated, I





shall not undertake to give a positive answer, but the general opinion of people better acquainted with these matters is well known...⁹

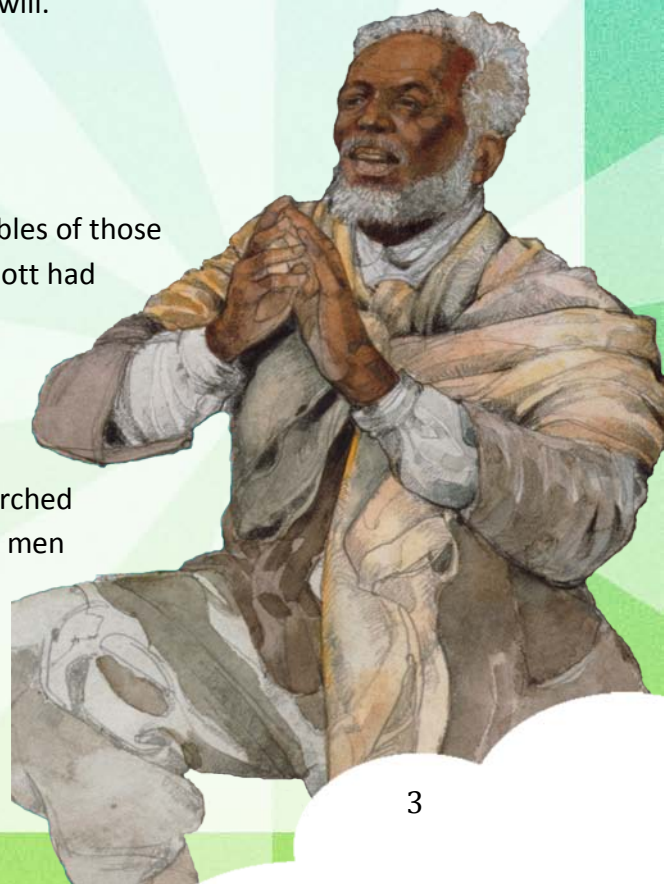
Eventually, at the end of 1797, Elliott was fired from the Indian Department for falsifying the numbers of Native people resident in the area, in order to draw more supplies from stores; presumably he resold these for his own profit.

Despite his dubious business dealings, Elliott must have been respected by his peers. In 1788 he was made a Justice of the Peace for the new District of Hesse.¹⁰ He was elected to the Upper Canada House of Assembly three times, representing Essex from 1801-12.¹¹

From 1807 on, British relations with the US became increasingly strained, and there was a fear that the western tribes would ally with the Americans. Elliott was seen as the only person who could ensure Native allegiance to Britain. He was reappointed Superintendent and Amherstburg became the most important Indian Department post.¹² When hostility built to war in 1812, Elliott became colonel of the 1st Essex Militia, although by that time he was already in his seventies. He was present at the capture of Detroit in August 1812, and at the battles of Fort Meigs, Moraviantown and Black Rock. When the Americans seized Amherstburg, he and his wife fled to Burlington Heights (now part of Hamilton, Ontario). He died there on May 7, 1814.¹³ Enslaved people are not mentioned among his possessions in his will.¹⁴

ELLIOTT AND SLAVERY

It was a tradition of war that the winners take the valuables of those defeated. During the American Revolution, Matthew Elliott had taken advantage of this situation to increase his trading inventory. Among the goods he acquired were enslaved people. In a raid on Martin's Station, Kentucky, in June, 1780, Elliott and his men captured several Americans, including the La Force household. The captives were marched north to the British post at Detroit. There, Elliott and his men kept the African American slaves, but sent the rest of the white prisoners to Quebec. Widow Agnes La Force petitioned Governor Haldimand (Governor of Quebec)





concerning the loss of her human property:

That on the 25th June [1780]... [she] together with her five children and... thirteen negro slaves belonging to her... were disturbed...by a party of Soldiers and Indians of His Majesty, and were by them taken Prisoners and carried to detroit [*sic*] where on their arrival said negro slaves were sold & disposed of without [her] consent..to her very great Detriment said slaves being her only resource...[She wishes] to reclame [*sic*] the above mentioned her negro slaves...¹⁵

