

# The Myth of Mary Mink Representation of Black Women in Toronto in the Nineteenth Century

Guylaine Petrin

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Article abstract

The tale of Mary Mink, the Black millionaire's daughter sold into Southern slavery by her white husband and rescued, with great difficulty by her father, is one of the best-known tales of nineteenth-century Toronto. It appeared in contemporary newspapers, has been endlessly retold in scholarly and popular historical publications, and provided some of the subject matter for a made-for-TV movie—even though it is a complete hoax. The origins of the “Minnie” Mink legend are explored in order to understand the context that allowed this blatant falsehood to flourish, and suggest some reasons for its continued acceptance.

# The Myth of Mary Mink

## Representation of Black Women in Toronto in the Nineteenth Century

by Guylaine Petrin

The tale of Mary Mink, the Black millionaire's daughter sold into Southern slavery by her white husband and rescued, with great difficulty by her father, is one of the best-known tales of nineteenth-century Toronto. It appeared in contemporary newspapers, has been endlessly retold in scholarly and popular historical publications, and provided some of the subject matter for a made-for-TV movie—even though it is a complete hoax.

Since there are so few true stories about real historical Black women in Toronto, it is important to expose the false ones. While Mary Mink and her father James Mink, a successful livery-stable owner, both really existed, the myth about her sale into bondage was fabricated out of whole cloth by a Scottish poet

and novelist whose work was serialized in Edinburgh's popular and deeply conservative *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1860. Reprinted in 1880 in a Chicago newspaper, this fiction was repeated by multiple newspapers across North America until the tale of the unfortunate "Minnie" Mink became accepted as historical fact.

The origins of the "Minnie" Mink legend are explored in order to understand the context that allowed this blatant falsehood to flourish, and suggest some reasons for its continued acceptance. Stereotypical representation of Black women, especially the "Mammy" and the "Tragic Mulatto" stereotypes, were common in both Canada and the United States, and continued in popularity until very recently.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sterling A. Brown, "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors," *Journal of Negro Education* 2, no. 2 (1933): 179-203, accessed 21 September 2013, < <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2292236> >. Profes-

## *Abstract*

*The tale of Mary Mink, the Black millionaire's daughter sold into Southern slavery by her white husband and rescued, with great difficulty by her father, is one of the best-known tales of nineteenth-century Toronto. It appeared in contemporary newspapers, has been endlessly retold in scholarly and popular historical publications, and provided some of the subject matter for a made-for-TV movie—even though it is a complete hoax. The origins of the “Minnie” Mink legend are explored in order to understand the context that allowed this blatant falsehood to flourish, and suggest some reasons for its continued acceptance.*

**Résumé:** *L'histoire de Mary Mink – fille d'un millionnaire afro-canadien, vendue en esclavage dans le Sud des États-Unis par son mari blanc, et finalement sauvée par son père – est une des histoires les plus connues du XIXe siècle à Toronto. Même s'il s'agit d'un canular, cette histoire fait la une des journaux contemporains, elle est racontée maintes fois dans des articles de presse ainsi que des publications académiques et elle est source d'inspiration pour un film. Nous proposons d'explorer les origines de la légende de «Minnie» Mink afin de comprendre le contexte qui a permis à cette tromperie de se répandre, et nous avançons quelques raisons pour lesquelles elle continue à se propager.*

*Captive Heart: the James Mink Story*, a movie made in Ontario in 1995, was broadcast in the United States and Canada in April 1996.<sup>2</sup> While it purports to describe the life of the real James Mink of Toronto, and to be based on “historical records,” the movie is mostly a work of fiction. At its heart is James Mink’s desire to see his mixed-race daughter marry a

white husband. She does, and this white husband then sells his young bride into Southern bondage, where she suffers at the hands of a lascivious slave owner.<sup>3</sup> Her distressed father then travels to the Southern States, disguised as a slave, with his white wife disguised as his owner, in order to rescue his daughter.

