

# Making a Living African Canadian Workers in London, Ontario, 1861–1901

Tracey Adams

Volume 67, printemps 2011

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt67art01>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Adams, T. (2011). Making a Living: African Canadian Workers in London, Ontario, 1861–1901. *Labour / Le Travail*, 67, 9–44.

Résumé de l'article

À l'heure actuelle, on fait davantage de recherche sur les Canadiens d'origine africaine au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle qui touche à leur expérience au travail. Néanmoins, la documentation traite rarement la façon dont les possibilités sur le marché du travail ont changé pour les Canadiens d'origine africaine et, en particulier, la façon dont les membres de cette communauté ont réussi dans une économie industrielle et capitaliste en croissance lente, mais toutefois dramatique. Cette étude se sert des données du recensement pour explorer l'expérience professionnelle des Canadiens d'origine africaine qui vivent à London, Ontario, entre 1861 et 1901. Les résultats suggèrent que les possibilités sur le marché du travail étaient meilleures pour les homes d'origine africaine au milieu du siècle mais ont diminué de façon remarquable dans les années subséquentes. La plupart des Canadiens d'origine africaine des deux sexes n'ont pas profité de la croissance économique et leur travail s'est hautement concentré sur une gamme étroite d'emplois peu spécialisés. Bien qu'il y ait quelque preuve de mobilité professionnelle ascendante et un léger élargissement de possibilités d'emploi en 1901, les femmes et les hommes canadiens d'origine africaine ont été désavantagés par rapport à leurs homologues blancs.

## ARTICLE

# Making a Living: African Canadian Workers in London, Ontario, 1861–1901

**Tracey Adams**

IN THE EARLY 1830s, TWO African American brothers – A. B. and Alfred T. Jones – managed to extricate themselves from slavery in Madison County, Kentucky. The tale of how they did so is a little murky, but it appears that their older brother was able to arrange his freedom with his millwright owner who continued to employ him, and this allowed him to earn enough to purchase his two younger brothers from a different slave owner. Things seemed to go awry at the last minute, but the brothers managed to flee using forged passes. They eventually made their way to Canada where, they had heard, “colored men were free.”<sup>1</sup> They first travelled to St. Catharines, but soon after settled in what is now London, Ontario. Some twenty years later, in the mid-1850s, American travelers to London intent on documenting the fate of former slaves interviewed the two Jones brothers, whose accomplishments were impressive. Arriving in London with no money and poor literacy skills, the brothers had worked in a variety of capacities. By the mid-1850s, both owned fine brick homes and businesses. A. T. Jones had established a “New Fruit Store” by the late 1840s, and in the 1850s, he was the owner of a successful apothecary. Not only was he literate, but one 1850s traveler found him hard at work learning Latin, so that he could fill doctors’ prescriptions.<sup>2</sup> He was married and the father of eight children, all of whom attended an integrated school. A. B. Jones

1. A. B. and A. T. Jones described their escape (separately) to Benjamin Drew in the mid-1850s. This account is taken from their somewhat contradictory personal statements in Benjamin Drew, *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Boston 1856), 149–53. The name of the third brother is not recorded, and his fate remains unknown.

2. Untitled notice respecting A. T. Jones’ “New Fruit Store” in *London Free Press*, 30 January 1849; “Former U.S. Slave Became Druggist in London,” *London Free Press*, 12 June 1971.

also established a family, and he was listed as a “grocer” in the 1856 London directory. From all accounts, he was a successful businessman and reportedly owned a considerable amount of property including a building with two stores and several lots near the train depot. He had also acquired and donated another property to establish the Second Baptist church in town. Both men were leaders in the community. Although history has tended to ignore the accomplishments of African Canadians like the Jones brothers, they were prominent enough to be mentioned in city histories written at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Jones brothers’ path from slaves to successful businessmen was atypical in mid-19th century Canada, their story was not unique.<sup>4</sup> In the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, thousands of African Americans fled the United States and attempted to establish themselves in Upper Canada / Canada West.<sup>5</sup> Although they migrated to areas across the region, they disproportionately settled in several communities: near the US border in Amherstburg, Colchester, and Windsor; in St. Catharines, Chatham, and Toronto; and in London.<sup>6</sup> Migrants also founded some communities of their own, the most successful of which was at Buxton, Ontario. Established late in 1849, in its heyday Buxton boasted close to 1,000 inhabitants.<sup>7</sup> In this era, Canada was

3. The story of the Jones brothers has been compiled using a variety of sources: Drew, *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves*, 149–53; Daniel G. Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (Agincourt, ON 1981), 143–44, 158, 170; Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Montreal and Kingston 1997), 246, 255–58, 371; S. G. Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West: Report to the Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission* (Boston 1864), 45–52; *Railton’s Directory for the City of London, C.W., 1856–1857* (London 1856). A. B. Jones was active in the anti-slavery movement, a contributor to the church, and on the board of the Elgin Association, which had oversight of the Buxton settlement, while A. T. Jones led the fight against the segregation of the school system in London in the early 1860s. See also Peggy Bristow, “Whatever You Raise in the Ground You Can Sell it in Chatham,” in Bristow *et al.*, eds., *We’re Rooted Here and They Can’t Pull Us Up: Essays in African Canadian Women’s History* (Toronto 1994), 79; Archie Bremner, *City of London, Ontario, Canada: The Pioneer Period and the London of Today*, 2nd ed. (London, ON 1900); London City (ON) manuscript census rolls, 1861.

4. For example, a letter written by American L. S. Haviland and published in the *Provincial Freeman* describes a trip to Canada where he visited several settler families, finding some “who [were] from 12 to 20 years from Southern servitude, whose personal, and real estates are valued at from \$20,800 to \$30,000.” L. S. Haviland, “Condition of the Fugitives in Canada,” *Provincial Freeman*, 13 October 1855. Stories of wealthy African Americans are common in histories: see also Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*, and Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 246, 329–32.

5. The region now called southern Ontario was in Upper Canada before 1840 and Canada West between 1840 and 1867. With Confederation, the region came to be part of the province of Ontario.

6. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 144–47; Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*, 46–59; Sharon A. Roger Hepburn, “Following the North Star: Canada as a Haven for Nineteenth-Century American Blacks,” *The Michigan Historical Review*, 25 (Fall 1999), 91–126.

7. Sharon A. Roger Hepburn, “Crossing the Border from Slavery to Freedom: The Building of

by no means a haven for these migrants who faced considerable prejudice, but British law in Canada West protected their rights to freedom, property, justice in the court system, and, for men of property, the vote.<sup>8</sup> In this environment, many African Americans and African Canadians did manage to establish themselves despite considerable hardship and difficulty. They benefited from an economy where labour was in short supply, and wages and mobility high.<sup>9</sup> While not every African American migrant succeeded like the Jones brothers did, many arrived in Canada with next to nothing and yet managed to find work, support families, buy farms and homes, and find some measure of economic stability. There is ample evidence that several achieved affluence.<sup>10</sup>

By the recession of the late 1850s, however, there is evidence of declining opportunities for African Canadians in the Ontario region. Legislation passed in 1850 facilitated, and indeed encouraged, racial segregation of schools. This legislation, put into effect in an era of economic hardship and what historian Robin Winks refers to as a “rising tide of prejudice,”<sup>11</sup> seems to have led to a more hostile environment for African Canadians in Upper Canada. Racial conflict around schooling increased, and the access of minority children to a good education decreased. While 1850s American travelers found A. T. Jones studying Latin to expand his business and optimistic about his children’s future, in the early 1860s, S. G. Howe found him battling local authorities intent on removing his and all other African Canadian children in London from the local common schools. In the 1850s, A. T. proudly declared himself a British citizen, but he confessed to Howe around 1863, “We won’t stay here

---

a Community at Buxton, Upper Canada,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, 3 (Summer 2002), 25–68; Fred Landon, “Negro Colonization Schemes in Upper Canada before 1860,” *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Section II, (1929), 73–80; Bristow, “Whatever You Raise in the Ground,” 74–94.

8. Hepburn, “Following the North Star”; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 171–77.

9. Jeremy Webber, “Labour and the Law,” in Paul Craven, ed., *Labouring Lives: Work and Workers in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto 1995), 115.

10. Many historians have documented success stories of African American entrepreneurs and professionals in Canada: Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*, 163–77; Hepburn, “Crossing the Border from Slavery to Freedom,” 54–56; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 246–49; Adrienne Shadd, Afua Cooper, and Karolyn Smardz Frost, *The Underground Railroad: Next Stop Toronto* (Toronto 2002), 65–77. One of Drew’s informants, Alexander Hamilton, documented how he arrived in London with nothing but in time acquired three houses and several lots of land; he asserted that “the colored people in London are all making a living: there is no beggar among them.” Drew, *The Narratives of the Fugitive Slaves*, 178. Additional support is found in Michael B. Katz’s research on people living in Hamilton between 1851 and 1861, which shows evidence of “stability and modest prosperity” amongst black Hamiltonians, including good rates of home ownership. Although small in number, some black men are found in the highest economic ranks in 1851 and 1861. Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City* (Cambridge, MA 1975), 68.

11. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 250.

after this [American Civil] war is decided."<sup>12</sup> Jones died shortly thereafter, and his family did remain in the city; however, many other African Canadians did not. Out-migration to the United States increased after the American Civil War.<sup>13</sup> In many Ontario communities, the size of the African Canadian population declined.

While the historical record hints at declining opportunities for African Canadians in Ontario, there is much we do not know about their experiences in this time of significant economic change. In the second half of the 19th century, urbanization and industrialization gradually transformed the economy and labour market. Involvement in agriculture slowly declined, while factory employment increased.<sup>14</sup> Technological change transformed the nature of factory employment and altered many skilled trades.<sup>15</sup> Occupational and social mobility became somewhat more restricted.<sup>16</sup> The slow rise of larger bureaucratic organizations and the emergence of closed, self-regulating professions in the late 19th century were associated with an expansion of good, white-collar service jobs for men with education and training. How did these trends affect the numerically declining African Canadian population? Did opportunities for entrepreneurial success, enjoyed by the Jones brothers and others, diminish? Were new jobs open to the variably educated African Canadian population in the late 19th century, or did occupational opportunities decline? These questions are the focus of this present case study, which explores the changing occupational distribution and occupational status of people of African origins in London, Ontario, between 1861 and 1901.

Results suggest that the combined effect of economic and social change in the late 19th century was generally to reduce the labour market opportunities

12. Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*, 51–52.

13. Out-migration to the United States was common in the late 19th century in general, and the Canadian government took steps to replace the white population by aggressive immigrant recruitment schemes and programs; however, no effort was expended to encourage African Americans to immigrate, as they were not seen as ideal Canadian citizens: Ninette Kelley and Michael J. Trebilcock, *The Making of the Mosaic: A History of Canadian Immigration Policy* (Toronto 1998), 63, 64–83. This led to a declining African Canadian population, especially in southern Ontario, given the ease of migration to the United States. See also James Walker, *Racial Discrimination in Canada*, 12–13.

14. Such processes were gradual. According to Terry Crowley, participation in agriculture actually increased between 1850 and 1875, and subsequently the numbers of individuals in rural areas remained high, although the percentage of the Ontario population engaged in agriculture began to decrease. Terry Crowley, "Rural Labour," in Craven, ed., *Labouring Lives*, 44, 55, 57.

15. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*, 2nd ed. (Toronto 1992), 81–83; H. C. Pentland, "The Development of a Capitalistic Labour Market in Canada," *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, 25 (1959), 450–61; Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets and Economic Development in Nineteenth-Century Ontario* (Toronto 1988).