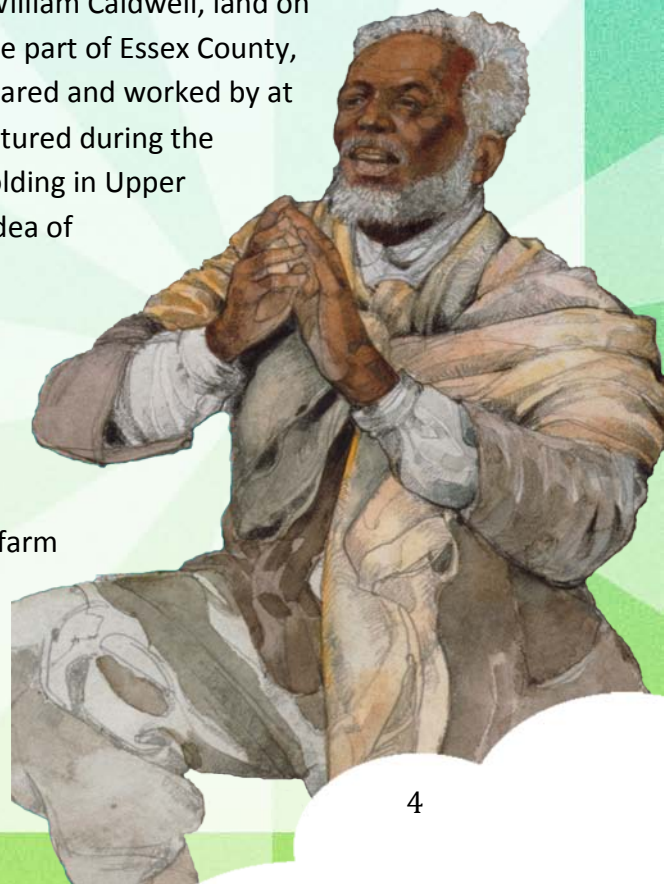
The Governor ordered an enquiry, which located the people claimed by Mrs. La Force as her former possessions. Two of these enslaved African Americans, Joseph and Peggy, were in the possession of Matthew Elliott, and he refused to return them.¹⁶ This was the subject of ongoing frustration for Mrs. La Force. In 1782, in a letter to General Alexander, American Commander-in-Chief George Washington requested:

Should the Enemy send from Canada, any Negroes belonging to a Mrs. La Force who lately came from thence, I pray your Lordship to have them taken care of and sent on here, that they may be forwarded to her in Virginia.¹⁷

In gratitude for their loyal service, the British government gave Alexander McKee,¹⁸ Matthew Elliott, and Elliott's Detroit business partner, William Caldwell, land on the east side of the Detroit River, on what would become part of Essex County, Upper Canada.¹⁹ Elliott's huge wooded property was cleared and worked by at least 64 enslaved Africans, many of whom had been captured during the Kentucky raids. Elliott's was the largest recorded slaveholding in Upper Canada. In 1784, Elliott built an estate house, with the idea of establishing a Southern-style plantation in Malden.²⁰

Captain Hector McLean (the commander of Fort Malden) despised Elliott, and wrote:

[Mr. Elliott] lives as I am informed in the greatest affluence at an expense of above a thousand a year. He possesses an extensive farm not far from the garrison stock'd with about six or seven hundred head of cattle & I am told employs fifty or sixty persons





constantly about his house & farm chiefly slaves.²¹

In 1799, a traveller described Elliott's lovely home, without mentioning that it was the result of much unpaid labour:

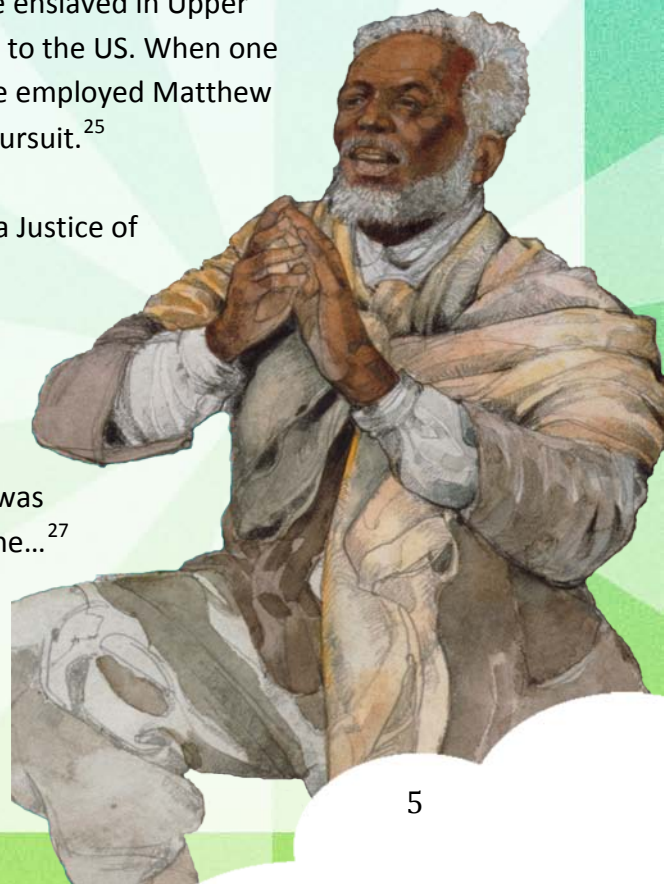
The farm belonging to our friend, Captain E[lliott],...contains no less than two thousand acres. A very large part of it is cleared, and it is cultivated in a style which would not be thought meanly of even in England. His house, which is the best in the whole district, is agreeably situated, at a distance of about two hundred yards from the river; there is a full view of the river, and of the island of Bois Blanc, from the parlour windows, and the scene is continually enlivened by the number of Indian canoes that pass and repass before it. In front of the house there is a neat little lawn, paled in, and ornamented with clumps of trees.²²

This idyllic estate also had slave quarters, the remains of which were still evident in 1920.²³ Elliott was reputed to be a harsh master, securing slaves to a black locust tree on his property for whipping. The iron ring to which their shackles were attached is now preserved in the North American Black Historical Museum, Amherstburg.

In 1787, the American Northwest Ordinance restricted slavery in the territory between the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers.²⁴ This meant that those enslaved in Upper Canada could find freedom by crossing the Detroit River to the US. When one of Alexander McKee's enslaved men escaped in 1795, he employed Matthew Elliott to track the man down. Elliott sent David Tait in pursuit.²⁵

In Detroit, Tait swore an affidavit before George Sharp, a Justice of the Peace for the Western District of Upper Canada:²⁶

I being sent by Captain Elliott in search of a Molato man named Bill the property of Colonel McKee, which was thought to be at Fort Wayne, But on my Arrival at the Glaize was inform'd by the officer there that he was gone...²⁷





Tait did not get assistance from the Detroit authorities, and the freedom-seeker, Bill, was not recaptured.

In 1801, Elliott was enlisted by Peter Russell of York (now Toronto) to find a buyer for Russell's enslaved servant, Peggy.²⁸ Russell became impatient waiting for the sale to go through. In September he wrote to Elliott:

Dear Sir,

My Slave Peggy, whom you were so good to promise to assist me in getting rid of, has remained in Prison ever since you left (in expectation of your sending for her) for an Expense of above Ten pounds Halifax, which I was obliged to pay to the Gaoler [Jailer]...²⁹

Five weeks later, Russell complained:

When You were so obliging to offer to take Peggy and dispose of her for me ... I gave you a Bill of Sale ... to cover you in case any breach of the Peace should happen from her folly & violence in being removed from York...³⁰

Elliott replied:

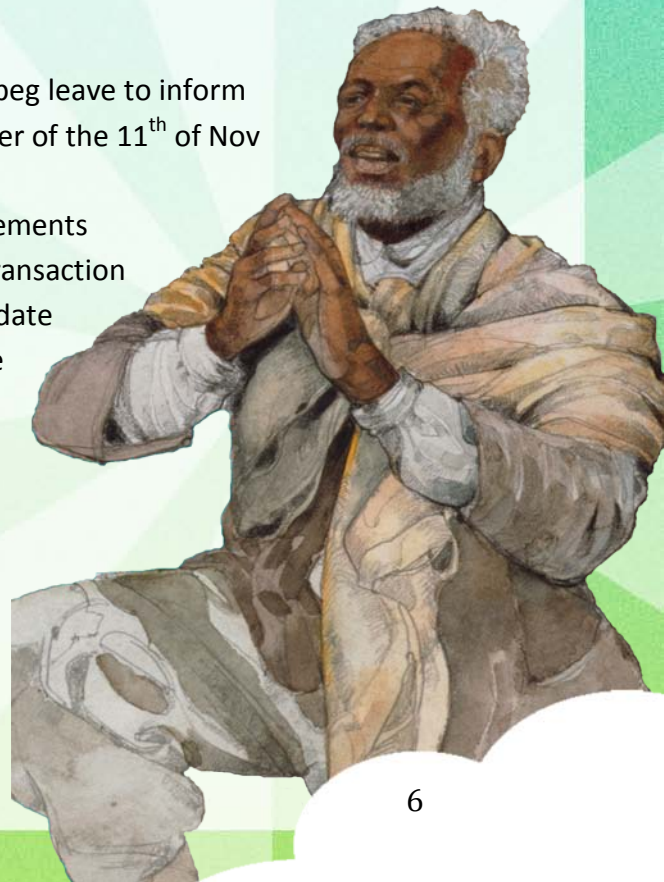
Sir

In answer to your Letter of the 31st Oct I beg leave to inform you, that Captain Brant³¹ writes me in a Letter of the 11th of Nov he intended within a few days going to York where he would make the necessary arrangements respecting the Negro wench. In this whole transaction my only motive was to oblige and accommodate you, having no manner of desire to purchase any more Slaves for myself...

I hope to pay you my respects on the meeting of the Legislature
...with great respect, Sir

Your most Obedient Humble
Servant

M Elliott³²



There is no evidence that the sale of Peggy was ever completed. However, in 1803, Alexander Grant of Detroit complained that:

Mr. Duff and Phillis has been for this week past perplexed and troubled very much with a cursed negro wench they bought some time ago from Capt. Elliott.³³

Over the years, Elliott's brutal treatment propelled many of his "workers" across the Detroit River to freedom in Michigan. Other slaveholders in Upper Canada lost their human "property" in the same way, and by 1806, there were so many living on the other side of the river that Michigan Territory Governor William Hull was able to raise a Black Militia company in Detroit comprised almost entirely of former African Canadian freedom-seekers. Lieutenant Colonel Grant, commander of the British garrison at Amherstburg, reported his anxiety about the situation, stating that the unit was made up of "Renegade Negroes ... deserted from Capt. Elliot and several gentlemen at this side."³⁴