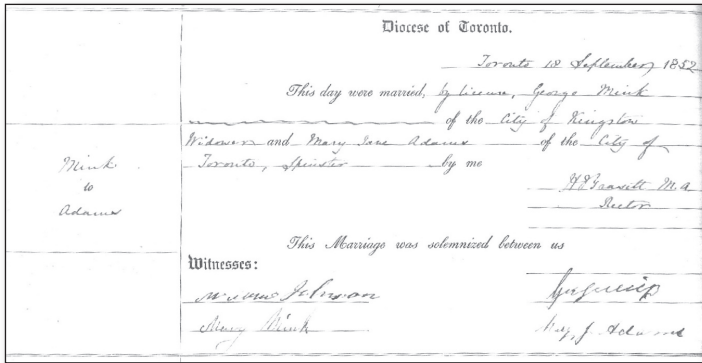
The movie’s account of Mary’s mar-

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sor Brown was the first to catalogue the stereotypes of Blacks in fiction: while the Contented Slave, the Wretched Freeman, and the Comical Negro, were prominent pro-slavery stereotypes, the Tragic Mulatto was an anti-slavery stereotype since it showcased the immorality of slave owners having sex with their slave concubines; Deborah Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 27-61. The first chapter of this book discusses in detail the origins in antebellum slavery of the female stereotypes of Jezebel and Mammy. Prior to her work, scant attention had been paid to female slaves; Jessica Millward, “More History than Myth: African American Women’s History since the Publication of *Ar’n’t I a Woman?*” *Journal of Women’s History* 19:2 (2007), 161-67, doi:10.1353/jowh.2007.0042. In this recent article, the author states that the pervasive stereotypes of the “Mammy” and the “Jezebel” are still relevant for historical research in the twenty-first century.

<sup>2</sup> *Captive Heart: The James Mink Story*, directed by Bruce Pittman (1996; Hallmark Entertainment), broadcast on CBS and CanWest Global, 14 April 1996. The movie used to be available on YouTube but was deleted. It is aired periodically on the Hallmark channel, and other networks; Larry Hannant, “The Arrow / *Captive Heart: the James Mink Story* / Lyddie / Margaret’s Museum / The War between Us,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 78:4 (1997), 695-708.

<sup>3</sup> *Wikipedia*, q.v. “James Mink,” last modified 14 March 2013, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James>



*Image from the original parish register of St. James Anglican Cathedral in Toronto, Mary Mink signed her name, alongside with her future husband. Courtesy of the St. James Cathedral and its Archivist, Nancy Mallett.*

There was one big problem with this sad tale, it was completely untrue. Mary Mink was married in 1852 to a Black man named William Johnson,

and she lived in Toronto with her family until they moved to Milwaukee in 1868, where she died in 1876 surrounded by friends and family. So where did this alternative story of her sale into bondage come from? And why did so many intelligent readers of contemporary newspapers believe it rather than the real story?

riage to a white man was based in part on a newspaper story first published in Chicago in 1880. While it appeared in many different versions across North America, the 1880 newspaper article emphasized James Mink's wealth and his daughter's fall from grace:

A sad life-history terminated at Chicago a few days ago when a colored woman named Mrs. Minnie Andrews died in a miserable hovel. She was the daughter of James Mink of Toronto, who about the year 1859, owned all the stage lines in Canada, and was one of the wealthiest men in the Dominion. His daughter was nearly white and very handsome. He had an absorbing desire to have her marry well, and offered \$30,000 to any respectable and well-to-do white man who would take her for his wife. A white man named James Andrews accepted the offer, married the girl and got his \$30,000 and they set out for the South. At Richmond, Va. Andrews sold his wife into slavery. At the first opportunity she escaped and made her way back to her father. But her life was blighted and she became reckless and entered upon a dissolute course, which ended as above stated.<sup>4</sup>

The answer to this conundrum lies in stereotypes regarding race prevalent in Canada and the United States that were rooted in slavery, but that persisted long after the Civil War. It is important to understand the historical context in which the Mink family story was framed. In the middle of the nineteenth-century, Toronto had the largest African-Canadian population of any town or city in Canada West. Black Torontonians intersected with the city's white community in employment situations, at school, and sometimes in church, for although this was not the case elsewhere in Canada, Toronto's schools and churches were never segregated. Yet, however successful and prosperous, African-Canadians

Mink. A google search of "James Mink" Toronto reveals that, as of July 2013, the information readily available on the web about Mr. Mink is based on the film *Captive Heart*.