16. Webber, "Labour and the Law," 116.

of African Canadian men. More jobs, and higher-status jobs, seem to have been open to men of colour in the mid-19th century than later. While there appears to have been some limited expansion of opportunities towards the end of the century, by and large, men of colour were locked into a fairly narrow range of low-status jobs, and they were largely excluded from expanding labour market opportunities in industrial and white-collar sectors. The labour of women of colour was similarly concentrated into a few low-paying jobs; compared to their white counterparts, their job options were narrower and lower-paying. In 19th-century Ontario, industrialization and economic change were associated with the marginalization of African Canadian workers.

### **African Americans in Upper Canada / Canada West**

FACED WITH INJUSTICE AND INEQUALITY, anti-slavery advocates in the United States considered a number of migration schemes in the mid-19th century. While there was a strong contingent that urged Americans to stay in the United States and continue to fight for equality, many within the anti-slavery community advocated emigration to places like Haiti, Liberia, Mexico, and Canada.<sup>17</sup> Given its closeness to the United States, Canada was a favoured emigration destination. In the first few decades of the 19th century, the British government in Upper Canada solidified its stance that African American immigrants, regardless of whether they were slaves in the United States or not, would be considered free in the region and subject to all of the same laws as any other citizen. The government refused to return escaped slaves to American owners. Moreover, the state and court system acted to protect the interests of African American settlers against prejudice and discrimination by white Canadians. As Sharon Hepburn argues, Canada appealed to migrant African Americans because of its proximity and its legal safeguards that protected their rights.<sup>18</sup> Although African Americans experienced considerable prejudice in Canada, they believed that with the legal system behind them, discrimination was weakened. In the words of Londoner John Moore in the 1850s, “There is prejudice here ... but they have not got the power to carry it out here that they have in the United States. The law here is stronger than the mob – it is not so there.”<sup>19</sup>

Migration from the United States into Upper Canada was fairly steady in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s. Free black men and women and former slaves settled in towns like Chatham, St. Catharines, London, and Toronto, where

17. Shirley J. Yee, “Finding a Place: Mary Ann Shadd Cary and the Dilemmas of Black Migration to Canada, 1850–1870,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 18 (1997), 1–16; Hepburn, “Following the North Star.”

18. Hepburn, “Following the North Star”; see also Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*, 14–17.

19. John D. Moore in Drew, *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves*, 174.

they found employment; some started businesses.<sup>20</sup> Many others settled in rural communities near these centres or closer to the New York and Michigan borders. At Buxton (south of Chatham), they established a thriving farming community that by the late 1850s boasted a brickyard, sawmill, potash factory, bank, post office, schools, churches, and several businesses.<sup>21</sup> Toronto had a fairly large African American population by the 1840s and 1850s. According to an 1840 survey, black men worked in a variety of jobs. Roughly half of the 159 working men surveyed were employed as low-skill labourers; however, over one-third worked in skilled trades (for instance, as carpenters, cooks, shoemakers, tailors, and barbers), and roughly 10 per cent ran businesses (for instance, as grocers and tobacconists) or worked as ministers.<sup>22</sup> Reportedly, African American men in urban centres in Canada West found work “abundant” and “fairly rewarded.”<sup>23</sup> Although there were few opportunities for men of African origins to take on posts and positions of authority in Upper Canada, they did serve in the militia in the late 1830s and 1840s.<sup>24</sup> Records documenting the employment of African Canadian women are scarce, but there is evidence

20. There is a growing body of historical research on blacks in Canada. Early contributions by Fred Landon and Ida C. Greaves were augmented in the 1970s with a landmark study by Robin Winks and other important contributions by Hill and Walker. The field has expanded considerably in recent years. For a review of the historiography on this subject see David C. Este, “Black Canadian Historical Writing 1970–2006: An Assessment,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 38 (2008), 388–406. Selected important works include the following: Ida C. Greaves, *The Negro in Canada* (Montreal 1931); Fred Landon, *Pamphlets on the Negroes in Upper Canada* (Toronto 1925); Fred Landon, ed., *The Diary of Benjamin Lundy* (n.d.); William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, “Opposition to the Founding of the Elgin Settlement,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 38 (1957), 202–18; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*; Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*; James W. St. G. Walker, *Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience* (Ottawa 1985); James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone 1783–1980*, 2nd ed. (Toronto 1992); Dorothy Williams, *Blacks in Montreal 1628–1986: An Urban Demography* (Cowansville, QC 1989); Crawford Kilian, *‘Go Do Some Great Thing’: The Black Pioneers of British Columbia*, 2nd ed. (Burnaby, BC 2008); Bristow et al., *‘We’re Rooted Here’*; Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal* (Toronto 2006); Shadd, Cooper and Smardz Frost, *The Underground Railroad*; Adrienne Shadd, *The Journey from Tollgate to Parkway: African Canadians in Hamilton* (Toronto 2010).

21. Hepburn, “Crossing the Border from Slavery to Freedom,” 52.

22. Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*, 166–68. These Toronto black men appear more prosperous than their counterparts in Montreal who, according to Williams, were clustered in the 1830s in marginal jobs such as shoe-shiner, busboy, and porter, as well as barber. Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, 19.

23. *London Free Press*, 12 June 1971. A similar impression is left by Drew in *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves*; see 94–95, 152, and 322. Crowley argues that the rural labour market was typically a good one in the period, and wages for men were relatively high. Crowley, “Rural Labour,” 23–28.

24. Wayne Edward Kelly, “Canada’s Black Defenders,” *The Beaver*, 77 (April/May 1997), 31–34; Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*, 118–23; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 150–51.

that they worked as servants, teachers, seamstresses, store owners, boarding house keepers, farmers, and in other capacities.<sup>25</sup> Some historical accounts indicate the presence of residential segregation, but others point to considerable integration. Social integration is also suggested by a relatively high rate of racial intermarriage: according to Wayne, roughly one in every seven married black men in 1861 was married to a white woman.<sup>26</sup> Overall, African Americans who migrated to Upper Canada in the 1820s and 1830s typically joined small but growing communities where they found economic opportunities, or they settled in rural areas and farmed with mixed success.<sup>27</sup> Some prospered, establishing successful businesses and practising skilled trades; in rare instances, some even managed to launch themselves or their sons into prestigious careers as medical doctors, lawyers, and political leaders.<sup>28</sup>

Immigration to Canada increased exponentially after 1850 with the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act. This act sought to facilitate the ability of slave owners to track down and reclaim fugitive slaves living anywhere in the United States. Abolitionists considered the act an abomination, as it allowed for the capture of blacks and their return to slavery without a trial. Officials were paid more for sending people into slavery than for ruling them free. In practice, this legislation saw not only the return of many former African American slaves living in northern states to their owners, but also the forcing of some free black men and women into slavery at the hands of bounty hunters.<sup>29</sup> Faced with the threat of persecution, and fearing that their rights were not protected under US law, thousands of African Americans fled to Canada. Some ventured on their own, but the Underground Railroad continued to carry both free men and women as well as former slaves into Canada at a fairly high rate. Estimates

25. Bristow *et al.*, *'We're Rooted Here'*; Yee, "Finding a Place"; Shirley J. Yee, "Gender Ideology and Black Women as Community-Builders in Ontario, 1850–70," *Canadian Historical Review*, 75 (March 1994), 53–73; Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*, 163–77.

26. Wayne, "The Black Population of Canada West," 479. Howe claims that intermarriage was less common by the 1860s than previously and that marriage between black women and white men was generally rare. Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*, 29–33.

27. Crowley argues that African Americans settling in rural areas often had difficulty, since they typically did not arrive with sufficient economic resources to get a farm successfully established. Unfamiliar with the workings of commercial contracts, some lost their land. Nonetheless, many managed to secure land and eke out a living. Crowley, "Rural Labour," 21.

28. For instance, A. T. Augusta moved from Virginia to Toronto and worked as a druggist; he then enrolled in Medical School at Trinity College, graduating in 1860. He worked briefly in Toronto but then returned to the United States. Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*, 168–69. Canadian-born Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott received his medical degree from the University of Toronto around the same time. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 329. Many other Canadian-born and/or educated men of colour went on to successful careers in medicine, law, and politics; however, many had to return to the United States to do so. Hepburn, "Crossing the Border from Slavery to Freedom," 54–56; Greaves, *The Negro in Canada*, 51–52.

29. Hepburn, "Following the North Star," 101–106; Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*, 32.



vary, but it appears that 10,000 or more African Americans entered Upper Canada during the 1850s.<sup>30</sup>

This rapid increase in the black population did produce strain. White Canadians became less tolerant of African American immigration and began to fear the larger numbers of settlers arriving in their towns.<sup>31</sup> The ability of local labour markets to absorb all of these new settlers was unclear, especially in the recessionary period of the late 1850s. Also, the ability of new migrants to get by may have become more of a challenge. Many arrived with little money, clothes, or skills. Some benefited from relief efforts that raised funds for refugees, providing them with clothes, food, and housing until they could become established. These schemes were criticized within the community, however: first, because they were sometimes associated with fraud – money and materials donated did not always reach those in need – and second, because many early settlers firmly believed that all the refugees needed was employment. They tended to see such charity as an insult.<sup>32</sup>

Nonetheless, the picture presented in the mid-1850s by visitors to what is now southern Ontario was typically a positive one. The refugees were generally shown to be prospering through their own hard work and responsibility. Since these reports were usually produced by abolitionists and intended to demonstrate to Americans that men and women of African backgrounds could succeed as free citizens, they may have intentionally produced a rosy picture; however, while the accounts are laced with optimism, the evidence provided by Benjamin Drew and others does reveal considerable discrimination and hardship.

As noted, there is reason to believe that the fate of African Americans in Canada West deteriorated as the 19th century progressed. Studies point to rising discrimination in the 1850s and 1860s.<sup>33</sup> As the population of some

30. It is impossible to determine the actual number of African American immigrants in this era. As Afua Cooper has demonstrated, the border was a “fluid frontier,” and movement across and back again was common. Afua Cooper, “The Fluid Frontier: Blacks and the Detroit River Region,” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 30 (2000), 129–49. Wayne found over 17,000 people of colour in the 1861 census of Canada West, but many of them were Canadian-born. Evidence from histories of London and Buxton suggest that migration peaked in the mid-1850s, and after that migration flows may have reversed. Michael F. Murphy, “Unmaking and Remaking the ‘One Best System’: London, Ontario, 1852–1860,” *History of Education Quarterly*, 37 (Autumn 1997), 291–310; Hepburn, “Crossing the Border from Slavery to Freedom,” 41, 61; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 229; Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*, 14–17.

31. Howe states that where African Americans became more numerous, prejudice grew, and he provides many examples of strong prejudice in larger towns in Canada West in the mid-1860s. Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*, 40–54. See also Murphy, “Unmaking and Remaking the ‘One Best System’”; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 247–52.

32. Drew, *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves*, 151; Hepburn, “Crossing the Border from Slavery to Freedom,” 49.

33. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 247–52.

towns swelled, and the economy faltered, white citizens expressed more resentment and prejudice against newer African American arrivals. The school system in Upper Canada / Canada West had been integrated in many centres prior to 1850, but new legislation enabled (and in effect encouraged) the establishment of separate schools for students of African origins.<sup>34</sup> Writing about London, Ontario, in the 1850s, Michael Murphy has shown how the rapid influx of African Americans into the area, along with an influx of working-class Irish Catholics, spurred a crisis in the city's school system. White middle-class Londoners removed their children from the common schools in droves, turning to private schools that excluded black children and the poor. A separate school was established for the latter two groups during the 1850s, but the demand was too high for the number of spaces. The crisis was only ameliorated in the late 1850s by two trends: a drop in the city's population due to the economic recession and a reorganization of the school system that – while it did not fully segregate the schools – had the effect of minimizing contact between white and black children. In the 1860s the issue was raised again, and the school trustees moved to segregate despite considerable opposition from members of the black community.<sup>35</sup> While schools in other centres, such as Buxton and Toronto, remained integrated in this era, others did not. For example, Chatham's schools excluded black children and segregated them into separate, inadequate institutions. In general, there is evidence of increasing segregation that had the effect of reducing the quality of education open to black children, and at times it effectively excluded them from the school system altogether.<sup>36</sup>

If thousands of African American refugees entered Canada with a sense of hope in the early 1850s, the economic recession of the late 1850s combined with rising discrimination and educational segregation brought disenchantment; Canada West did not provide a haven from persecution or a land of opportunity.<sup>37</sup> Evidence of deterioration in conditions can be found in the

34. There were attempts to segregate schools from the 1840s through the late 19th century, but segregation increased significantly after the legislative change in 1850. Kristin McLaren, "We Had no Desire to be Set Apart": Forced Segregation of Black Students in Canada West Public Schools and Myths of British Egalitarianism," *Histoire sociale / Social History*, 37 (May 2004), 27–50.

35. Murphy, "Unmaking and Remaking the 'One Best System'"; McLaren, "We Had no Desire to Be Set Apart," 33, 48; Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*, 45–53; Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 229, 371.

36. Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*, 102–103; 147–161; McLaren, "We Had no Desire to Be Set Apart,"; Hepburn, "Crossing the Border from Slavery to Freedom"; Adrienne Shadd, "No 'Back Alley Clique': The Campaign to Desegregate Chatham's Public Schools, 1891–1893," *Ontario History*, 99 (Spring 2007), 77–95. Shadd indicates that Chatham's schools were race-segregated from the town's early days and only desegregated in 1893 after a concerted and organized multi-front campaign by the town's African Canadian citizens.

37. Yee, "Gender Ideology and Black Women," 68–69; Yee, "Finding a Place," 10; Winks, *The*

contrast between two reports by American abolitionists on life for black refugees in Canada West. Benjamin Drew's report of his tour of Canada West in the 1850s is quite favourable; however, S. G. Howe describes his early 1860s visit in more negative terms, detailing substantial prejudice and discrimination. Given the harsh conditions he found, Howe predicted that most black families would return to the United States when the civil war ended.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, there is evidence that with the American Civil War, many people of African origins did move to the United States. Given the worsening conditions for black men and women in the late 1850s, out-migration likely predated the civil war.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, there was no sudden exodus from the province, and the size of the African Canadian population did not diminish substantially during the 1860s. Census figures indicate a decline in the African Canadian population in Ontario by about one-quarter between 1861 and 1871.<sup>40</sup>

How did the African Canadians who remained in Ontario fare over the course of the 19th century? As their numbers declined and discrimination increased, did they struggle to make a living? How did the economic volatility and industrial expansion of the late 19th century, which widened social inequality in general,<sup>41</sup> affect African Canadians in Ontario? A case study is helpful as it allows for detailed analysis of data, including census material, on occupational trends that would prove unwieldy at the provincial level. London is a good subject for a case study because it had a sizable black population, but not one that dominated the city. In terms of its size and its historical treatment of black men and women, London appears to have been moderate: smaller and less tolerant than large urban centres like Toronto, but larger and less discriminatory than many other centres in southern Ontario including Chatham.<sup>42</sup>

---

*Blacks in Canada*, 247–52. Even the very optimistic Ruth Danenhower Wilson, who reports little discrimination in Ontario historically, suggests that employment opportunities for African Canadian men declined once the major period of land clearing and railroad building was done. Ruth Danenhower Wilson, "Negro-White Relations in Western Ontario," *The Negro History Bulletin*, 18 (1955), 105–106.

38. Drew, *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves*; Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*, 101.

39. Unfortunately, the rise and fall of the African American population in Canada took place in between census years, so we lack accurate statistics. It appears likely that numbers reached their height in the mid-to-late 1850s and then declined.

40. Wayne, "The Black Population of Canada West," 471. Population numbers continued to decline both provincially and regionally in the succeeding years. For instance, as Colin McFarquhar shows, census figures indicate 17,053 people of colour living in Ontario in 1861 but only 12,097 people of African origins in 1881; the black population in Toronto declined over the same period from 987 in 1861 to 593 in 1881. Colin McFarquhar, "Blacks in 1880s Toronto: The Search for Equality," *Ontario History*, 99 (Spring 2007), 63–76.

41. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 85–86, 117–118.

42. Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*; Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*; Drew, *The Narratives of the Fugitive Slaves*.

While the historical trends observed for London are not necessarily generalizable to other Ontario centres, London shared many similarities with other towns and cities in terms of its economic base and social history. London was a prosperous and growing centre in the 19th century. It was incorporated as a town in 1826 and enjoyed moderate growth until the early 1850s when, with the building of the railway, it experienced rapid growth and emerged as a major administrative, financial, and manufacturing city in what is now southwestern Ontario.<sup>43</sup>

## Data and Methodology

BEFORE PRESENTING THE FINDINGS of this study, it is worth discussing the data in some detail, since there are many limitations and challenges associated with the use of 19th-century census data. Information on the African Canadian population in London, Ontario, was taken from the manuscript census rolls from 1861, 1871, 1881, and 1901.<sup>44</sup> Although useful for tracing the occupational experiences of African Canadians, census data also present several challenges and problems.<sup>45</sup> Generally, it must be acknowledged that historical census data are notoriously imprecise and frequently inaccurate. The actual conduct of early censuses was, at times, “careless and haphazard,” and there were frequent charges that many members of the population were missed, while others were double-counted.<sup>46</sup> Further, early census takers found that human experience did not always fit into established census categories, and 19th-century enumerators and citizens often struggled to provide the data requested. To a population not used to categories like age, ethnicity, and occupation, it was sometimes difficult to provide straightforward answers. Further, enumerators were inconsistent in how they recorded information in a variety of areas, including occupation: for instance, in 1861, occupation and social status were often conflated, and the listing of occupations was not standardized. An additional problem for the present-day researcher is that census

43. London was incorporated as a city in 1854. Kevin Burley, “Occupational Structure and Ethnicity in London, Ontario, 1871,” *Histoire sociale / Social History*, 11 (November 1978), 390–410; Murphy, “Unmaking and Remaking the ‘One Best System,’” 293–96; Bremner, *City of London, Ontario*.

44. The 1852 manuscript census rolls for London have not survived in their entirety, so they could not be used.

45. See Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada, 1840–1875* (Kingston and Montreal 2001); Bruce Curtis, “Expert Knowledge and the Social Imaginary: The Case of the Montreal Check Census,” *Histoire sociale / Social History*, 28 (November 1995), 314–31; Kris Inwood and Richard Reid, “Census Manuscript Data,” *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 28 (November 1995), 300–307.

46. Curtis quoted in Wayne, “The Black Population of Canada West,” 467, note 5; Curtis, “Expert Knowledge and the Social Imaginary,” 314–31.

enumerations were handwritten, and then often later rewritten and revised.<sup>47</sup> Surviving records are an edited version of what was originally collected, and these records have deteriorated and faded, making notations often hard to decipher.

Census data used in this present project bring some additional difficulties. First, population measures used in the census varied over time, and this is particularly true with respect to ethnicity. In 1871, 1881, and 1901, Canadians were asked to identify their “ethnic origins.” For this study, I identified all of those listed as living in London City and London Township who claimed “African” origins. Sometimes, however, “Black” individuals did not list African origins. For instance, in mixed-ethnicity families, children were often assigned the ethnicity of their fathers, so children of an English father and an African mother would have been listed as “English” in most 19th-century censuses.<sup>48</sup> Further, sometimes individuals claimed other origins as, for instance, when African American barber Shadrick Martin claimed “American” origins in the 1881 census.<sup>49</sup> Although a concerted effort was made to identify everyone of African origins living in London in the 19th century, in such circumstances some individuals were likely missed. In 1901, the census also assigned a racial category to all citizens, and those identified as “Black” were included in the listing of African Canadians living in London. In 1891, Canadians were not asked about their ethnic origins, and so data from this census were not used in this present study.

The data for 1861 are more problematic. In 1861, enumerators were asked to identify whether an individual was “coloured” or not. Many census takers took pains to distinguish between those they identified as “mulatto” or “coloured,” while others did not. My data for 1861 include all of those listed as “coloured” or “mulatto” and living in London. The assessment of whether someone was “coloured” or not rested with the enumerators.<sup>50</sup> This measure is clearly not

47. As Curtis states respecting the 1861 census, “by the end of the compilation process, the information reported in the field encounters between enumerators and informants had been subjected to repeated reinterpretation.” Curtis, *The Politics of Population*, 230.

48. Curtis, *The Politics of Population*, 285. This practice changed in the 20th century, when race and ethnicity came to take on ostensibly scientific meanings. Since 1901, children of mixed-race marriages “were to be classified as belonging to the non-white ‘race.’” Monica Boyd, Gustave Goldmann, and Pamela White, “Race in the Canadian Census,” in Leo Driedger and Shiva S. Halli, eds., *Race and Racism: Canada’s Challenge* (Montreal and Kingston 2000), 33–54.

49. “American” was not an accepted response, and so it was crossed out on the census rolls. Follow-up searches for some long-time residents did uncover some individuals, like Shadrick Martin and the Jones family in 1881, who would have otherwise been missed due to the census classification of their ethnic origins (the latter were listed as having “English” origins in 1881).

50. Census takers were asked to place a mark beside the name of everyone they identified as coloured. Wayne, “The Black Population of Canada West,” 468. As Wayne later points out, some fair-skinned African Canadians could have “passed as white” (470). Because race is a so-

ideal, but it does provide some way of identifying the population of interest in London in 1861, and there is overlap between those found in the 1861 census listed as “coloured” and those identified as having African origins in the 1871 census. Overall, I cannot be certain that at each point in time I have successfully identified every member of the population of interest from the manuscript census rolls, but using this approach did provide an extensive amount of data on people of African origins living in London in the latter half of the 19th century.

It was a goal of this project to trace the occupations of people of African origins over time, yet in the 19th century work was often seasonal and temporary; occupation was not a fixed status.<sup>51</sup> Not surprisingly, there is a considerable amount of missing occupational data in each of the censuses. Data on women’s work was often not recorded, and when a person held multiple jobs, the tendency was to record only one. It is by no means clear whether the absence of an occupational entry means that the individual was unemployed at the time of the census, or whether no information on occupation was given (or even sought – some of the records for the “coloured” population in 1861 especially are woefully incomplete).<sup>52</sup> At times, when occupations were recorded, they were illegible. Because the focus of this project was occupational status and not employment status, census data were augmented by information on occupation taken from city directories published shortly before or after the census. An additional problem is that the occupational data provided in the census rolls were frequently vague. In the 19th century, the most common job for men in London, regardless of their ethnic background, was labourer. In many censuses, no data were collected on the type of labour performed or the industry of employment. It was not until later censuses that enumerators were urged to elaborate on the designation “labourer” by adding an industry or employer;<sup>53</sup> however, even here, the data collected are not great. Elaborations

---

cial construction, any such categorization will be imperfect and could vary meaningfully from one assessor to the next.