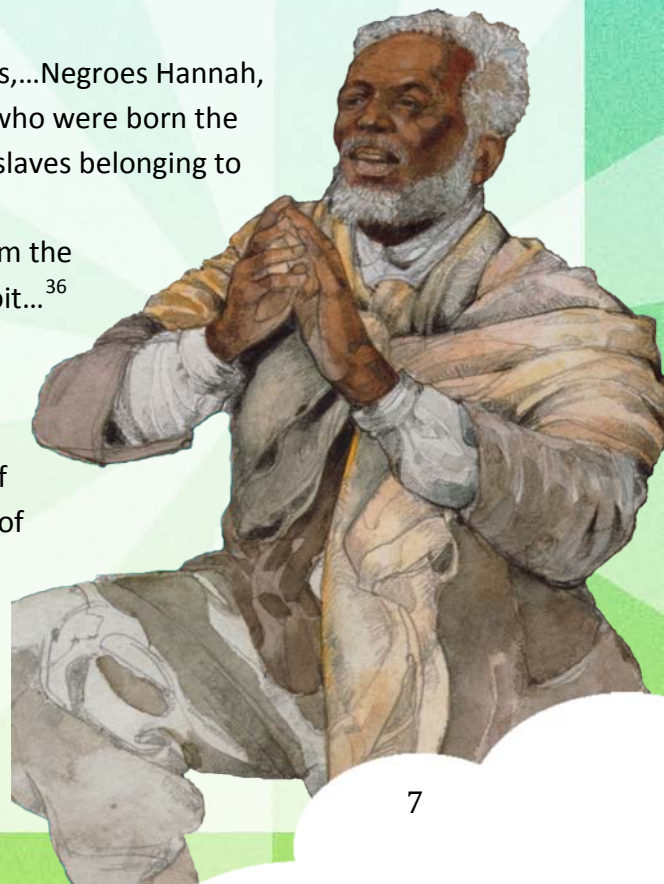
In October 1807, Matthew Elliott sent James Heward to Detroit to demand the return of several of these people.

In applying for a warrant, Heward swore that:³⁵

...[in 1794] Matthew Elliott held, as his Slaves,...Negroes Hannah, Peter, Abraham, Scipio, Candus, and James who were born the slaves of the said Matthew Elliott of female slaves belonging to the Said Matthew...
...last winter and Spring...[they] deserted from the service and Came within the district of Detroit...³⁶

The judge responded that:

In the matter of Matthew Elliott, a Subject of his Britannic Majesty residing in the Vicinity of Amherstburg in the province of Upper Canada, who moves the Court for a warrant to apprehend Sundry of his Slaves





now within this territory; the Court over rules the motion.³⁷

Several of the Loyalist settlers along the Detroit River were slaveholders. Among Matthew Elliott's slaveholding neighbours were Jacques Dupéront Baby, who held at least thirty people in slavery; Antoine Louis Descompte dit Labadie;³⁸ James Girty, who possessed at least fourteen;³⁹ Simon Girty; Alexander McKee;⁴⁰ William Maccomb;⁴¹ and Walter Roe.⁴²

Matthew Elliott is remembered for his loyalty and heroism in defending Britain's interests in the Old Northwest. But to dozens of enslaved people, he was the ruthless slavemaster who had robbed them of their freedom, and had the power of life and death over them. Elliott's role as a slaveholder should not be forgotten. Nor should we overlook the contribution of his enslaved workforce, who were among the first to clear land and work the early farms in Essex County. They made a significant and lasting contribution to the early settlement of Canada.



¹ The plaque erected in 1959 by the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario (now Ontario Heritage Trust) reads:

Near this site stood the house erected in 1784 by Matthew Elliott. Born in Ireland, he emigrated to the American Colonies in 1761, and during the Revolution served with the British forces as a captain in the Indian Department. He was an Indian agent for the western tribes 1790-95 and deputy superintendent of the Indian Department 1795-98. Elliott represented Essex in the legislative assembly 1801-12. As colonel of the 1st Essex Militia he took part in the capture of Detroit, August 16, 1812, and the battles of Fort Meigs, Moraviantown and Black Rock.

It is located near the site of Elliott's former home, 849 Front Road South, south of Amherstburg on County Road 18. It can be viewed online at *Ontario Heritage Trust*, accessed February 10, 2011, <http://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/Resources---Learning/Online-Plaque-Guide/Plaque-Information.aspx?searchtext=846>.

² Reginald Horsman, "Elliott, Matthew," entry in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* (hereafter *DCBO*), accessed February 10, 2011, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=2395.

³ Alexander Blaine to Matthew Elliott, Carlisle, August 9, 1775, *Haldimand Papers*, in *Michigan Historical Collections* (hereafter *MHC*) 19 (Lansing, MI: Robert Smith & Co., 1892), 317. Online at *Internet Archive*, accessed February 20, 2012, <http://archive.org/>.

⁴ Horsman, "Elliott, Matthew."