<sup>4</sup> "Current notes," *Boston Journal*, 3 July 1880.

still inhabited a “world within a world” as was the case in American cities. Racism and discrimination based on colour prejudice did not stop at the US border.<sup>5</sup> The majority of Toronto’s Black residents were formerly enslaved African-Americans who had fled the United States in search of freedom. There were also a few free Black families who had migrated to the city to escape the rampant racial discrimination prevalent even in the Northern States. A few of Toronto’s best-known African-Canadian residents, however, were descendants of slaves once owned in Upper Canada by Native, French or English slaveholders. This was the case with the Minks. James Mink was the son of a slave brought to Kingston by his United Empire Loyalist owners, the Herkimers. At the end of the American Revolution, some slaves who had escaped from American Patriots were considered free and treated as Loyalists, but slaves belonging to Loyalist settlers, including the Herkimers, remained in slavery.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the British Imperial Act of 1790, to encourage immigration to British North America, allowed Americans to carry with them into British colonies their

movable property and chattel, including slaves.<sup>7</sup> In 1793, Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe introduced “An Act to prevent the further introduction of Slaves and to limit the term of contracts for servitude within this Province.”<sup>8</sup> This Act did not free one slave in Upper Canada, and it had no impact on the status of James Mink’s father, who continued into bondage until the death of his nominal owner Mary Herkimer in 1805.<sup>9</sup>

By mid-century, some of Toronto’s long-time Black residents had done well for themselves, and by then, many white residents of Canada thought of slavery as an American problem. The Minks had interests in several businesses, worked regularly for the government, and were respected citizens whose activities received occasional notice in the newspapers. Unlike the lonely Black man portrayed in the 1995 movie, James Mink was part of a very active Black community, for example he was involved in the annual celebration for Emancipation Day in Toronto. Furthermore, his daughter Mary Mink was by all accounts a virtuous young Black woman of respectable family and fine education. In short, she did not fit the com-

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel G. Hill, “The Blacks in Toronto,” in *Gathering Place: Peoples and Neighbourhoods of Toronto, 1834-1945*, ed. Robert F. Harney (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1985), 75-107; Karolyn Smardz Frost, *I’ve Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2007), 279-309. I also wish to acknowledge the generous help of Dr. Smardz Frost in understanding the place of the Mink family in nineteenth-century Toronto.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Mackey, *Done with Slavery: the Black Fact in Montreal* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2010), 381-407. In an appendix titled “Spoils of War” Mackey describes the various ways settlers of African descent were treated at the end of the American Revolution.

<sup>7</sup> Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: a History* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 1971), 24-60.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>9</sup> Rick Neilson, “George Mink: a Black businessman in Early Kingston,” *Historic Kingston*, 46 (1998), 111-29; Rick Neilson, e-mail message to author, 22 February 2013. In addition I wish to thank Rick Neilson who generously shared his notes on the Mink family’s origins and life in Kingston.

monly salacious Victorian stereotypes regarding Black women that helped buttress the slave system in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Mary Mink's supposed downfall, as described in the newspaper story cited above, is quite representative of the stereotypical images of women of African descent found in newspapers in North America during the Reconstruction period.

The known facts in the life of Mary's father were not hard to come by. Generally, men are much easier to research than women.<sup>11</sup> They appear in city directories, they buy land, and they pay taxes. In addition, James Mink was a prominent businessman who advertised his business in various publications, and he obtained transportation contracts with both the provincial government and the City of Toronto. His hotel, the Mansion House Hotel, located on Adelaide Street, was also used as a polling place during elections. His livery stable was equally famous.<sup>12</sup> James Mink was buried in non-denominational Toronto Necropolis cemetery and, unusually for one of the city's Black citizens, his death at the age of 70 years and 10 months was announced in the *Globe* newspaper of Monday, 14 September 1868.

Mary Mink was much harder to lo-

cate in the historical record. The 1851 census for the City of Toronto, the first to provide names and details for each member of a household, has not survived. The 1842 census names only the householder, and by the time the 1861 census was taken, Mary was married and away from home. The wedding record of the daughter of a prominent Toronto businessman might be expected to furnish solid information. In fact, there are at least three records of the marriage of Mary Mink, daughter of James Mink, to a William Johnson. The marriage was announced in Methodist newspaper the *Christian Guardian* of 13 October 1852 and the *Globe* on 14 October 1852. In addition, the wedding was recorded in the Home District Marriage Register. On 5 October 1852, Mary Mink was married in Toronto, by Reverend Henry Wilkinson, minister of the Richmond Street Methodist Church. The two witnesses were James Waddel, an African-American immigrant to the city and a successful businessman in his own right, and Mary's own father James Mink.<sup>13</sup>

One month before their wedding in October 1852, Mary Mink and her future husband had acted as witnesses to the wedding of her uncle George Mink and his bride Mary Jane Adams at St.

