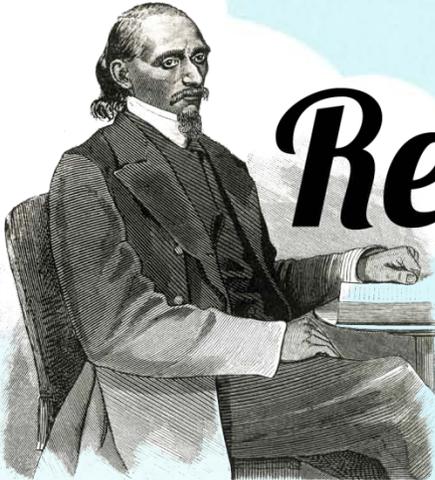




BREAKING THE CHAINS



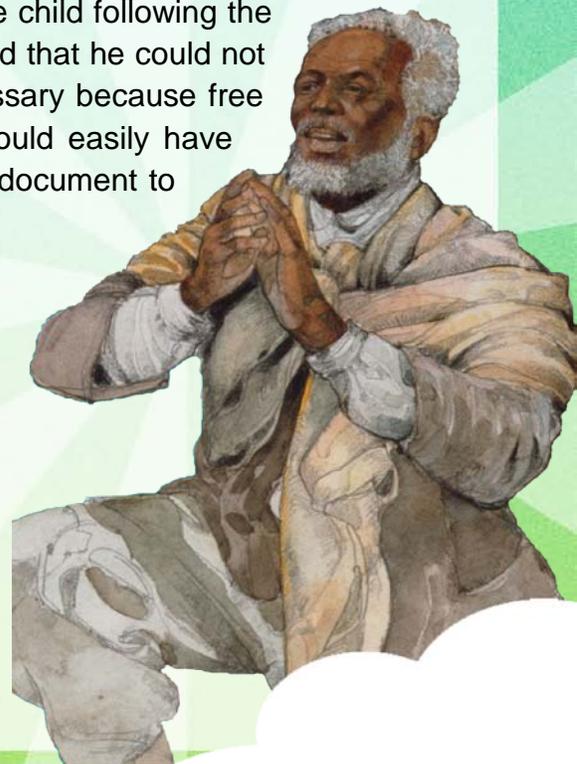
# Reverend Mitchell

TORONTO

One of the interesting people who lived in Canada West (Ontario) during the era of the Underground Railroad was the Reverend William, or W. M. Mitchell. In addition to being a Baptist minister, Reverend Mitchell was also an abolitionist and committed Underground Railroad conductor. He is perhaps best known for writing a book about his experiences and impressions of the Black communities in Canada West (Ontario), entitled *The Under-Ground Railroad*.<sup>1</sup> However, less well known is that he resided with his family on the outskirts of the City of Toronto proper, and that he ministered to a Baptist congregation in the city in the mid-1850s.

William M. Mitchell was born free in Guildford County, North Carolina, to a Native American mother and African American father. His parents died when he was quite young and he consequently came under the custody of the local authorities. Mitchell was apprenticed to a planter and slave owner, and because, as a Native American, his mother was a free woman, Mitchell was also legally free, the child following the status of his mother. However, the indenture expressly stated that he could not be kidnapped or bound into slavery. This clause was necessary because free Blacks were always in danger of being enslaved, which could easily have happened to William Mitchell, had he not had such a legal document to corroborate his status.