51. Paul Craven, “Introduction,” in Craven, ed., *Labouring Lives*, 6; Crowley, “Rural Labour.”

52. Negligence and discrimination combined to play a role. See also Wayne, “The Black Population in Canada West,” 468. As Curtis reports, in 1861 some census commissioners questioned whether the government was really interested in counting people of colour and expressed a concern that it would be difficult to get information from this population. Nevertheless, enumerators were assured that every person was to be recorded, and the fact that census takers were paid by the name (two cents for every name recorded) likely encouraged diligence despite prejudice. Curtis, *The Politics of Population*, 194–99. It was not until 1901 that data on employment status and other labour force characteristics were more systematically collected. Peter Baskerville and Eric Sager, “Finding the Work Force in the 1901 Census of Canada,” *Histoire sociale / Social History*, 28 (November 1995), 521–39.

53. Canada, Department of Agriculture, *Report on the Fourth Census of Canada, 1901, Volume I* (Ottawa 1903), xix.

were inconsistent, unclear, and often illegible. Overall, the census data on occupation used in this study are flawed.<sup>54</sup>

It was also a goal of this project to trace, insofar as possible, families over time. This presented a new set of difficulties, especially within the African Canadian population where illiteracy rates were high and knowledge of age sometimes low (especially amongst former slaves). Despite these difficulties, it did prove possible to trace approximately 290 individuals across the four censuses.<sup>55</sup>

Overall, then, this study relies on data collected on over 1,200 individuals of African origins living in London City or London Township between 1861 and 1901. Because it is difficult to trace women over time (due to marriage and last name changes), and because data on women's employment were so limited, the focus is on the occupational status of the male population. Nevertheless, data on women were gathered and analyzed. The entire census record for each individual identified as being "coloured" or "mulatto" in 1861, or having African origins in 1871, 1881, or 1901, was taken from the manuscript census rolls for London City and London Township. Online records of the manuscript rolls are available for household heads and strays (those living outside of a family unit) in 1871 and all Ontarians in 1881. Information from these online records was examined and compared with the data I had gathered first-hand to ensure completeness and consistency.<sup>56</sup> In the end, my searches revealed a total of 582 individuals of colour living in London City and London Township in 1861, 448 individuals of "African origins" in 1871, 343 in 1881, and 342 in 1901. As noted, I was able to trace only 290 individuals across more than one census. Data analysis presented here was conducted on the subset of individuals for whom I had occupational data.

For each census I reviewed the occupational distribution of African men and women and compared this distribution to that of Londoners more generally by using published occupational tables for 1861, 1871 and 1881, and the 1901 census sample data file.<sup>57</sup> I also did a separate analysis of those Londoners

54. Katz further shows the problematic nature of occupational census records, finding considerable variation in the occupational titles recorded for individuals living in Hamilton, Canada West, between the 1851 census and the 1852 assessment taken roughly three months later. Katz, *People of Hamilton*, 19.

55. As Katz documents for Hamilton, urban populations in mid-19th century Canada West were very transient. Nevertheless, members of the urban black population appear to have been less transient than some others: Katz, *People of Hamilton*, 68.

56. On a few occasions there was a discrepancy between my records and the online records respecting occupation. For example, in two instances, an individual who was listed as a "barber" in my records was listed as a "baker" in the online records. In both cases, I resolved to keep the occupation as "barber" since I had found these individuals listed as "barbers" in the London city directory published a few years later. Online records are also available for the 1901 census, and these were drawn on as well.

57. Canada, "Appendix 8: Upper Canada Personal Census, Professions, Trades and

of African origins for whom multiple records could be found to assess intra-generational and intergenerational mobility over time.

In addition to looking at occupational titles, I did a separate analysis of occupational categories using a modified version of Michael Katz's occupational classification designed for mid-19th century Ontario.<sup>58</sup> Katz's classification divides occupations into six categories according to their place in occupational hierarchies, economic rank, and status (see Tables 3 and 5). The first and highest-ranking category (i) includes commercial proprietors, those with prestigious posts and positions of high authority, and high-status professions such as barrister. The second category (ii) includes those in official office posts (but not at the highest level), lower-status professional occupations (land surveyor, apothecary, dentist), commercial employees, some proprietors, and other independent workers. The third category (iii) is predominantly composed of skilled tradesmen (bakers, brick-makers, coopers, shoemakers). The fourth category (iv) consists of semi-skilled manual workers (gardeners, chimney sweeps, miners) and service providers (porters, teamsters, barbers). The fifth and lowest occupational category (v) is reserved for unskilled labourers. Unfortunately, Katz lumps all women's jobs and other difficult-to-classify men's jobs into a sixth category, rendering his scale useless for the analysis of women's employment. This was quite commonly low-status and poorly paid through much of the 19th century.

Scales such as these are admittedly imperfect. The attraction of this scale is that it provides a reasonable way of categorizing occupations by skill level, by ownership and authority, and by status. Furthermore, it was designed to be of use in studies of occupational mobility. The primary limitation for this present study – beyond the scale's inability to classify women's jobs adequately – is that it was constructed with the mid-19th century Ontario labour market in mind; it was never intended that it be used to capture late 19th century and early 20th century employment. New jobs that arose in the late 19th century are not always represented on the scale, and many jobs changed in content and nature over time, so that their initial ranking may not accurately reflect skill and status later in the century. For these reasons, I used the scale with care, and I did reclassify some occupations when they underwent a notable

---

Occupations, 1861" in *Census of the Canadas, 1860–61*, Volume 1 (Quebec 1864), 558–75; Canada, "Table XIII: Occupations of the People, Province of Ontario," *Census of Canada, 1870–1*, Volume II (Ottawa 1873), 250–261; Canada, "Table XIV: Occupations of the People, Province of Ontario," in *Census of Canada, 1880–81*, Volume II, (Ottawa 1882), 304–15. This data, however, reflect only the occupational distribution of those living in London City and not London Township. Published tables for London in 1901 were not available, so a public use data file was used: Canadian Families Project, *Census of Population, 1901: National Sample of the 1901 Census of Canada* (Victoria, BC 2002).

58. Michael B. Katz, "Occupational Classification in History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 3 (Summer 1972), 63–88; Katz, *People of Hamilton*, 343–48. This scale has been used in other studies including Murphy, "Unmaking and Remaking the 'One Best System.'"



change. For instance, in the mid-19th century an “engineer” was commonly a machinist and is categorized in category III on Katz’s scale as a skilled trade.<sup>59</sup> By the turn of the 20th century, professional engineering began to emerge; hence, those claiming to be “civil” or “electrical engineers” in the 1901 census should be classified with other newer professions in category II. The scale is also not easily adapted to the expansion of white-collar and service work at the turn of the 20th century. While these methodological concerns are notable, they did not emerge as central ones in this study, primarily because, as we will see, African Canadians did not typically find employment in emerging or rapidly changing sectors of the economy. Instead they tended to cluster in a narrow subset of occupations that did not change substantially from one point in time to the next. Furthermore, the classification is being used not to assess occupational or social status outright, but to provide a way of comparing African American Londoners to other Londoners, and to explore change in the African Canadian community over time. The scale proved useful in this specific capacity.

Admittedly, investigations of quantitative change such as this study are limited by their data, and hence they cannot illuminate the breadth of lived experience.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, they can shed light on social change that would not otherwise be apparent and hence contribute much to our understanding of African Canadians’ experiences of work and life in the 19th century.

### **African Canadians and Their Work in London, Ontario, 1861-1901**

TABLE 1 LISTS SOME GENERAL characteristics of the African Canadian population in London between 1861 and 1901. As the table shows, the numbers of people claiming African origins declined in London throughout the 19th century, and they came to represent a smaller percentage of the city’s population. The African Canadian population in the late 19th century was fairly gender-balanced. In 1861, a slight majority of men and women of colour were US-born, but most of the Canadian-born were under the age of 20. Almost 90 per cent of workingmen of colour were US-born. Over time, this number decreased, and the majority of Londoners of African origins were born in Canada. In 1861, census takers sometimes recorded the state from which the American-born originated, and these data suggest that many people of colour living in London were originally from Kentucky, although a notable number were from Virginia and free northern states. In this respect they are similar to people of colour living elsewhere in Ontario in 1861, as Michael Wayne has shown. As is typical in declining populations, the average age of African-origin men and women was younger in 1861 than in later decades.

59. Katz, “Occupational Classification in History,” 80.

60. Crowley, “Rural Labour,” 15. Sources documenting the lived experience of African Canadians in London are scarce.

**Table 1: General Characteristics of Men and Women of African Origins in London, Ontario, 1861–1901**

	<b>1861</b>	<b>1871</b>	<b>1881</b>	<b>1901</b>
Total number listed in census	582	448	350	342
Number with occupations listed in the census	136	167	127	145
% male	50%	47%	47%	49%
Average age	24.6	26	26.8	28
% US-born	55%	45%	32%	15%
% Canadian-born	32%	52%	66%	82%
% of working men US-born	88%	75%	56%	21%
% of total London population *	5.0%	2.5%	1.4%	0.9%

\*Population totals for London should be considered estimates. Several studies indicate that the population totals given in the published census tables do not always match the manuscript census closely. See, for example, Wayne, "The Black Population of Canada West." Further, the population numbers for 1871 and 1881 published in 1901 are much higher than those totals given in the original census tables for 1871 and 1881 (because 1901 electoral district limits were used). For this calculation, the totals published in 1901 for 1901, 1881, and 1871 were used (since I am exploring London City and Township) as well as the original population count for 1861. It is also worth noting that people of African origins made up a higher percentage of the London population than the national average in each year (for instance, nationally, African Canadians represented .62% of the entire population in 1871 and .32% in 1901). Greaves, *The Negro in Canada*, 44; Canada, *Fourth Census of Canada, 1901, Volume 1: Population* (Ottawa 1902), 3.

A look at the occupational data for 1861 indicates that London men of colour had diverse experiences, just as histories of blacks in Ontario at mid-century suggest. The 126 men of colour for whom I have information are spread across 30 different occupations. The majority of them, 43 per cent, were employed as labourers, working in typically low-skill, low-paying jobs. At the same time, about 15 per cent of them were farmers, most located just outside the city in London Township. There were several business owners – a grocer and a druggist, shoemakers, and barbers – and a few practising established or emerging professions – one doctor, one dentist, and two ministers. About 20 per cent of men of colour living in London in 1861 practised skilled trades, for instance as carpenters, blacksmiths, cabinetmakers, and coopers. A variety of trades and occupations appear to have been open to men of colour in the early 1860s. Nevertheless, considerable occupational concentration is evident. Table 2 lists the most common jobs for black men in London between 1861 and 1901. From this table we can see that almost 75 per cent of men of colour living in London in 1861 were clustered into only six occupations, working as labourers, farmers, barbers, plasterers, teamsters, and shoemakers.

