

Dawn Settlement Tour

Driving - Allow a minimum of 35 minutes for the full tour

Introduction:

The Directors of Dresden.ca extend to you a warm welcome. We hope you enjoy the Dawn Settlement tour and your visit to Dresden.

Dresden is home to the world famous “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” Historic Site.

Josiah Henson inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe’s fictional character “Uncle Tom” in her 1853 novel which later became the basis for songs, musicals, plays and movies. Henson’s association with the novel has tended to distort our understanding of his real life story.

Henson’s fame also overshadowed other important Underground Railroad figures connected to the Dawn Settlement. Henson was one great man among many. He was one of a group of men who founded and developed the Dawn Institute also known as the British-American Institute.

The purpose of this tour is to introduce you to some of those important figures, viewing sites and artifact buildings linked to them. You will travel around an area which was once the British-American Institute a place of refuge and learning for fugitive slaves.

We often understand the “fugitives” or “freedom seekers” who came to Canada as slaves who escaped with little more than the clothes on their backs. While these individuals are a significant part of the great migration that took place from the 1790s to the 1860s, there were others, particularly after the passage of the “1850 Fugitive Slave Act” that were Freeman of some means. Many freemen who settled “Dawn” were important figures in the Underground Railroad and Abolitionist Movement.

Instructions:

This Dawn Settlement Tour consists of an introduction, a numbered sequence of sites and a conclusion. Each site is identified on the map which appears at the end of this script.

The Dawn Settlement Tour may be started at any point in the sequence. #1 is Uncle Tom’s Cabin located on Uncle Tom’s Road. An alternate suggested starting point is #12, The First Baptist Church located on Queen St near the corner of St George St in downtown Dresden.

If you have already toured the Uncle Tom’s Cabin Heritage Site you may skip to #2, the Henson Family and BAI Cemeteries or # 3 the Dresden Campground Meeting Site.

We will start the tour at Uncle Tom’s Cabin, which is located on Uncle Tom’s Road at the western edge of the former British-American Institute or BAI.

#1 – Uncle Tom’s Cabin:

This five-acre historic site consists of an interpretive centre, gift shop, three historic buildings, including Uncle Tom’s Cabin, two cemeteries and extensive artifacts. It is open year round to groups of 20 or more and to the general public from May through October. Admission fees apply.

Just north on Uncle Tom’s Road you will see two cemeteries. If you have already toured the cemeteries you may opt to skip to #3 –The Dresden Campground meeting site.

#2 The Henson Family and the BAI Cemeteries:

The Josiah Henson Family Cemetery is to your right on the east side of the road. Josiah's stone, visible next to the cedar tree, bears the Mason's symbol and a crown representing Queen Victoria. Henson was a member of the Mount Moriah Masons #4 in Dresden. The land was purchased from the BAI by Henson and became part of the Henson Farm in 1872.

The Historic Sites plaque located at his graveside reads, in part:

Josiah Henson, 1789-1883

After escaping to Upper Canada from slavery in Kentucky, the Rev. Josiah Henson became a conductor in the Underground Railroad and a force in the Abolition Movement. The (co-founder) of the black settlement of Dawn... it goes on to read... was also an entrepreneur and (co-founder)... of the school, the British-American (or Dawn) Institute. His fame grew after Harriet Beecher Stowe stated that his memoirs published in 1849 had provided 'conceptions and incidents' for her extraordinarily popular novel, "Uncle Tom's Cabin".

On the opposite, or west, side of the road the BAI cemetery sits on land that was part of the Willoughby-Harris Farm. Weldon Harris and Levi Willoughby, 2 freedom seekers, established here in c. 1823. They were among the first settlers to purchase land after the British signed Treaty 25 with members of the Council of Three Fires, opening this land for settlement. Their 50 acre farm which extends north to the river flats, was established 20 years before the BAI.