Mitchell was apprenticed for twelve years, the last five of which he was manager of the entire estate. He became painfully familiar with all of the cruelties and abuses of the slave system. It was his job, for



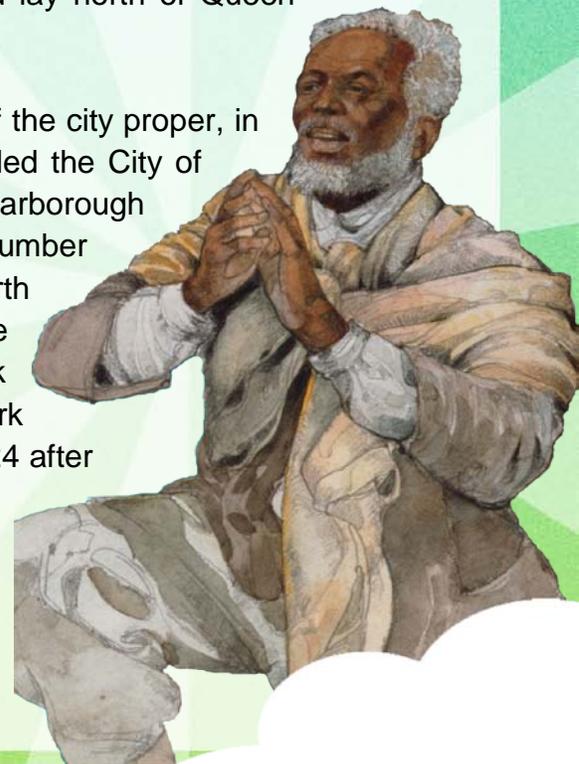


example, to order or superintend the punishment, which often included whippings of men, women and children for the purpose of keeping order and discipline on the plantation. He was also involved in separating and selling off husbands from wives, mothers and fathers from children, brothers from sisters, and so forth. As a result of these experiences, Mitchell developed an abhorrence of slavery and everything it represented. After his period of indenture was up, therefore, he decided to dedicate the rest of his life to the cause of the enslaved.<sup>ii</sup>

Mitchell studied Christianity and moved to Ohio. He lived in Cincinnati before relocating in 1843 to Ross County, Ohio, with his wife. There he continued his work in earnest as an active member of the local Vigilance Committee and undertook the dangerous work of being a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Reverend Mitchell helped dozens of fugitive slaves make their way secretly through Ohio and on to freedom in Canada. Among those he assisted, according to his own account, was the famous “Eliza” immortalized in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. She was the real life slave mother who jumped from ice flow to ice flow across the Ohio River, her child in her arms, so that her infant son who had already been sold could not be delivered to his new owner.<sup>iii</sup>

In 1855, Mitchell became a missionary of the American Baptist Free Mission Society. It was one of the few Baptist bodies that had stood up against slavery. He moved to Toronto with his family and pastored at the Coloured Regular Baptist Church on Terauley (now Bay St.) and Edward Streets, very close to where the new City Hall stands today. His church was in St. John’s Ward, the location of the largest number of African Americans and African Canadians in Toronto, with a population of 539. St. John’s Ward was Toronto’s first working class suburb, and lay north of Queen between the modern University Avenue and Yonge Street.

However, Mitchell himself chose to reside on the outskirts of the city proper, in York Township West. At that time York Township surrounded the City of Toronto, extending just above Bloor St on the south, the Scarborough line (and Scarborough Township) on the east, and the Humber River (and Etobicoke Township) on the west. It stretched north to Vaughan and Markham Townships, and south to Lake Ontario past the city limits. Yonge Street separated York Township West from York Township East. By 1861, York Township held the second largest population of Blacks at 224 after St. John’s Ward in Toronto. York Township West, Ward 3 – where Reverend Mitchell resided – held the highest number of Blacks at 119 of all of the wards of York