<sup>10</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*, 28-29.

<sup>11</sup> Neilson, "George Mink."

<sup>12</sup> Hill, *Gathering Place*, 82-83. This article cites multiple primary sources such as tax records, city council minutes and newspapers accounts which attests to Mink's prominence in Toronto in the 1840s and 1850s; Daniel G. Hill, *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (Agincourt, Ont.: Book Society of Canada, 1981). This popular book has a shorter but better-known version of the story of Mary Mink.

<sup>13</sup> Marriage of William Johnson and Mary Mink, Toronto, 5 October 1852, Registrations for Home District, District Marriage Registers 1780-1858, RG 80-27, Microfilm MS 248 reel 2, Archives of Ontario.



James Cathedral. The signatures of Mary Mink and William Johnson can be seen in the parish register of St. James.<sup>14</sup> A little delving into the official records reveals that William Johnson, born in Tennessee, his wife “Mrs. Johnson,” i.e. Mary Mink, born in Kingston and their son William Johnson were living on Teraulay Street in 1861. All three appear in the census that year. All were literate and self-identified as “colored.”<sup>15</sup> In addition, a second son named John James Johnson had died in 1855; he was buried in the Necropolis cemetery in the same plot where his grandfather, James Mink, would eventually be laid to rest.<sup>16</sup> Documentary evidence thus shows that the Johnson couple lived in Toronto, and that two sons were born to them in Toronto: one of whom died, while the second was still alive in 1861.

So why did some scholars state that

Mary Mink had married a white man named James Andrews? The answer lies in the *Freedom Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* (1981) written by the late Dr. Daniel G. Hill. This is what the book says of the purported marriage:

Mink was considered eccentric. He offered \$10,000 for a ‘...respectable white husband...’ for his daughter Minnie. The prize tempted James Andrews, a cabman from Yorkshire, and he married Minnie, took her to the U.S.A. for a ‘honeymoon’ and promptly sold her into slavery. Months later Mink discovered his daughter’s plight and rescued her.”<sup>17</sup>

Hill gave as his sources the Abbott Papers, which are now at the Toronto Reference Library but which were still in private hands when he wrote his book.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott was the first Canadian-born Black physician, and a noted figure in Toronto as his very well-off father, Wilson Ruffin

<sup>14</sup> Marriage of George Mink and Mary Jane Adams, Toronto, 8 September 1852, Marriage Register of St. James Anglican Cathedral, St James Cathedral Archives, Toronto.

<sup>15</sup> 1861 Census of Ontario, Toronto, St. John’s Ward, District 3, page 681, LAC microfilm C-1106, Archives of Ontario. William Johnson, born in Tennessee, age 35, Mrs. Johnson, born in Kingston, age 25 and Wm. Johnson, age 5 born in Upper Canada are living in a two-storey frame house on Terauley (Bay) St. With them is a John Clancey, born in Ireland, age 32, perhaps an employee of the livery stable on Terauley. The census form was filled out by William Johnson.

<sup>16</sup> Burial of John Johnston, 27 March 1855, Necropolis Cemetery Burial register 1849-1857, Ontario, Toronto Trust Cemeteries 1826-1935, Familysearch.org; Sue Henderson, e-mail message to author, 20 March 2013. The burial register does not indicate the plot number but Sue Henderson, genealogy researcher at the Mount Pleasant Cemeteries Group was able to verify that James Mink bought plot O7 in 1855 for the burial of John James Johnson, and that he was later buried in the same plot. No other family members were buried with them, and plot O7 was later sold when no family members claimed it.

<sup>17</sup> Hill, *Freedom-Seekers*, 208.