Gravestones in this cemetery mark the final resting place of early leaders of the Dawn Settlement. Some of the surnames etched on the stones are SMITH - wife of an original BAI trustee, Peter B Smith-, DAVIS – including Rev. Samuel Davis of the Baptist Mission, his wife Catherine and one of their children, and BURKETT, an early merchant in Dresden.

Travel north past Park St to the end of Uncle Tom's Road. From Glasgow Line look north between the 2 properties.

If walking you may opt to go to #4 by turning right on Park St and left at Wilson St

#3 – the Dresden Campground Meeting Site:

Along the row of trees toward the Sydenham River is a flat area believed to be the location of the "Dresden Campground" meetings of the 1830s. These semi-religious gatherings attracted audiences of all races and creeds from a 40-mile radius. The river site continued to be used for river baptisms until at least 1949.

Rev. Henson, may have participated in gatherings such as these when he first came to the area while scouting locations for the BAI. Henson indicated he had spoken to large mixed race gathering of this type. Researchers speculate he may have been introduced to the area *because* of his involvement with the campground meetings. Henson and other members of the three-man BAI site selection committee certainly would have found the community here inviting and with families who could provide support for an educational institute, as well as rich land and dense stands of hardwood trees.

The BAI boundary extends north from this point in a straight line across the Sydenham River.

Return south on Uncle Tom's Rd, turn left on Park St. Turn left at the 1st street which is Wilson and proceed to Holden St.

#4 – Wilson & Holden Streets:

Several streets were named by the final trustees of the BAI for key personalities involved with the Institute during its history. Wilson Street is named for Rev. Hiram Wilson, who, along with J C Fuller, from New York State, raised funds for the BAI at the first world anti-slavery convention in London, England in 1840. You will soon travel on Fuller St, named for JC Fuller.

At the corner of Wilson and Holden Streets, beyond the trees on your left, is the Sydenham River. Until the 1970s there was a street continuing from this point running along the river and joining Glasgow Line. The first survey of the BAI lands designated it as “Henson Street”.

Turn right on Holden St, go east to Fuller St.

Holden St is named for Isaac Holden, one of the final trustees of the BAI. Holden had strong ties to the Chatham Settlement, was an early Chatham businessman and fire chief.

Turn left at Fuller St, go north 2 blocks to Hughes St, then turn left into the gravel circle.

#5 – the McVean Sawmill Site:

This is the heart of the British American Institute lands. The main buildings, including the saw mill, are believed to have been located near this spot. 50 acres of the BAI were also located across the river to the west. Newspaper accounts speak of a rope bridge made of hemp grown and harvested by local farmers and constructed by the BAI that spanned the river 20 years before a “first Dresden bridge” is recorded in the history books. Such a bridge would have facilitated travel to the BAI’s lands across the river in the 1840s.

The BAI lands were sold in 1871 with the proceeds going to establish the Wilberforce Educational Institute in Chatham, ON. This was a school established exclusively for blacks that offered courses from elementary to university levels.

On the sale of the land, this area became Dresden’s main industrial area. Most of the industry that established here was based on the manufacture of wood products or the processing of agricultural products.

You will notice the bell mounted on the tall stand. For some 50 years, this bell signaled the start and stop of production at the O&W McVean Ltd Factory, which operated a saw mill and wood manufacturing plant. Alexander McVean established the factory around 1874. You can still detect remnants of its foundations in this area. It is speculated that the BAI mill at least provided the inspiration, if not the foundation for the later McVean enterprise.

The trail running through this area is part of Dresden’s Trillium Trail Historical Walk. The plaque at the base of Hughes St, one of many in the trail, is dedicated to Rev. Josiah Henson.

Leaving the Hughes St circle, turn left on Fuller St and then right on Brown St.