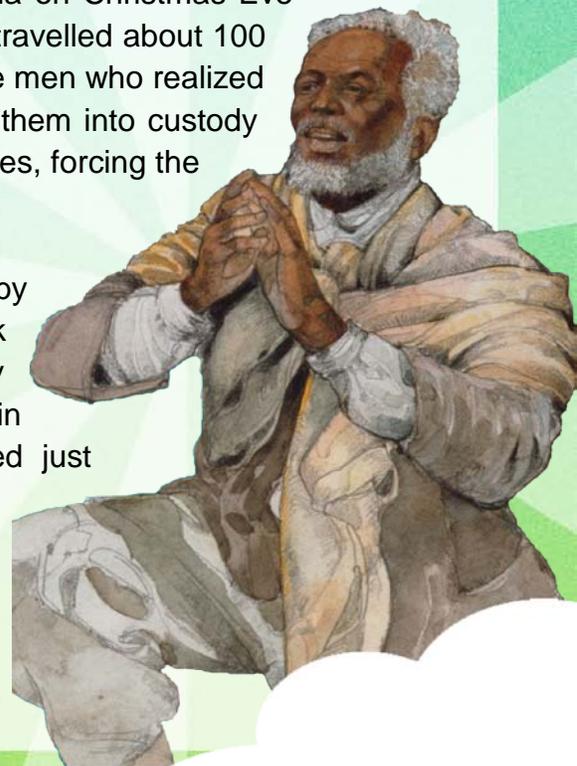
Township at that time. It included the large area west of Yonge Street as far west as the Humber River, and ran north of Bloor extending well past St. Clair Avenue.

In 1861, the census recorded that Mitchell was a minister and thirty-five years of age. His wife, Elizabeth, was recorded as aged twenty-nine, and their children were listed as James, aged 16 , John, 13 , Fred E., 6 , Eliza E., 4 , and Augusta L., a toddler of 2 years. They lived on  $\frac{3}{4}$  acres of land in a one-storey frame house. Lea Jefferson, a 40-year-old labourer, lived with the family, most likely as a boarder.<sup>iv</sup> Many families in the area supplemented their incomes by taking in boarders. Some were relatives but others strangers who had no friends or family in town. This was a common starting point for newcomers to the city, and providing them with both a home and semblance of family life.

The Mitchells had some interesting neighbours. Well-known ice merchant Richard B. Richards, who owned four successful ice houses, lived off Davenport Road, as did his brothers and in-laws.<sup>v</sup> An ice house was a place where ice was stored in order to sell to businesses and homes before refrigeration was available. Carpenter and community leader Adolphus Judah also lived in the area,<sup>vi</sup> and there were numerous other individuals and families in York Township West who had escaped slavery on the Underground Railroad.

According to the 1861 census, Frank and Emily Wanzer, and Barnaby and Mary Grigsby, for example, were sharing a one-storey frame house on  $\frac{1}{2}$  acre of land and they owned a horse and four pigs valued at \$15.<sup>vii</sup> These couples, whose women were sisters, were later immortalized by William Still in his famous book, *The Underground Railroad*. Still described how they had escaped from Virginia on Christmas Eve 1855 in their master's horse-drawn carriage. After they had travelled about 100 miles, they were stopped and questioned by a group of white men who realized they were escaped slaves. These men were about to take them into custody when both the men and the women drew their guns and knives, forcing the group to let them ride on.<sup>viii</sup>

After reaching Philadelphia, where they were interviewed by Mr. Still, they journeyed on to New York State. There, Frank and Emily, who were already engaged, were married by Underground Railroad agent Reverend Jermain Loguen in Syracuse. They travelled across Lake Ontario and settled just outside Toronto in York Township West, Ward 3. Frank Wanzer later journeyed back into slave territory to rescue his sister, her husband and another friend, who also later