**Table 2: Most Common Occupations for African Men in London, Ontario, 1861–1901**

	1861		1871		1881		1901
Labourer	43.2%	Labourer	52.0%	Labourer	38.1%	Labourer	32.3%
Farmer	15.2%	Barber	10.4%	Barber	10.5%	Teamster	14.1%
Barber	5.6%	Farmer	9.6%	Farmer	6.7%	Barber	10.1%
Plasterer	4.0%	Plasterer	6.4%	Teamster	5.7%	Cigar maker	4.0%
Teamster	3.2%	Gardener	5.6%	Plasterer	4.8%	Farmer	4.0%
Shoemaker	3.2%						
	<b>74.4%</b>		<b>84.0%</b>		<b>65.8%</b>		<b>64.5%</b>

Occupational concentration is also evident in Table 3, which presents the distribution of men of African origins across Katz's occupational classification between 1861 and 1901. Almost half of all men of colour in 1861 are found in the lowest-skill, lowest-status category. Only 2.4 per cent are classified in the highest-status category. Nevertheless, in 1861, men of colour were fairly evenly distributed across other occupation categories with almost 18 per cent in category II (farmers, business owners, and some professionals), 20 per cent in skilled trades, and 14 per cent in lesser skilled jobs (working primarily as barbers and teamsters).

How does this occupational distribution change over time? As Tables 2 and 3 suggest, in 1871 the occupational distribution of African men narrowed. Men claiming African origins in 1871 and living in London City or London Township were clustered into only 27 different occupations. Fully 52 per cent were working as labourers, while the percentage of farmers dropped to 10 per cent. More men of African origins were working as barbers. Gone in 1871 were many of the workers of colour who held somewhat high-status jobs in 1861: no druggist, grocer, or doctor remained in this census, although there continued to be two ministers in the community. Overall, there were fewer men of African origins in higher-status positions, and their involvement in business and farming declined. Involvement in the skilled trades also seems to have declined, as the number of carpenters and shoemakers dropped substantially, and no blacksmiths or cabinetmakers appeared amongst this population in 1871. As Table 2 shows, workers of "African origins" were even more concentrated into a narrow range of jobs: 84 per cent of the population was clustered into the top five jobs of labourer, barber, farmer, plasterer, and gardener. Teamster continued to be a fairly popular occupation amongst men of African origins; it was the sixth most common job, held by 3 per cent of the members of this population. These findings are supported by those presented in Table 3, in which we can see that London men of African origins in 1871 had a lower occupational status than those of colour in 1861. The number of people in categories I, II, and III dropped noticeably, while participation in lower-skill jobs (categories IV and V) significantly increased.

**Table 3: Occupational Status of African Men in London, Ontario, 1861–1901**

Category	1861	1871	1881	1901
I Elite positions	2.4%	1.6%	1.9%	2.1%
II Commercial, farming, professional	17.6%	9.7%	5.8%	5.3%
III Skilled trades	20.0%	11.3%	21.2%	15.8%
IV Lower-skill manual and service jobs	13.6%	25.0%	30.8%	40.0%
V Low-skill labourers	46.4%	52.4%	40.4%	36.8%
<b>Total number</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>95</b>

By 1881, the occupational distribution of men of African origins shows some signs of improvement. There was less occupational concentration: their employment was spread across 35 separate occupations. Only 64 per cent of them were clustered into the five most common jobs (Table 2). Nonetheless, these jobs are similar to those identified in previous censuses. African Canadian men living in London in 1881 predominantly worked as labourers (38 per cent), barbers (10 per cent), farmers (7 per cent), teamsters (6 per cent), and plasterers (5 per cent). The number of African Canadian farmers continued to decline.<sup>61</sup> We do see some small change in this era; for instance, four African Canadian men were listed as porters, and an additional three were working for railway companies (performing manual labour). It is not clear whether the porters worked on the railways; however, the 1880s was an era in which many men of colour in Canada found work on the railways, especially as sleeping car porters.<sup>62</sup> Significantly, although London in the 1880s was a thriving city with a strong manufacturing base in industries like cigar manufacturing, furniture

61. McFarquhar suggests a similar occupational distribution for African Canadian men living in Toronto in 1881. Labourer was a common occupation, but many men were also employed as barbers, plasterers, shoemakers, and waiters. Although “waiter” was a common niche job for African Canadian men in many Ontario cities, in London and neighbouring Chatham this was not the case. McFarquhar, “Blacks in 1880s Toronto,” 66.

62. It seems that most of the men who were known to work for the railway in this era actually worked in manual jobs as labourers or wood sawyers for the Great Western Railway (GWR), which primarily ran between Windsor and Niagara Falls. The GWR was “one of the province’s biggest employers” up until 1882, when it was absorbed by the Grand Trunk Railway. London was a major hub of operations. Paul Craven, “Labour and Management on the Great Western Railway,” in Craven, ed., *Labouring Lives*, 341. It is possible that some worked as sleeping car porters on other lines as well. African-origin men were hired by railway companies in several roles in the 19th century, but from the 1880s on they were channelled into the job of porter and were viewed as having a special aptitude for the work. Agnes Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters in Canada: An Ethnically Submerged Split Labour Market,” *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 19 (1987), 1–20; Sarah-Jane Mathieu, “North of the Colour Line: Sleeping Car Porters and the Battle Against Jim Crow on Canadian Rails, 1880–1920,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 47 (Spring 2001), 9–41.

making, metal fabricating, brewing, and baking, African Canadian men had little presence in these sectors. Two men of colour worked for the London Furniture Company, and two for the McClary Manufacturing Company as finishers and/or polishers, but they represented only a small fraction of these firms' workforces. Although information on employers of African American men in the 1880s is scarce, there is no evidence that they worked for larger firms or the principal employers in the city with the exceptions of the above-mentioned men and those employed by the Great Western Railway.<sup>63</sup>

As Table 3 shows, the occupational status of male workers of African origins appears to have improved between 1871 and 1881, insofar as the percentage employed in the lowest category (v) decreased, while the representation in categories III (skilled trades) and IV (less skilled occupations) increased. Nevertheless, there was a continued decline in the participation of individuals in category II, which reflects the declining numbers of African Canadians in farming and business. The only African Canadian men in category I (there were two of them in 1871, 1881, and 1901) were the pastors of the two churches in town serving the African Canadian community: the Second Baptist and the Bethemanuel Methodist churches.

Twenty years later, in 1901, considerable economic and occupational change had taken place in Ontario society, but as Table 2 shows, the change for men claiming African origins was minor. The most common job for these men was still labourer, employing one in four African Canadian male workers. The occupations of teamster and barber continued to be popular amongst this population, employing 14 per cent and 10 per cent of the population respectively. The rest of the population was spread out across a number of other jobs; the next most popular jobs employed only four people. For instance, in 1901, four African Canadian men reported their occupation as cigar maker (as did two African Canadian women in the city). Notably, all of the men were living at the same address: three brothers ranging from age 16 to 26 (their father was a teamster) and one 42-year-old man who lodged with them.<sup>64</sup> Four other

63. Information on the employers of African Canadian men was gathered from the 1881 London city directory. Information on London industry in the 1880s was taken from Gregory S. Kealey and Bryan D. Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Ontario, 1880–1900* (New York 1982), 40, 46–51. Kealey and Palmer indicate that the McClary Furniture Company was a non-union firm that had a reputation as an unfair employer (369). See also Gregory S. Kealey, ed., *Canada Investigates Industrialism: The Royal Commission on the Relations of Labor and Capital, 1889* (Toronto 1973), 125–28.

64. The cigar making industry had quite a history in London, one characterized by labour conflict. Working conditions were poor, and there was little job security. The industry had been partially unionized, but by 1887 only 28 of 275 people working in the tobacco industry in the city were working in union establishments. Employers preferred inexpensive labour, controversially making strong use of child labour. According to Heron, some firms even imported American blacks to work in the industry; but in London I can find little evidence of African Canadian men working in this sector regularly before 1901. At this time, all four of the men in the industry were Canadian-born. For information on the cigar making industry in London,



**Beth Emanuel Church, London, Ontario, 2011, founded 1856 and a centre of African Canadian activity.**  
Photograph: Blake Palmer

individuals were working as farmers.<sup>65</sup> Overall, the African American male labour force was less concentrated in 1901, but there was still a tendency for the men to cluster in the same kinds of jobs they had held in the past. Over half of the African-origin male population was employed in a small number of jobs. In 1901, as in 1881, there was little information available on employers, but the evidence shows that very few employed more than one male of colour – the only exceptions being a few barbershops, a furniture company, and possibly George Kelly and Company, cigar makers.<sup>66</sup>

With respect to occupational status, it is clear that African Canadian men's participation in higher-status positions continued to decline. While the numbers of men in the lowest-status, lowest-skill category decreased between 1881 and 1901, the percentage in skilled trades also declined. There was an increase in the percentage of men of African origins in lower-skill manual and service occupations. Generally speaking, African Canadian men in London continued to be concentrated in lower-skill, lower-status jobs, and there was a clear downward trend in their occupational status between 1861 and 1901.

---

Ontario, see Kealey and Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be*, 372; Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict*, 188–90. See also Craig Heron, "Factory Workers," in Craven, ed., *Labouring Lives*, 516.

65. Although the job of porter does not make the top five in this analysis, Mathieu reports that 39 London African Canadians worked as porters for the Grand Trunk Railway in 1902. Only three African Canadian men were listed in the census with "porter" as their occupation. Mathieu, "North of the Colour Line," 14.

66. In the city directory, an employer is listed for only the oldest of the cigar making brothers (George Kelly and Company). It is possible that his younger brothers were employed by the same firm.

**Table 4: Most Common Occupations for All Men in London City, Ontario, 1861–1901\***

	1861		1871		1881		1901
Labourer	12.2%	Labourer	19.0%	Labourer	9.0%	Farmer	16.4%
Boot & shoemakers	6.8%	Carpenters & joiners	10.8%	Clerks	7.8%	Labourer	10.6%
Carpenters	6.3%	Clerks	10.4%	Tailors	4.1%	Clerks	6.0%
Clerks	6.2%	Shoemakers	6.2%	Carpenters	3.7%	Carpenters	4.3%
Railroad employees	3.8%	Railway employees	5.3%	Machinists	3.4%	Cigar makers	2.6%
<b>Cumulative %</b>	<b>35.3%</b>		<b>51.7%</b>		<b>28.0%</b>		<b>29.9%</b>

\* Data for 1861, 1871, and 1881 are taken from the published census tables (see footnote 57). Data for 1901 have been calculated using the 1901 census sample data file.

How do the experiences of men of African origins compare with those of male Londoners more generally in this era? Table 4 shows the most common jobs for male Londoners between 1861 and 1901. Here we can see that male Londoners were not as concentrated into a narrow range of jobs. For instance, in 1861, while men of African origins were found in 30 distinct occupations, male Londoners more broadly were spread across 129 different jobs.<sup>67</sup> The top five jobs employed only 35 per cent of all male workers in the city, while the top five jobs for men of colour employed 71 per cent (see Table 2). There is some overlap between the most common jobs for African Canadian men and all men.<sup>68</sup> Labourer was the most common job in both populations, but only 12 per cent of employed men in the city (compared with 43 per cent of employed African Canadian men) were in this occupation in 1861. Beyond the job of labourer, however, there is little overlap in the most common jobs for all men and African Canadian men (listed in Tables 2 and 4). This pattern is repeated across the four separate census years.

Looking more closely at the data for 1871 in Table 4, we can see that African Canadian men were not the only ones who appear to have suffered an economic decline between 1861 and 1871. The number and percentage of men

67. Canada, *Census Report of the Canadas, 1861*, Appendix 8, 558–75. These findings are similar to Katz's for Hamilton in this era. Black men were concentrated at the bottom of occupational hierarchies compared to their counterparts and were more likely to be in service occupations. Michael B. Katz, Michael J. Doucet, and Mark J. Stern, *The Social Organization of Early Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA 1982), 79–81.