6 - Brown Street:

Another street believed to be named for a BAI trustee, JC Brown, not only the BAI’s longest serving trustee, he was the only person that remained a trustee throughout its entire existence and is largely accredited with saving it as an African-Canadian directed institution. Brown was also a co-founder of “Canada’s Original Black Colony”, known as Wilberforce, located at Lucan near London, ON. Brown was instrumental in establishing the Wilberforce Educational Institute in Chatham.

Travel east on Brown St, stop and turn left on Strathglass. Note the house on the corner-ahead and to your right at 471 Brown St.

7 – 471 Brown Street:

This is believed to be a surviving example of an early BAI house. Much altered, its profile is reminiscent of the Harris House, located on the Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site.

Go north on Strathglass until you reach Queen St, turn right.

Midway between Brown and Queen Streets was the northern boundary of the BAI lands. You can see that it was a substantial piece of property, originally 200 purchased acres, with an additional 100 acres acquired shortly after for a total of 300 acres. It was hoped this large land base would sustain the school and its students with timber and agricultural products.

Travel east along Queen St to the first intersection, turn left on West St. for 1 block.

Immediately north of the BAI lands border was Survey 127 of the original community of Dresden surveyed in 1853. With few exceptions, the roughly 100 properties making up this piece of prime real estate were purchased by a partnership of freemen abolitionists made up of Dennis Hill, James Whipper Pernell, William Goodrich and Absolom Shadd. All these individuals were connected with William Whipper.

Stop with caution before turning left on Lindsley St then follow the turn right onto Metcalf St.

Whipper was a prominent "Station Master" on the Underground Railroad and smuggled 100's of fugitives north. In his account of his UGR work to William Still in his history entitled "The Underground Railroad" Whipper briefly mentions these "lands along the Sydenham" in Dresden.

Follow Metcalf St viewing the river area and heritage buildings prior to the stop sign at St George St.

#8 – Metcalf Street:

The Sydenham River in the 1850s and 60s was very different from today. Schooners sailed its waters directly connecting Dresden to Detroit, Michigan, and the Great Lakes. At that time the proximity of the river meant this would have been a preferred area for homes and businesses. Consequently, white entrepreneurs like Alexander Trerice and his father-in-law, William Wright, established a lime burner and sawmill on the bend of the river.

While people of African decent comprised as much as 80% of the early population of Dresden, Trerice, and others of Irish, Scottish and German descent, were also neighbours in the early Dresden community. The lives of many, especially Trerice and Wright, appear to have been closely intertwined with their neighbours resulting in their intimate involvement in the fate of the black-owned institutions. From 1863 to 1868, Trerice was named receiver of the BAI lands, managing its business affairs at a time when its ownership was being contested and its assets tied up in the courts. Trerice, a justice of the peace, would emerge in the 1870s and 80s, as a major industrialist, a shipbuilder and also be named Reeve of the newly incorporated village in 1871, then of the town in 1882.

James Charity another owner of considerable real estate in Dresden, possibly was the builder of 135 Metcalf St, believed to be a rare example of the 1860's black architectural "shotgun" style home. Charity also owned Chatham properties including a 2-story brick building he rented to the "Provincial Freeman", a newspaper published by Mary Ann Shadd-Carey.

Cross over St George St and continue along Metcalf St

In Dresden James Charity operated a “crockery store” on Metcalf just west of the bridge and his brother, Cornelius along with George Webster, owned a successful corn mill at the bend of the river immediately to the west. The Charity brothers also owned a schooner named “the Industry of Detroit” reported in the Provincial Freeman to have docked here in 1854.

Proceed to the white house on your left at # 315 Metcalf.

#9 – The Whipper Cottage.

William Whipper, along with two of his three siblings, and a nephew came to Dresden in the 1850s. Whipper was the wealthiest Black Man in North America at that time, turning his money and business talent to banking, the purchase of railroad cars and stock, milling, coal and real estate development. His large Dresden holdings were mainly managed by his agent, J B Hollensworth., the majority of which were sold by 1872.