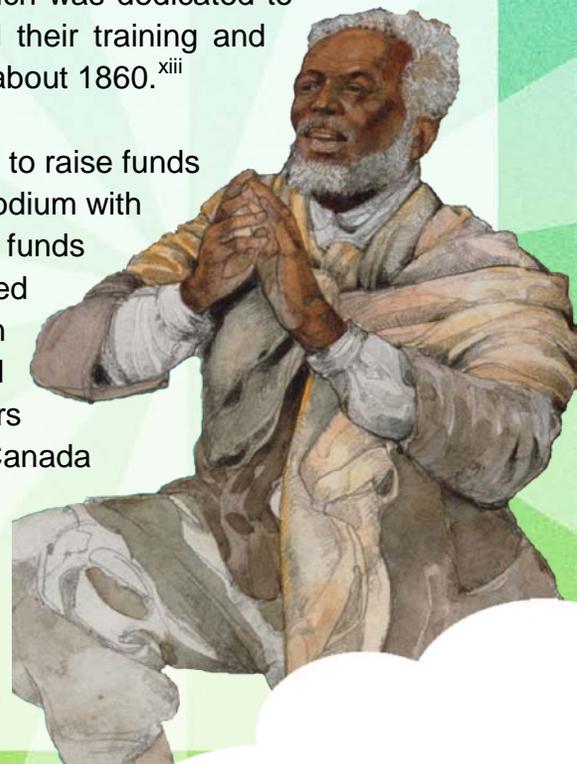


settled in York Township.<sup>ix</sup> These were just a few of the unsung heroes that inhabited Reverend Mitchell's neighbourhood.

Reverend Mitchell was the minister of the Coloured Regular Baptist Church, or Terauley St. Baptist Church, on what is now Bay Street.<sup>x</sup> As pastor of a church of 100 members, some of whom were recently-arrived ex-slaves, Mitchell often visited those who were in desperate situations, some of them suffering without enough warm clothing or food to eat. Organizations such as the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, with its female wing, the Ladies Association for the Relief of Destitute Coloured Fugitives, and the Liberating Association, which had been established by 1856 to "assist the weary and worn-out fugitive that may reach our shore" were doing tremendous work in assisting these individuals and families who were not yet in a position to support themselves. When such families applied for assistance, it was Mitchell's job to visit them and verify their situation so that aid could be delivered. In addition, he often held church services in the homes of poorer members of his congregation who could not attend regular Sunday services for lack of proper attire.<sup>xi</sup>

As a leader of Toronto's Black community, Reverend Mitchell also met with Canadian officials from time to time. For example, in January 1859, he met with the Governor General of Canada, Sir Edmund Walker Head, at his residence. The latter assured him that there would always be room in Canada to accommodate African American fugitives from slavery.<sup>xii</sup> Mitchell also became involved in other ways in the elevation of the African Canadian community in Canada. For example, he was a member of the Association for the Education and Elevation of the Coloured People of Canada, a racial uplift organization focused on African Canadian youth. Mitchell was a member of the committee that wrote the constitution. The organization, which was dedicated to "the education of the coloured youth of this province, and their training and preparation for the active duties of life," was incorporated in about 1860.<sup>xiii</sup>

In 1859, Mitchell travelled to Great Britain on a speaking tour to raise funds to build a chapel for his congregation. He often shared the podium with Reverend William Troy of Windsor, who was there to raise funds for *his* Baptist church. It was in England that Mitchell published his book, *The Under-Ground Railroad*, which gave an account of Underground Railroad activity in the United States and disputed the ways in which some other lecturers represented the true conditions of the Black population in Canada West. Mitchell returned to Great Britain in 1863-64 to again raise funds for schools and chapels for "fugitive slaves". Just before leaving on his second tour, tragedy struck the





family when Mitchell's six-year-old daughter, Eliza, died of inflammation in January 1863.<sup>xiv</sup>

During Reverend Mitchell's second tour of Great Britain, he became embroiled in controversy when he was arrested for failing to pay his room rent, and was censured for using old references and for not keeping a proper accounting of his fundraising receipts. Mitchell insisted that he had collected £400, all of which was sent to Canada, less his salary and expenses.<sup>xv</sup> Sometime after this, the Mitchells left the area and it is not known where they relocated. At the end of the Civil War and the Emancipation of American slaves, it is very likely that the family moved back to the United States to begin the great work of ministering, educating and providing other assistance to the newly-freed enslaved population. Mitchell is listed as a deceased member of the Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention in the minutes of the annual meeting for 1879.<sup>xvi</sup> His book remains a lasting legacy of his life and work in the cause of the oppressed African in Canada and the United States, and an important contemporary assessment of the condition and status of Black communities in mid-nineteenth century Canada West.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> Reverend W. M. Mitchell, *The Under-Ground Railroad*, Reprint, 1860 (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1970). Mitchell toured the province and wrote about his general observations of the Black population of the province. He wrote specifically about the Black communities in Toronto, Hamilton, St. Catharines, London, Chatham, Windsor, The Refugee Home Society of Essex County, Sandwich, Amherstburg, Dresden and the Wilberforce and Elgin Settlements of Middlesex and Kent Counties, respectively.