68. These figures are not directly comparable, because the published statistics for London refer to the city only, whereas the data collected on African Canadians include those in both London City and London Township. It is worth reiterating here that published data do not conform precisely with the manuscript census; for instance, using manuscript census data Kevin Burley produces a similar occupational ranking in 1871 but finds coopers to have been slightly more numerous than railway employees. Burley, "Occupational Structure and Ethnicity in London," 400.

working as labourers increased in the city more generally. Furthermore, the male labour force in London was more highly concentrated in 1871 than it was in 1861. Hence, the decline in the fortunes of African Canadian men in London between 1861 and 1871 appears to reflect a decline in available economic opportunities in the city more generally.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, the impact on African Canadian men appears to have been stronger. While one in five employed male Londoners worked as a “labourer” in 1871, as many as one in two workingmen of African origins in the area did so. African-origin men remained more highly concentrated in a narrow range of low-skill jobs than their counterparts from other ethnic backgrounds. Thus, while the population of London as a whole faced growing occupational concentration and an increase in the percentage of the male workforce employed in low-skill jobs between 1861 and 1871, men of African origins remained more highly concentrated in poor jobs in the labour force than both their white counterparts and their 1861 counterparts of colour.

By 1881, London men were much less concentrated into a select few jobs, and while labourer remained the most common employment, the percentage of men working in this occupation dropped by 10 per cent. There continued to be little overlap in the occupational distribution of all men and African Canadian men in 1881, and the labour of African Canadian men was much more concentrated.

It is worth looking at the figures derived from the 1901 census sample closely, as they provide an interesting contrast to the data on African Canadians in London at this time. Analysis of the sample data taken from the 1901 census of London, Ontario, indicates that 40 per cent of men in London City and London Township were clustered into jobs such as labourer (10.6 per cent), farmer (16 per cent), and clerk, carpenter, and cigar maker. Farming appears on this list, since the sample data include both London City and London Township, while the published statistics for previous years reflect the city only.<sup>70</sup> Many men in London in 1901 were employed as clerks, or in the burgeoning construction (carpenters) and manufacturing (machinists, cigar making) sectors. These growing jobs – with the exception of the low-skill, labour-intensive, manual

69. It is not clear to what extent changes in the occupational distribution reflect broader economic change (declining participation in agriculture, changes in manufacturing, and so on), or whether differences in the way the two censuses were conducted, and data on occupation collected, also had an impact. These changes may also reflect the tightening of the labour market in this era reported by Webber in “Labour and the Law,” 116.

70. The sample data may produce a slightly distorted picture of the occupational distribution, since they provide a picture of only some households, and one of the “households” selected for the sample is an institution (probably the London Insane Asylum). The result is that the job of “attendant” appears among the ten most common in the city. It is unlikely that the occupations of the inmates at the institution accurately reflect the occupational distribution of Londoners more generally.



**Table 5. Occupational Status of Men in London, Ontario, 1901\***

Category	African origins	All
I Elite positions	2.1%	3.8%
II Commercial, farming, professional	5.3%	46.5%
III Skilled trades	15.8%	23.8%
IV Lower-skill manual and service jobs	40.0%	10.7%
V Low-skill labourers	36.8%	15.0%
<b>Total number</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>1539</b>

\* Data on African-origin men are from the manuscript census rolls for London in 1901. Data for all men were calculated from the 1901 census sample data file.

job of cigar-maker – do not appear to have been open to black men.<sup>71</sup> Rather, men of African origins continued to cluster in a few jobs as unskilled labourers, teamsters, and barbers.

Table 5 compares the occupational status of African Canadian workers in London and all male workers in the city in 1901. The difference is striking. While the percentage of workers in the first category is not high, London men in general were clustered into categories II and III – that is, into farming, white-collar, professional, and business occupations as well as skilled trades. Almost half of London's male workforce in 1901 can be found in category II, while only 5 per cent of African Canadian male Londoners can be placed in this category. Compared to their white counterparts, African Canadian men were also under-represented in category III jobs. Overall, Table 5 confirms that African Canadians working in London were much more likely than their counterparts from other ethnic backgrounds to be concentrated in a narrow range of low-skill jobs.

The concentration of London African Canadian men into a narrow subset of jobs reflects their experiences elsewhere. For instance, black men throughout the south and north United States had success working as barbers in the 19th century. Douglas Bristol Jr. describes African American barbers in the United States as some of the most successful black businessmen of their time. In the early to mid-19th century especially, African American men provided daily service to an often elite, white male clientele, providing shaves and haircuts in sometimes luxurious surroundings. African American men were viewed as having a particular aptitude for this work, and although white barbers came to dominate numerically by the end of the 19th century, Bristol claims

71. Patricia Cooper explains that at the turn of the 20th century, cigar making was a booming industry, but one that was highly segregated by sex and race; further, "different groups of workers made different types of cigars using different tobaccos." At this time, the cigars were largely handcrafted, and there was little use of machinery. Low-waged workers were preferred to make the cheaper cigars. Patricia A. Cooper, "What This Country Needs is a Good 5-cent Cigar," *Technology and Culture*, 29 (October 1988), 779–807. Patricia A. Cooper, *Once a Cigar Maker: Men, Women and Work Culture in American Cigar Factories, 1900–1919* (Urbana, IL 1987).

that African American men were often more highly patronized and successful.<sup>72</sup> Work as a barber was also a niche job for black men in Toronto in the 1850s, where, it was reported, most of the barbers in the city were men of colour.<sup>73</sup> London was no different: in the early 1870s, roughly twelve of the fifteen barbers in the city were men of African origins.<sup>74</sup> And by the 1880s, there were several prominent barbers in the city who appear to have been very successful, employing many other men of colour in their businesses. Like their counterparts in the United States, they appear to have enjoyed stability and security, and they were able to keep their children in school longer than some of their counterparts, often launching their sons into good careers.<sup>75</sup> It is notable that until 1901, the vast majority of African-origin barbers in London were American-born, suggesting that they brought this tradition, and perhaps certain skills, with them when they migrated to Canada.

Less has been written about African Americans' participation in work as teamsters, dray men, and carters – drivers of horse-drawn conveyances. However, such jobs would have allowed men who could save enough to buy the necessary apparatus to work fairly independently.<sup>76</sup> By 1856 in London, at least one-quarter of the city's licensed "carters" were known to be men of African origins. While they do not appear to have predominated in this field, as they did in barbering, black men were overrepresented. Interestingly, in the 1901 census the occupations of motorman and motor vehicle driver emerged (as the sixth most common job for men in London), but this was not a job open to men

72. Douglas Bristol Jr., "From Outposts to Enclaves: A Social History of Black Barbers from 1750 to 1915," *Enterprise & Society*, 5 (2004), 594–606. Close ties within local African American communities and a system of apprenticeship helped to ensure the success of black barbers and to protect them from the encroachment of white barbers. See also Johan E. Vacha, "The Best Barber in America: George A. Myers," *Timeline*, (Jan/Feb 2000), 2–15. Barbershops that catered to the elite were often very exclusive and sometimes actually refused to provide service to African American men, although successful barbers sought to give back to their community in other ways.

73. Shadd, Cooper, and Smardz Frost, *The Underground Railroad*, 15. According to the report, the barbers were typically thriving. Black men also worked as barbers in 1830s Montreal and 1850s Victoria, BC. Williams, *Blacks in Montreal*, 19; Kilian, "Go Do Some Great Thing," 38–39.

74. Burnley, "Occupational Structure and Ethnicity in London," 408.

75. Sylvea Hollis, "'The Black Man Almost Has Disappeared from Our Country': African American Workers in Cooperstown, New York, 1860–1900," *New York History*, 88 (2007), 13–31. As discussed later, some London barbers sent sons into skilled trades and other careers that were not common amongst African Canadian men.

76. Some men were very successful in this job, such as African Canadian Thornton Blackburn who reportedly founded the first taxi business in Upper Canada in Toronto in 1837. Shadd, Cooper, and Smardz Frost, *The Underground Railroad*, 69. However, it seems to have been a somewhat marginal job that a man without other opportunities could fall back on. Many African Canadian men also worked as teamsters in 1850s Victoria, BC. Kilian, "Go Do Some Great Thing," 38–39.

of African origins – none were listed in the census, even though many continued to work as teamsters. Studies have also documented the channelling of African American men into unstable and often temporary jobs as labourers.<sup>77</sup>

Overall, a look at the work of men of African origins across the four census years uncovers three clear findings. First, men of African origins were clustered into a fairly narrow range of jobs that were disproportionately low-skilled. Their occupational opportunities were more narrow and limited to unskilled work than their white counterparts. Second, their opportunities for independent, skilled work declined between 1861 and 1871, and while involvement in the skilled trades increased slightly between 1871 and 1881, opportunities to farm, own businesses, and work in professional occupations clearly diminished across the period. On the whole, African Canadian men were more highly represented in positions of ownership and authority in 1861 than later. Third, there are signs that across the late 19th century, the London economy expanded to include more white-collar occupations, more jobs in retail sales, and more jobs in manufacturing. With the exception of a few cigar makers and furniture finishers, African Canadian men were absent from these expanding jobs. Thus, black men were virtually excluded from the “new economy” of the late 19th century and continued to cluster in lower-skill occupations working as manual labourers, barbers, and teamsters.<sup>78</sup>

### ***Occupational Stasis and Change***

In the late 19th century, the African Canadian population in the London region appears to have been a mobile one.<sup>79</sup> Of the 1,575 records of people of African origins listed in the censuses between 1861 and 1901, I can confirm only 290 individuals who were living in London for more than one census. What were the occupational outcomes of these geographically stable people? Analysis was conducted to trace occupational change amongst this group to explore intra-generational and intergenerational mobility. Looking at this subset of people sheds additional light on the occupational outcomes identified above.

77. See for example, Hollis, “The Black Man Almost Has Disappeared from Our Country,” 23–26. Many of the men in Hollis’s study were day labourers without a steady employer, and given the lack of any information on employers in my sources (both the census and the city directories), it is quite possible that the same was true in London.

78. McFarquhar’s study of blacks in Toronto in the 1880s also shows the exclusion of black men from white-collar jobs and documents the struggle of one African Canadian, Albert Jackson, to hold the position of postman to which he had been appointed by the government. McFarquhar, “Blacks in 1880s Toronto,” 66–71.

79. Note that Katz argues that the African Canadian population in Hamilton in the mid-to-late 19th century was probably less mobile than the population more generally. Katz, *People of Hamilton*, 68. Many of the individuals traced across censuses are men (or married women); it is difficult to trace women over a long period of time because their last names changed upon marriage.