Among his numerous land purchases in both North and South Dresden, was this Regency style cottage which he bought in 1854. Believed to have been used as a temporary residence by Whipper and his family, this is one of the few properties Whipper’s widow, Harriet, hung onto long after William’s death in 1876.

A ships dock was located next to the cottage and a 1850s Inn owned by Whipper, across the street was demolished in 2005.

Whipper also established key industries in the fledgling community, a significant contribution to the development of the Dawn Settlement and early Dresden.

This street was the main business district of the town in the 1840s and 50s. It was a mosaic of black and white professionals and business people including Scots-Irish families such as Webster, Watson and McInnies and prominent blacks such as Josiah Henson, Dennis Hill, James B Hollensworth and Mary Smith.

Continue on Metcalf St to the stop sign. Proceed veering slightly left on Water St. On your right, across from a group of silos, at #582 is a red brick home.

10 – The Wright House:

The plaque in the peak of this Greek Revival/Georgian home reads. “J. Smith, 1870” yet no Smith ever owned it. Furthermore the construction is more accurately dated to c. 1855.

The bricks in this house may be some of the approximately 100,000 bricks said to have been manufactured by the BAI. No brick yard in this area, except for the one operated by the BAI, is known to have existed at the time the Wright house was built. Only two structures in the community feature the unusual black bricks and Pennsylvania bond style construction found in this house.

The home was built, across the road from his mill, by William Wright and Alex Trerice’s father-in-law. Wright was the founder of Fairport, this section of the Dawn Settlement. Wright’s Mill, by oral tradition, is identified as the former BAI mill that he moved here with the help of Josiah Henson in about 1853. The silos standing across the street combined with land record evidence indicate this had continuously been a milling location since the 1850s, when Wright built this house, until recently.

Continue south on Water St, turn right on Brock St and right on Tecumseh St to Main St

#11- Main Street:

After the Civil War, many members of this unique community turned their attention and energies to reconstruction back “home” in the U.S. At least 2/3rds remained here and continued to develop a prominent black-owned business district along this section of Main St and east toward the river. Many of the families who had been involved in the abolitionist movement continued to operate businesses on Main St until at least 1906.

Among those located here were the Talbot Blacksmith Shop, which is now the location of the Post Office, William and Stephen Smith’s Barber Shop, the William Whipper Flour Mill and JB Hollensworth’s Ice Cream Parlour – which was named the Sweet Briar Cottage. Also included in this block on Main St were properties owned by Josiah Henson and his son, Peter.

After 1906, knowledge of ties to the elite black abolitionist families in the US faded. The important legacy they left behind was largely forgotten by successive generations and failed to be documented by early town historians.

Knowledge of this remarkable group has begun to be reclaimed thanks to the 2003 development of the Trillium Trail Historical Walk and subsequent community projects.

Turn right on Main St. Turn left on Metcalf and left again on Queen St. On your left near the end of this block is a white church.

12 – The First Regular Baptist Church:

One of this church’s first ministers, Rev. Samuel Davis, had previously been minister of a Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan which was a prominent Underground Railroad “station”.

The First Regular Baptist Church is the oldest surviving church built in Dresden. It was founded by Rev. William Newman in about 1864. Rev. Newman, along with Rev. Davis, had operated the segregated school situated on the BAI from 1860 – 1863.

Many members of the current congregation of this Baptist Church can trace their roots to the African-Canadian pioneers of the early Dawn Settlement.

Continue on Queen to the stop then cross St George St. The former Episcopal Church is on the north-west corner of St George and Queen Streets.

13 – The former Episcopal Church:

This Anglican Church now called Christ Church, is the former Episcopal Mission Church founded by Rev. Thomas Hughes and is the town’s oldest surviving brick church building. The bricks of this Church are said to have been made by former slaves using clay from the river flats. The main section of the church is virtually unchanged from the year it was built. The mission was founded by Rev. Thomas Hughes in 1858 and the church building completed in 1867.