⁵ More information about the role of First Nations and the Indian Department can be found on the website *National Defence and the Canadian Forces* at www.force.gc.ca. For the period 1760-1814, see *Aboriginal People in the Canadian Military*, Chapter 3: "In Defence of Their Homelands," accessed March 22, 2012, <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/dhh-dhp/pub/boo-bro/abo-aut/chapter-chapitre-03-eng.asp>.

⁶ Wilcomb E. Washburn, *History of Indian-White Relations*, vol. 4 of *Handbook of North American Indians*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1988), 86.

⁷ The land between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers.

⁸ Reginald Horsman, "The British Indian Department and the Resistance to General Anthony Wayne, 1793-1795," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 49:2 (September 1962): 270.

⁹ Capt. Herbert McLean to Capt. James Green, military secretary to Lord Dorchester, *Library and Archives Canada* (hereafter *LAC*) 251, 92-95; *MHC* 20, 603. *The Windsor Border Region. Canada's Southernmost Frontier: a collection of documents*, Ernest J. Lajeunesse, ed. (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1960), 221.

¹⁰ The Hesse District was created in 1788 as an administrative division of Upper Canada. In 1792 it was renamed the Western District. It consisted of the area west of a line drawn north from Long Point on Lake Erie. More information can be obtained online, accessed March 27, 2012, at <http://www.ontariogenealogy.com/uppercanadadistricts.html>.

¹¹ Horsman, "Elliott, Matthew."

¹² Reginald Horsman, "British Indian Policy in the Northwest, 1807-1812," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 45:1 (June 1958): 54-57.

¹³ Death announcement of Col. Matthew Elliot [sic], *New England Palladium* (Boston), July 8, 1814. Online at Newsbank, through Godfrey Memorial Library, accessed February 10, 2012, http://infoweb.newsbank.com/iw-search/we/HistArchive/HistArchive?d_viewref=doc&p_docnum=1&p_nbid=C65U4DEJMTMzMjg2NTg4NS45NTEzOTQ6MT04OnJmLTE5NDI2&f_docref=v2:109E895B80A29900@EANX-NX-10AE2E9228B8BA78@2383798-10AE2E9239F3DC78@0&p_docref=v2:109E895B80A29900@EANX-10AE2E9228B8BA78@2383798-10AE2E9239F3DC78@0.

¹⁴ Matthew Elliott Estate Files, Malden, 1814, RG22-155-6-I-A, Microfilm MS 638 R47, Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO).

¹⁵ Petition of Agnes La Force to Haldimand, *Haldimand Papers*, *MHC* 19, 494.

¹⁶ William Renwick Riddell, "Two Incidents of Revolutionary Time," *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 12:2 (August 1921): 232-233.

¹⁷ George Washington to William Alexander, Lord Stirling, December 9, 1782, "The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799," John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *George Washington Papers at the Library of Congress, 1741-1799*, online at *American Memory* (US Library of Congress), accessed March 22, 2012, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/mgw:@field%28DOCID+@lit%28gw250480%29%29#N0448-608>.

¹⁸ McKee had also acquired a member of Mrs. La Force's household: Candis. Riddell, "Two Incidents," 233.



¹⁹ See “Map of the Area of the 1783 [Indian Officers' Land] Treaty” on *The Atlas of Canada* website, Natural Resources Canada, accessed March 22, 2012, http://atlas.nrcan.gc.ca/site/english/maps/historical/indiantreaties/historicaltreaties/p7.gif/image_view.

²⁰ David M. Katzman, “Black Slavery in Michigan,” *American Studies* 11:2 (Fall 1970): 61.

²¹ Capt. Hector McLean to Capt. James Green, military secretary to Lord Dorchester, Amherstburg, September 14, 1797 (LAC 251, 92-95; MHC 20, 603) in Lajeunesse, 221.

²² Isaac Weld, *Travels through the states of North America, and the provinces of Upper and Lower Canada, during the years 1795, 1796, and 1797* (London: J. Stockdale, 1799), 179-180. Online at *Internet Archive*, accessed March 8, 2012, <http://archive.org/>.