<sup>ii</sup> This outline of Mitchell's life is by W. H. Bonner, "Preface," in Mitchell, iii-ix.

<sup>iii</sup> Mitchell, 100-103.

<sup>iv</sup> 1861 Census of Canada West, County of York, Township of York, Ward 3, 88; Adrienne Shadd, Afua Cooper and Karolyn Smardz Frost, *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop, Toronto!* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2005), 40-43.

<sup>v</sup> 1861 Census of Canada West, County of York, Township of York, Ward 3, 90; C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Volume II: Canada, 1830-1865* (Chapel Hill, NC and London, UK: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 378n; Mitchell, 132; Shadd, Cooper and Smardz Frost, 43.

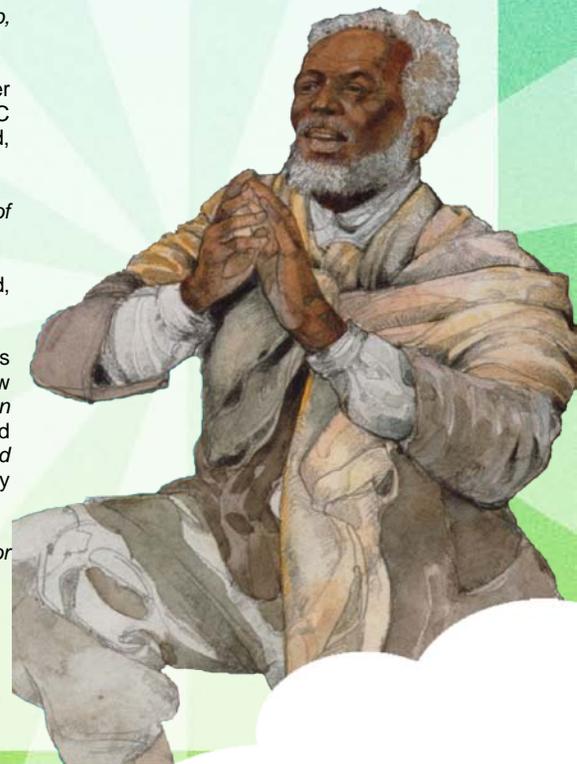
<sup>vi</sup> Ripley, 304-5n; *Mitchell & Co. General Directory for the City of Toronto, and Gazetteer of the Counties of York and Peel for 1866* (Toronto: Mitchell & Co., 1866).

<sup>vii</sup> 1861 Census of Canada West, County of York, Township of York, Ward 3, 84; Shadd, Cooper and Smardz Frost, 23-24, 40.

<sup>viii</sup> Studies have shown that as much as 80 percent of the fugitive slave population was male. See Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 265; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 70; Adrienne Shadd, "The Lord Seemed to Say 'Go,'" Women and the Underground Railroad Movement," in *We're Rooted Here and They Can't Pull Us Up: Essays in African Canadian Women's History*, Peggy Bristow et al., eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 42-43.

<sup>ix</sup> William Still, *Underground Rail Road Records, Revised Edition, With a Life of the Author* (Philadelphia, Pa: William Still, 1883), 124-129.

<sup>x</sup> Ripley, 483n.



<sup>xi</sup> Mitchell, 160-164.

<sup>xii</sup> Mitchell, 155-56.

<sup>xiii</sup> Mitchell, 156.

<sup>xiv</sup> Shadd, Cooper and Smardz Frost, 46.

<sup>xv</sup> Ripley, 483n.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ripley, 483n.