Rev. Hughes came from England to serve freedom seekers in Canada. Legend says he was inspired to do so after reading “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”.

Rev. Hughes was an important early proponent of desegregation and Civil Rights. Though many mainstream churches were against slavery, integration was not always a policy. Hughes’ church congregation, and his school, were important early models for interracial co-operation and respect.

This church has connections to both the British abolitionist movement and to the black abolitionists from Pennsylvania, which was a strategic location for Underground Railroad

activity. Associated with this church are important figures such as William Whipper, his partner Steven Smith and their families, and the famous Shadd family.

Continue west on Queen St to the stop sign. Pass through and continue slowly past or stop by the present Evangel Pentecostal Tabernacle.

14 – The former location of the British Methodist Episcopal Church:

This property is the former site of the British Methodist Episcopal Church where Rev. Josiah Henson acted as minister for much of the time he resided at Dresden and until his death. His funeral was held at the church formerly located here. Newspaper accounts show his funeral was one of the largest ever held in Dresden's history. Proceeding from the church the funeral cortege is believed to have wound nearly three kilometers ending at the Henson Family cemetery.

The present Evangel Pentecostal Tabernacle still contains the pulpit and two chairs believed to have been used by Rev. Henson in the former BME church.

You will also note that looking south on Queen St toward the downtown is roughly the north-east boundary of the BAI.

Continue on Queen St, turn left at the 1st intersection, Cross St and go 3 blocks to Hughes St.

When the majority of the BAI was sold in 1871, the Civil War was over and there was no longer a need for a large block of land set aside for fugitive slaves. The population of blacks had also decreased by about 1/3rd. Education, however, was still important as many schools were closed to the black population. Separate institutions were often their only means to getting an education.

Although most of the BAI was sold, a section of property south of Hughes St, was for a brief time, retained, possibly for a new school, and renamed the Wilberforce Institute Reserve Lands. Roughly a year later this land was also sold and the proceeds were combined with those of a school in Chatham establishing the Wilberforce Institute School.

You are approaching what was important "high ground" in the BAI lands. Dresden is very flood prone, especially true once the lumber industry clear cut large areas of forest making high ground very desirable for building.

Turn right at Hughes St. Please note there is no parking anywhere along this street.

15 – Hughes Street

This area became known as Quality Hill. This high ground, particularly of the Wilberforce Reserve, was much sought after. The town's population was booming with many new affluent settlers taking over lands formerly owned by the BAI and blacks like William Whipper.

Alexander McVean and his five sons, Sandy, James, John, Osgoode and William set up an industrial empire here. Many of the large mansions you see on these streets are attributable to them. The Dresden "Building Heritage" tour features many of these homes.

Located to your right on the north side is 396 Hughes St. Please do not stop.

16 – the McInnis Surgery

This well preserved, late Georgian house is the oldest on the street and the town's "most traveled" building. Originally built on Metcalf Street in 1850, it was moved to St. George Street, in the downtown business district about 1870 and finally moved here around 1900.

The house, built for Mrs. Martha Webster, a widow who married Dr TR McInnes, served as the doctor's office and family home. For nine years, they lived in this house, raising two boys, Tom and William, along with Martha's daughter by her previous marriage to George Webster. Josiah Henson, their famous Metcalf Street neighbour, visited often telling stories that fired young Tom's imagination. Forty years later Tom wrote "Hard Times Come Again No More", a poem based on his memory of Henson's visits. The poem is published in "Amber Lands" one of several nationally acclaimed books of poetry by Tom's after his having an eclectic career as a lawyer in the Yukon Gold Rush and as a foreign advisor to China.

Proceed on Hughes St, turn left on Margaret to Holden Street.

If you are driving turn left on Holden St. and continue to the stop sign at North St. Turn right onto North St and turn right where highway 21 curves to the left by the Dresden Arena and Raceway.