²³ William Renwick Riddell, “Upper Canada-Early Period,” *The Journal of Negro History* (hereafter *JNH*) 5:3 (July 1920): 333.

²⁴ An Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States, North-West of the River Ohio, “Art. 6. There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory,” *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History & Diplomacy Lillian Goldman Law Library*, Yale Law School, accessed March 25, 2012, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/nworder.asp. This legislation was open to broad interpretation, and Finkelman suggests that the right to property trumped the right to freedom in the Northwest. Paul Finkelman, “Slavery and the Northwest Ordinance: a Study in Ambiguity,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 6:4 (Winter 1986): 343-370. However, Detroit judges do not seem to have extended the principle to Elliott and other British subjects.

²⁵ William Renwick Riddell, “Additional Notes on Slavery,” *JNH* 17:3 (July 1932): 372.

²⁶ The Detroit District was given to the US under the terms of Jay’s Treaty of 1794, but remained under British authority until 1796.

²⁷ Riddell, “Upper Canada- Early Period,” 333.

²⁸ Peter Russell held various positions with the government of Upper Canada: Receiver & Auditor General 1791-1808; Administrator of Upper Canada 1796-1799.

²⁹ Peter Russell to Matthew Elliott, September 19, 1801, Russell Papers, F46, Microfilm MS 75 reel 5, AO.

³⁰ Peter Russell to Matthew Elliott, October 31, 1801, Russell Papers, F46, Microfilm MS 75 reel 5, AO.

³¹ Joseph Brant: Mohawk leader, known as Thayendanagea. Officer in the Indian Department. Barbara Graymont, “Thayendanagea,” entry in *DCBO*, accessed March 26, 2012, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=2686.

³² Matthew Elliott to Peter Russell, October 31, 1801, Russell Papers, F46, Microfilm MS 75 reel 5, AO.

³³ In Bill McGraw, “Slavery is a quiet part of city's past,” *Detroit Free Press*, February 22, 2001, accessed January 27, 2009, http://mlloyd.org/gen/macomb/text/slave22_20010222.htm.

³⁴ Lt. Col. Grant to Capt. James Green, military secretary to Lord Dorchester, August 7, 1807, Amherstburg, (Archives series C vol. 673) in *Report on Canadian Archives, 1896* (Ottawa:1897), 106.

³⁵ *Transactions of the Supreme Court of Michigan*, 2:156, William W. Blume, ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1935-1940), 216, 219, quoted in *The Court Legacy*, 12:3 (November 2004), The Historical Society for the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan, accessed March 20, 2012, http://www.mied.uscourts.gov/HistoricalSociety/media/newsletters/200411_Court_Legacy.pdf.

³⁶ Sworn Testimony of James Heward, October 21, 1807, before James May, J.P. District of Detroit. *MHC* 36, 185-186.

³⁷ Decision: Supreme Court of Territory of Michigan, at Detroit, November 4, 1807, Peter Audrain, Clerk. *MHC* 36, 201-204.

³⁸ Riddell, “Upper Canada-Early Period,” 333.

³⁹ Will of James Girty, Gosfield Township, Essex County, Western District, 1804, Essex County Surrogate Court Register Book, Vol. A, 1785-1825, 205, RG22-310. Microfilm GS 2 R35, AO.

⁴⁰ Lyman C. Draper, “Interview of Rachel Reno,” reprinted in Arthur L. Thomas, *Grandma Reno’s Story*, accessed online October 27, 2010, <http://www.afrigenas.com/library/reno.html>.

⁴¹ Copy of the Will of the late William Macomb, July 27, 1796, Second Heir & Devisee Commission, RG40-5, Parcel 3, 40-0134, MS 657 R17, AO.

⁴² Will of Walter Roe, of Detroit, Western District, U.C., May 4, 1793, Essex County Surrogate Court Estate Files, Surrogate Court, Essex County (Windsor), Wills (Old Series) No. 19, RG22-311, GS 1 R717, AO. Roe died in Sandwich on August 9, 1801.