In particular, it is useful to have a closer look at the population of men of African origins between 1861 and 1871 – a period in which there appears to have been a notable decline in occupational opportunities and status. At least 36 men were listed in both the 1861 and 1871 censuses with an occupation. Of these, 25 (70 per cent) experienced no change in their occupational status. Of the eleven (30 per cent) who changed, six experienced an increase in their occupational status, while five suffered a decrease. The noticeable occupational decline between 1861 and 1871, then, is not due to any substantial decline in the fortunes of those African Canadians who remained in the city. Rather, it seems to reflect migration (and possibly mortality) trends. Many prosperous citizens in 1861 were no longer living in London in 1871 – whether these individuals migrated due to declining fortunes or the perception of better opportunities elsewhere is not known, although many do appear to have left the province.<sup>80</sup> For instance, Nelson Moss, who moved from Pennsylvania to London in the 1850s to escape the Fugitive Slave Act, and who worked as a shoemaker in the mid-1850s and early 1860s, appears to have left the city with his family.<sup>81</sup> Carpenters Charles Davidson and Henry Dawson, both of whom lived and worked in London in the 1850s and 1860s, also departed. Further, some old-time Londoners died between censuses. Most notably, Alfred T. Jones, the druggist, seems to have died around 1863, leaving behind his widow and at least six of his eight children.<sup>82</sup> Thus, the city lost some of its most prominent and successful African Canadian citizens. At the same time, there appears to have been an influx of new African Americans and Canadians into the city, and it was predominantly these individuals who swelled the ranks of the unskilled labourers in 1871.

The findings are similar when one compares occupational change between 1871 and 1881. Of the 38 men of African origins who have occupations listed in both the 1871 and 1881 censuses, twenty (or roughly 53 per cent) experienced no occupational status change, while, of the remaining eighteen, nine saw upward occupational mobility, and nine experienced downward mobility. Of the downwardly mobile, two moved out of farming into trades and labourer occupations, three left skilled trades, and three left better jobs to work as labourers. Also experiencing downward mobility was Cornelius Butler, listed as a minister in 1871 but only a “catticher” (a religious instructor) in 1881. Of the nine who moved upward, five left work as labourers for jobs in categories

80. Searches in the 1871 online householders index revealed only one African Canadian London male who had moved to another Ontario city since 1861.

81. Moss appears in Drew's *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*, 153–4. He is also listed in the 1856 London directory and the 1861 census, but he is not listed in the 1863 city directory. *Railton's Directory for the City of London, C.W., 1856–1857; City of London Directory for 1863–4* (London 1863).

82. A. T.'s brother A. B. is not listed in either the 1861 census rolls or London city directories in the early 1860s.

III and IV, while four went from category IV to work in the skilled trades (III). Clearly the stable population of African males cannot account for any overall occupational mobility observed. Rather, migration patterns would seem to remain important.

One might expect more mobility over the twenty years between the 1881 and 1901 censuses. However, once again, continuity in occupational status seems to have been the norm. Amongst the 22 men of African origins for whom I have occupational data at both points in time, twelve (54 per cent) experienced no change, eight experienced upward mobility (six rose out of labourer positions, and two went from trades into category II jobs), and two experienced downward mobility, moving from farming and skilled trades into lower positions. Here then, there is a slight upward trend that is not reflected in the overall data. In summary, those men of African origins who stayed in London from one census to the next did not experience substantial economic decline, and some experienced upward mobility. It seems that some men with good jobs in 1861 and after tended to die or leave the city, and newer African Canadian entrants into the London labour market were concentrated in semi-skilled and unskilled jobs.

The analysis of intergenerational mobility also reveals no striking trends. For those men in the 1901 census for whom I have information on their father's occupation, there is some modest evidence of upward intergenerational mobility. Notably, of the nine men who had fathers who were "labourers," three were labourers themselves in 1901, while six were working in more prestigious occupations as barbers (two), hostlers (two), farmers (one), and coopers (one). Similarly, of the four men whose fathers were barbers, one was also a barber, but three were working in moderately higher-status positions, two as bakers and one as a postman. Analysis of the 1881 records also finds evidence of modest upward change. Of the seven African Canadian men working in 1881 whose fathers were labourers, four were also labourers, while one was a barber, one a plasterer, and another a railway employee. While these analyses reveal limited evidence of upward intergenerational mobility, they more strongly reflect trends identified in the previous analyses. The labour of African Canadian men in London was clustered into a narrow range of jobs, and occupational mobility was largely limited to movement between these jobs. This conclusion is further supported by a look at the fate of the children of A. T. Jones, who worked so hard to ensure that his children could obtain an education. In 1901, son Albion was working as a cooper, while two of his daughters, Elizabeth and Teresa, worked as domestic servants.<sup>83</sup>

To summarize, there is little evidence of occupational mobility across census years or generations within the African Canadian population. While the occupations of individuals do change from one point in time to the next,

83. Albion Jones may have faced declining circumstances because he was listed as a dray man in the 1911 census; however, at his death in 1921, his occupation was again listed as cooper.

there is no clear evidence of improvements in circumstances over time; it was not the case that most African Canadian men had upwardly mobile careers. Yet, it is also true that there is little evidence of steady downward mobility. Rather, most African Canadian men moved between the limited subset of jobs open to them and did their best to earn a living. It seems that those who worked as barbers, or who had fathers who worked as barbers, may have been better off than many others; this job appears to have provided resources that enabled men to either switch to non-traditional careers (such as Charles Pope, who became a police officer in the 1880s before returning to the barber trade), or to educate their children to work in non-traditional areas, such as George Taylor, whose son Thomas worked as a postman in 1901.<sup>84</sup> In the late 19th century, there is no evidence of rags-to-riches stories like those told of African American settlers during the 1830s and 1840s. Some managed to succeed and improve their lot in life, but in general, there appear to have been few opportunities for African Canadian men in business, professions, or expanding areas of the economy.

### ***African Canadian Women's Work***

As Shirley Yee and others have argued, African Canadian women worked in a variety of capacities in the late 19th century.<sup>85</sup> Many married women worked in the home and raised their children when their husbands earned enough to support the family, but many single, married, and widowed women did work for pay outside the home. From census data, it is difficult to ascertain exactly how many women worked and what they did; historians have argued that women quite often undertook economic activity in their homes – and outside of it – that was not officially counted as work, since their primary roles were those of wife and mother.<sup>86</sup> The 1861 census lists occupations for only nine women of colour, and a London city directory gives an occupation for one other. Of these ten women, six were employed as seamstresses, while the remaining four worked, separately, as a servant, a washerwoman, a dressmaker, and an ice packer. In 1871, 42 women of African origins had an occupation listed in the census. This apparent growth could reflect an increase in women's employment outside the home – certainly with the decline in African Canadian men's occupational opportunities, women's work may have become more necessary for family survival – or it could simply indicate more diligence in the recording of women's jobs. As Table 6 indicates, 83 per cent of women of African origins

84. In 1901, two of George Taylor's other sons were also well-established: one (Charles) was listed as a baker and the other (William) as a barber in the census. In 1911, Charles Taylor was listed as a civil servant working in the post office. Thomas had also worked as a barber in the 1890s before becoming a postman.

85. Yee, "Gender Ideology and Black Women"; Bristow, "Whatever You Raise in the Ground"; Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers*, 171–77.

86. See, for instance, Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets and Economic Development*, 130–31.

living in London who worked outside the home in 1871 were clustered into two occupations: servant and laundress (or washerwoman).<sup>87</sup> Fewer women were listed as dressmakers or seamstresses in this census than in the previous one. It is unclear whether there was a true change in African Canadian women's working opportunities, but the extent of concentration is evident. In the 19th century, women from all backgrounds were highly concentrated into servant work, but African Canadian women's involvement in laundry work was exceptional. The 1871 census report for London indicated that 27 women worked as laundresses; the 17 women of African origins holding this job, then, appear to represent a striking 63 per cent of the total. They were highly over-represented in this occupation.

Laundress and servant remained the most common jobs for African Canadian women in 1881, although women found employment in other occupations too. For example, widow Margrit Bird ran a barbershop, and she worked there in the early 1880s as a hairdresser along with a young apprentice.<sup>88</sup> Further, two young African Canadian women worked as milliners, and two older women worked as dressmakers. The situation was not substantially different in 1901, as the vast majority of the 41 African Canadian women listed as working outside the home in London were employed as servants and laundresses. Two women worked as hairdressers, and another two were listed in the census as cigar makers. An additional four women (all married or widowed) have no occupation listed in the census, but it is clear that they are running boarding houses given the number of boarders living with them.<sup>89</sup> One other widow who appears in the census with an income but no occupation is listed in the city directory as a grocer.

Previous studies have documented relatively low rates of racial occupational segregation amongst women, since women's work is already quite segregated.<sup>90</sup>

87. In their occupational concentration, these London African-origin women strongly resemble their counterparts in Toronto, Halifax county, and New York state in the same era. McFarquhar, "Blacks in 1880s Toronto," 66; Suzanne Morton, "Separate Spheres in a Separate World: African-Nova Scotian Women in Late-Nineteenth-Century Halifax County," *Acadiensis*, 22 (1993), 61–83; Hollis, "African American Workers in Cooperstown, New York," 19–22.

88. Margrit Bird's occupation is not listed in the census, but it does appear in an 1881 city directory.

89. The records for 1881 suggest that at least a few women had boarders. Running a boarding house appears less common earlier, although it was not uncommon for African Canadian families in London to have had children or elderly men and women not related to them living with them. This trend was also identified in Halifax county by Suzanne Morton, "Separate Spheres in a Separate World," 77.

90. See, for instance, Hugh Lautard and Neil Guppy, "Revisiting the Vertical Mosaic: Occupational Stratification Among Canadian Ethnic Groups," in Peter S. Li, ed., *Race and Ethnic Relations in Canada* (Toronto 1999), 219–252. In this respect it is worth noting that 90 per cent of working women in London in 1871 were employed as servants; thus, the work of women of colour was quite similar to the employment of others. Burley, "Occupational

**Table 6. Most Common Jobs for Women of African Origins in London, Ontario, 1861–1901**

1861	1871		1881		1901		
	% (N)		% (N)		% (N)	% (N)	
Seamstress	60 (6)	Servant	42.9 (18)	Laundress	36.4 (8)	Servant	48.8 (21)
Servant	10 (1)	Laundress	40.4 (17)	Servant	22.7 (5)	Laundress	14.0 (6)
Washer	10 (1)	Dressmaker	4.8 (2)	Dressmaker	9.1 (2)	Boarding house	8.7 (4)
				Hairdresser	9.1 (2)	(3 tied at 2 each)*	12.9 (6)
				Milliner	9.1 (2)		
<b>Cumulative %</b>	<b>80%</b>		<b>88.1%</b>		<b>86.4%</b>		<b>84.4%</b>

\* In 1901, there were two female cigar makers, two hairdressers, and two housekeepers.

Thus, it is not surprising that a comparison of the most common jobs for white and African Canadian women in 1901 reveals overlap between the two groups (analysis not shown). The most common job for all women is servant, and both groups of women are equally represented in cigar making. At the same time, white women were more likely to work as housekeepers, while African women were more likely to work as laundresses. Furthermore, there were many jobs opening up to white women at the turn of the 20th century:<sup>91</sup> the 1901 census shows many London women employed as clerks, stenographers, nurses, and teachers. No woman of colour reported an occupation in one of these fields in 1901. As with men, many new jobs that were opening to women during this time period appear to have been closed to African Canadian women, who continued to predominate in the same jobs they had worked in for decades, with the exception of cigar making.

Although the data on women's employment are not extensive, the findings of these analyses continue to point to the marginalization of members of the African Canadian community in the labour market and their inability to gain acceptance in jobs emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Nevertheless, opportunities for women's work were expanding more generally throughout this period, and African Canadian women did benefit from this expansion, if only to a limited extent. Women of African origins living in London were clustered into only five occupations in 1861, seven in 1871, and eight in both 1881 and 1901, suggesting a slight broadening of their occupational horizons over time.

---

Structure and Ethnicity in London," 396.

91. Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets and Economic Development*, 146–151.