If you are walking you may turn right on Holden Street returning to the Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site by turning left off Holden to Wilson Street, then right on Park Street and left on Uncle Tom's Road.

17 – the Dresden Arena and Raceway

The lands to the right were just some of the many owned by Rev. Josiah Henson in and around Dresden. This property is located on what was the Southeastern boundary of the BAI. Rev. Henson was a complex, multi-faceted personality. Besides being a minister, world traveler and fundraiser, public speaker and farmer, he was also known as a breeder of fine horses.

Josiah's property stretched from the 4th concession, the road we were just on, to the next concession, 1 mile to the west.

Continue south to the corner of Base Line with the flashing amber light, which is Highway 15. Turn right which is west. You may opt to turn left at the 1st road if including the Union Church which is located about 3 kilometers south-west on Union Line.

If you opt to omit the Union Church from the tour proceed along Base Line and turn right on Uncle Tom's Road.

The lands around the BAI were part of the Dawn Settlement. Some of the farms in this area are still owned by sixth and seventh generation descendents of the first freedom seekers to own property here.

Originally, these were "mixed farming" operations. They raised livestock such as pigs and cattle, and grew corn, oats, hay, wheat and eventually established orchard crops, particularly apples. Those former slaves who fled Virginia are credited with introducing innovative new crops to Ontario like tobacco and in this area, two former Virginians also introduced hemp. These were important new sources of economic wealth in the early years of the community.

Today's farms tend to be more specialized and larger, so many of the traditional outbuildings you see on farms have fallen into disuse or have disappeared completely, but remarkably some early barns and outbuildings still survive.

#18 – the Union Baptist Church

The origins of the Union Baptist Church date back to the time of the Dawn Settlement. The original Church was a small wooden frame building located across the road from this one. It was

dedicated in 1890, but the community that created the church developed here much earlier. Rev. Thomas Hughes, from the Christ Church, ministered to the needs of this community in the 1860's. A school was eventually established here. The church and the last school house, which is now a residence, are among the few reminders of the thriving black settlement that existed on this concession road.

The church has two cornerstones. One from the earlier church inscribed, "founded by Rev. SH Linn, In the year of the lord 1886 and the other from the present church carved and dedicated, "Union Baptist Church 1971, John W Peoples, Minister."

Return on Union Line to turn left on Base Line, then right on Uncle Tom's Rd. You've now traveled the length of the BAI.

19 – Uncle Tom's Road

The land, north of the railroad tracks, on the east and west sides of Uncle Tom's Road was owned by Rev. Wilson as early as 1845 but transferred to Josiah Henson in 1875. The buildings, north of the tracks on the west side of the road, sit in front of where the previous home, built in the 1850s or 60s, once stood. This was the location of the Henson House, the home of Rev. Josiah Henson at the time of his death in 1883.

A white historian, William Chappel purchased the house and established it as a museum on this location in the 1930's. It was moved to the present Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site in 1965 by Jack Thompson, a private developer and operator of the site until its sale to the County of Kent in the 1980s. The site was subsequently sold to the St Clair Region Conservation Authority, and then in 2005 to the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

Proceed north to the Uncle Tom's Cabin Historic Site.

Tour Conclusion:

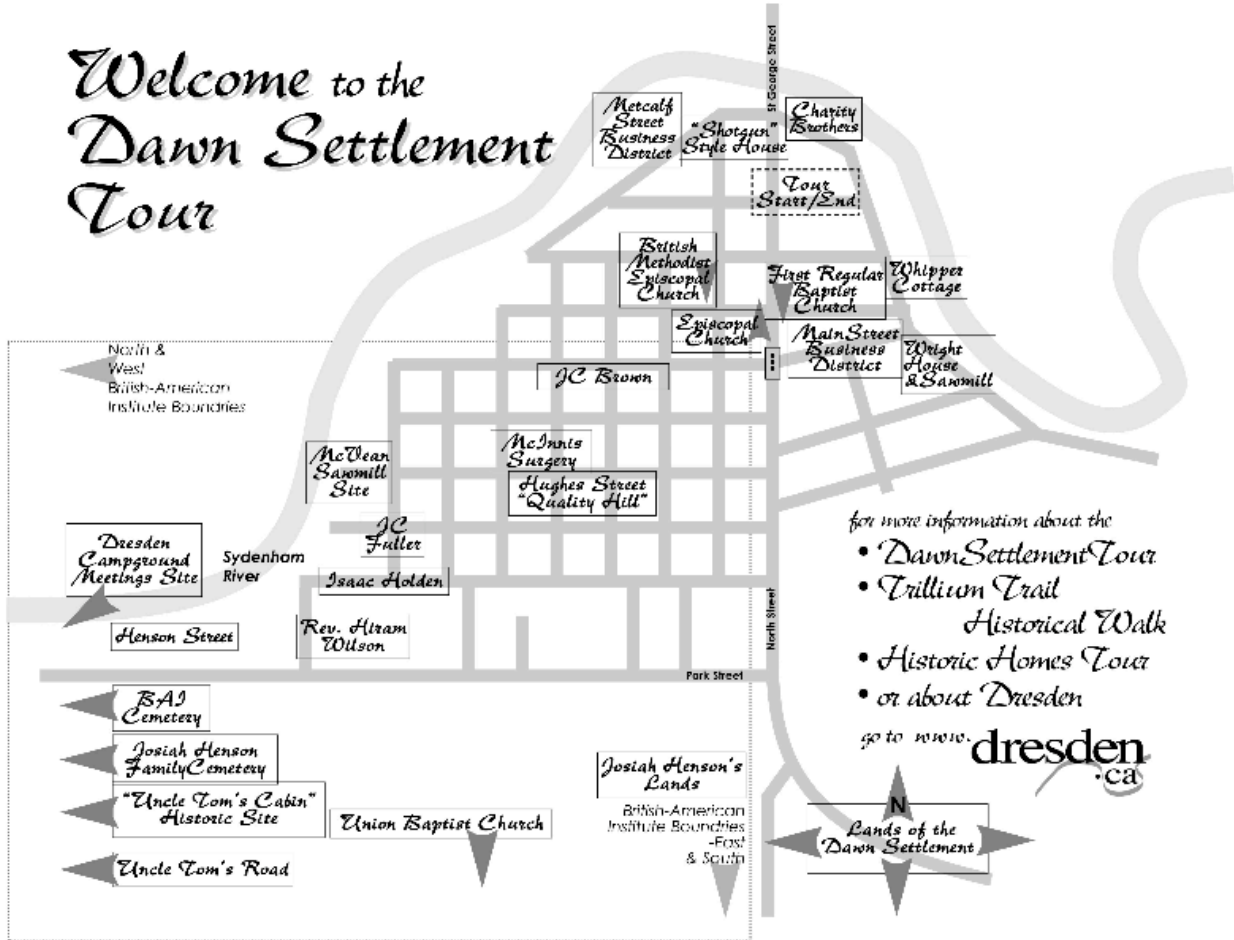
This concludes your Dawn Settlement tour. The tour is just a sampling of the rich historical legacy of the Dawn Settlement. We hope that you have enjoyed your time here and encourage you to linger, visiting downtown Dresden, or to return and explore more of our town's heritage.

For further information about Dresden or updates about the Dawn Settlement, and related Underground Railroad or Abolitionists Movement research we invite you to visit our website at www.dresden.ca

Full tour time with directions 35 minutes.

Full tour time without directions 30 minutes.

Welcome to the Dawn Settlement Tour



for more information about the

- Dawn Settlement Tour
- Trillium Trail Historical Walk
- Historic Homes Tour
- or about Dresden

go to www.dresden.ca