## Discussion

OVER THE LAST SEVERAL DECADES, numerous studies have documented the discrimination experienced by workers of colour in Canada and revealed considerable racial segregation and economic marginalization in the labour market.<sup>92</sup> People categorized as “Black” have worse labour market outcomes than most others in Canadian society.<sup>93</sup> Here, as in the United States, people of colour were traditionally excluded from high-status jobs, many service jobs that required interaction with the public, and good factory jobs.<sup>94</sup> While these trends have been long-standing, they do not appear to have been entirely static; change in the opportunities open to people of African origins has occurred over time.

If the experiences of people of African origins in London, Ontario, reflect trends elsewhere in the province, the 19th century seems to have been a time of particular change. From mid-century on, it is clear that black men and women were overrepresented in low-skill work that paid little. At the same time, there appears to have been some opportunities at mid-century for men of colour to do more. Both historical accounts and census data reveal black men who were business owners, farm owners, and workers in a variety of skilled trades. Some were ministers, teachers, dentists, doctors, and druggists. If the accounts collected by Benjamin Drew in the 1850s are indicative, there was a sense of optimism amongst African American migrants in Canada that anything was possible: they could start businesses, own homes, have families, educate their children in integrated schools, and prosper. Many did just that. However, the situation appeared to deteriorate by the recession of the late 1850s. Howe’s 1864 report on migrants in Canada West is more pessimistic and provides considerable evidence of discrimination. This negativity is not surprising given the evidence provided in this present study. A review

92. Calliste, “Sleeping Car Porters”; Elizabeth Beaton, “An African-American Community in Cape Breton,” *Acadiensis*, 24 (Spring 1995), 65–97; Hugh Lautard and Neil Guppy, “Revisiting the Vertical Mosaic”; Hugh Lautard and Donald Loree, “Ethnic stratification in Canada, 1931 to 1981,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 9 (1984), 333–44; Frances Henry and Effie Ginzberg, *Who Gets the Work? A Test of Racial Discrimination in Employment* (Toronto 1985); Cheryl Teelucksingh and Grace-Edward Galabuzi, *Working Precariously: The Impact of Race and Immigrant Status on Employment Opportunities and Outcomes in Canada* (Toronto 2005); Anne Milan and Kelly Tran, “Blacks in Canada: A Long History,” *Canadian Social Trends*, 72 (Spring 2004), 2–7.

93. The only exception is individuals from First Nations backgrounds: Lautard and Guppy, “Revisiting the Vertical Mosaic”; Jerry White, Paul Maxim, and Stephen Obeng Gyimah, “Labour Force Activity of Women in Canada: A Comparative Analysis of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Women,” *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 40 (2003), 391–415.

94. Dionne Brand, “‘We Weren’t Allowed to Go into Factory Work Until Hitler Started the War’: The 1920s to the 1940s,” in Bristow *et al.*, *‘We’re Rooted Here’* (Toronto 1994), 171–92; Jacqueline Jones, “The Modernization of Prejudice,” in *American Work: Four Centuries of Black and White Labor* (New York 1998), 301–36. Greaves, *The Negro in Canada*.

of census data between 1861 and 1901 indicates that occupational opportunities diminished over time. The number of men claiming African origins who were business owners, professionals, and farmers dropped steadily across the period, while the numbers in lower-level manual and service work steadily increased. Opportunities for work in skilled trades dropped substantially from 1861 to 1871, before rising again in 1881, only to drop slightly by 1901. Although some new opportunities arose across this period, in general, African Canadians remained clustered in a narrow range of jobs.<sup>95</sup> By and large, men's occupational mobility was limited to movement between several niche jobs: labourer, barber, teamster, plasterer, and farmer. The vast majority of women worked as servants (especially when single), laundresses (when married or widowed), and in some eras, as seamstresses. While there may have been some broadening of opportunities for African Canadian men and women at the turn of the 20th century, as the number of jobs claimed by each expanded slightly, in general, opportunities remained limited, especially compared to their white counterparts.<sup>96</sup>

In this era of industrialization, professionalization, and the gradual expansion of the services sector, it is important to note what work African-origin men and women were *not* doing. They were not employed as store or office clerks, or as professionals, and they were not employed to any great extent in factories. While African Canadian men continued to work as teamsters and dray men, they were not employed as drivers of more modern vehicles (trolleys, automobiles). By 1901, then, African Canadian men and women remained concentrated in jobs that had been around for decades – low-skill, blue-collar, and service work – that were not attractive jobs for others.<sup>97</sup> They were largely excluded from expanding fields and new industries.

How do we account for these changes in the experiences of African Canadians in this urban southern Ontario setting? Economic trends appear particularly salient. Economic growth prior to mid-century created a context

95. It is, nonetheless, important not to minimize the accomplishments of individuals such as Charles Pope, who may have been London's first African Canadian police officer in the 1880s, and 1901 postman Thomas Taylor. Also in southern Ontario during the 1880s, Delos Rogest Davis won the right to practice law through an act of parliament. Nevertheless, these men appear increasingly exceptional in the late 19th century; opportunities for advancement appear to have become more rare.

96. In 1931, Ida Greaves argued there was evidence of a narrowing of opportunity during the opening decades of the 20th century. Work as waiters, business ownership, and participation in the skilled trades were all said to have declined in Canada: Greaves, *The Negro in Canada*, 57.

97. David Goutor has argued that on the whole, the Canadian labour movement was more favourable to African Canadian workers than those of Chinese origins; while the latter seemed to symbolize the evils of industrial capitalism, the former represented oppressed workers of eras gone by. This image is, to some extent, reflected in the kinds of jobs in which African Canadian workers were clustered. David Goutor, "Drawing Different Lines of Color: The Mainstream English Canadian Labour Movement's Approach to Blacks and the Chinese, 1880–1914," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 2 (Spring 2005), 55–76.

in which African American workers were – at least to some extent – welcome, and their labour was a boon to an expanding economy transformed by the building of railways throughout southern Ontario. The fact that early Upper Canada lieutenant-governors, such as John Graves Simcoe, were opposed to slavery and favourable toward African American settlement in the region also played a role in encouraging their settlement.<sup>98</sup> By the mid-to-late 1850s, economic difficulties and rising discrimination appear to have generated a more hostile environment for African Canadians in many urban centres. These trends, combined with the promise of the American Civil War, spurred out-migration in the community that would have had a negative impact on African Canadian businesses that catered to the African Canadian population. Nonetheless, the population decline was not precipitous, and, in and of itself, could not be responsible for the economic marginalization documented here. Other concomitant social trends appear to have been influential. For instance, greater professionalization and regulatory legislation restricting entrance into dentistry, medicine, and pharmacy in the late 1860s and 1870s made it more difficult for the variably trained to enter and sustain a practice. Thus, it is not surprising that there were no African American doctors, dentists, or pharmacists listed in the census from the 1870s on.<sup>99</sup> Trends such as bureaucratic rationalization and formalization affected African Canadians in several ways: government policy brought more restrictions on immigration; greater organization amongst trades and factory workers brought more formal restrictions against African Canadian workers; and rising education requirements for many posts would have excluded many African Canadians whose education was negatively affected by educational segregation. Such trends, accompanied by extensive prejudice against people of colour, meant that opportunities for men and women of colour were fewer and farther between, and seemingly restricted to industries where they had long had a presence. As historians have documented, even the well-educated and trained were channelled into dead-end service jobs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>100</sup> In such an environment, it is not surprising that out-migration continued, and the size of the African Canadian population declined.<sup>101</sup>

98. Webber, "Labour and the Law," 117; Greaves, *The Negro in Canada*, 39–43.

99. Anderson Ruffin Abbott, MD, did practice in Chatham during the 1870s and later in the Toronto area. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada*, 329.

100. Judith Fingard, "From Sea to Rail: Black Transportation Workers and Their Families in Halifax, c. 1870–1916," *Acadiensis*, 24 (Spring 1995), 49–64; Mathieu, "North of the Colour Line"; Calliste, "Sleeping Car Porters."

101. Among many potential explanations for such extensive occupational segregation, residential segregation does not seem to be important, at least not in London in the 19th century. According to Jason Gilliland and colleagues, the African Canadian population in London was not particularly segregated from their white counterparts, and most had only a ten-minute walk to work. Donald Lafreniere and Jason Gilliland, "Socio-spatial Analysis of Journey to Work in London, Ontario, 1881." Presentation to Social Science History Association

Future research should continue to explore the experiences of African Canadians in the late 19th century to ascertain whether the narrowing of opportunities observed in London was true of other locations in Ontario and elsewhere in Canada.<sup>102</sup> Further, such research should look more closely at the forces shaping this decline in opportunities, which are currently unclear. To what extent were the experiences of African Canadians determined by economic change that limited opportunities in small-business ownership, farming, and trades? What was the role of exclusionary practices in limiting access not only to professions, but also to education and training in other types of work? What was the significance of migration trends? Were the prosperous more likely to move to the United States, or was out-migration more common amongst the economically vulnerable? Exploring these questions will shed greater light on the experiences of African Canadians in Canada in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and, ultimately, will enhance our understanding of the transition to industrial capitalism and its significance for social inequality in Canadian society.

*Research for this paper was supported by an internal Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant from the University of Western Ontario. I would like to thank Patrick Gamsby for his research assistance and the editor and anonymous reviewers for their advice and recommendations for improving this paper.*

---

Conference, Chicago, IL (November 2010); Donald Lafreniere, Jason Gilliland, Sherry Olson, P. Dunae, and J. Lutz, "Residential Segregation and the Built Environment in Three Canadian Cities, 1881–1961," European Social Science History Conference, Ghent, Belgium (April 2010). Sundstrom makes the same observation for people of colour in the mid-20th century United States; observed racial occupational segregation cannot be accounted for by residential segregation. William A. Sundstrom, "The Color Line: Racial Norms and Discrimination in Urban Labor Markets, 1910–1950," *Journal of Economic History*, 54 (June 1993), 283–97.

102. Greaves suggests a narrowing of opportunities for African Canadians in Nova Scotia in the early 20th century but implies that the population was largely rural and may not have experienced the same economic ups and downs in the 19th century; certainly the population remained fairly consistent in size. Greaves, *The Negro in Canada*, 44–60.

# Studies in Political Economy

A SOCIALIST REVIEW



**NOT FOR FAT CATS**  
*(They just can't digest it.)*

A Canadian scholarly journal providing detailed analysis of current issues and informed commentary on topics in Canadian and international political economy

## In Our Current Issue

Cannibalistic Capitalism; Fortress North America; Poverty and Media;  
Evangelical Christianity and Welfare; Life-Value of Labour;  
2010 Vancouver Olympics; Is Socialism an Alternative?

## In Upcoming Issues

Critical Development; Culture and Political Economy;  
Energy and the Environment

## Subscription Information

**Subscriptions to *SPE*:** All prices in CDN\$. Foreign subscribers pay in US\$.

**1 Year** (2 issues)

**Institutional** Print & Online **\$190.00** Online only **\$180.00** Print only **\$180.00**

**Individual** Print & Online **\$50.00**

**Student/Senior/Underemployed** Print & Online **\$25.00**

**2 Years** (4 issues)

**Individual** Print & Online **\$90.00**

**Sustaining** Print & Online **\$125.00**

**Student/Senior/Underemployed** Print & Online **\$40.00**

*For orders shipped outside Canada, please pay full amount in US funds.*

**Studies in Political Economy: A Socialist Review**  
Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa Ontario K1S 5B6 Canada