<sup>18</sup> Scrapbooks, *Abbott Collection*, S 90, Baldwin Room, Toronto Reference Library. This collection was gifted to the Toronto library in 1963 by Grace Abbott Hubbard. More documents in Fonds S 257 were donated by Abbott descendants in 1993. This is a primary collection of documents for early Toronto which includes both family papers and articles cut out of old newspapers. Because the clippings are removed from their original setting, these articles lack context. Nowadays, many of these articles can be searched and found online in digitized version of the newspapers, which helps give them context such as their date of publication, and the type of newspapers and the location where the articles were published. This type of research was less available to earlier researchers even in the 1990s.

Abbott, had been before him. Wilson Ruffin Abbott had learned first-hand the dangers of being a successful Black man in a white world, as he had been forced to flee with his family from Mobile, Alabama, before coming to Toronto.<sup>19</sup> Dr. Abbott, a contemporary of Mary Mink, collected and clipped numerous newspaper articles about Black Toronto and various topics related to his family. He assembled all kinds of articles, and he often wrote letters to newspapers to correct stories printed in the local press about African-Canadians. Unfortunately many of his clippings are not dated. The direct quotations in the passage about James Mink in *Freedom Seekers* seem to come from two different articles about the Mink family. The first quotation was most likely from an article titled, “The Exiled Negroes in Canada—Inquiry into Their Condition—Are They Improving or the Contrary?” published in the *New York Tribune* on 24 October 1857, and reproduced in other anti-slavery papers. Presenting a positive view of the life led by formerly enslaved African-Americans living in Toronto, the journalist provided some fascinating details about various individuals, including James Mink him-

self.<sup>20</sup> In the original *New York Tribune* article, James Mink was not named, but described: “The livery stable keeper is a fine example, physically of the pure black man; in countenance good-humored, open, and sensible, stout in figure and inclined to obesity, in manner equally free from rudeness and servility”<sup>21</sup>

This article was published and circulated in the 1850s at a time when the conditions of Black communities in Canada were widely discussed in both the Abolitionist and pro-slavery press. It was not uncommon for Southern slave holders to propagate myths about the terrible conditions for Blacks in Canada. When Benjamin Drew interviewed former slaves living in Canada in 1854, he was told by Dan Josiah Lockhart:

I was told before I left Virginia,—have heard it as common talk, that the wild geese were so numerous in Canada, and so bad, that they would scratch a man’s eyes out; that corn wouldn’t grow there, nor any thing else but *rice*; that every thing they had there was imported.<sup>22</sup>

The second clipping which was the source of the direct quotation about a “respectable white man” and the Yorkshire cabman named James Andrews was prob-

<sup>19</sup> M. Dalcyce Newby, *Anderson Ruffin Abbott: First Afro-Canadian Doctor* (Markham, Ont.: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Hill, *Gathering Place*, 83, 104n25. Dr. Hill quotes the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* of 1 April 1858, but the article describing Mink and Abbott was first published in the *New York Tribune*, 24 October 1857, and then repeated in other anti-slavery papers, such as *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, 13 November 1857. In the article, the reporter estimated James Mink’s fortune at between \$10,000 and \$30,000, mostly held in real estate. Mink was therefore a far cry from a millionaire, but his fortune still represented a significant achievement for a man who started with nothing, and it made him a source of envy.

<sup>21</sup> *New York Tribune*, 24 October 1857.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee: Or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada, Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada* (Boston: J.P. Jewett, 1856), 50.





*Booth & Son: north-east corner of Adelaide and Victoria streets in 1856. This is the street that the Mansion House Livery Stable was on, next to Booth & Son. Courtesy of City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1498, Item 6.*

ably one of the many articles published in 1880 announcing the sad end of Minnie Mink in Chicago. The original story titled “Sold in Marriage, Sold into Slavery, and Dying a pauper” was first published in the *Chicago Times* on 30 June 1880. The harrowing tale of the daughter of Toronto’s Black millionaire innkeeper, sold into slavery, was reproduced, sometimes with alterations, sometimes *verbatim*, in papers across North America, including in Toronto. On 2 July 1880, the *Toronto Mail* published its own version of the “Minnie” Mink saga, complete with “corrections” and considerable embellishments under the title “An Old Story Revived.” The *Mail*

article was reproduced in its turn in Canada, for example in the *London Advertiser* on 3 July 1880, and that same month in the *Kingston British Whig*.<sup>23</sup>

There were numerous problems with the accuracy of these articles. They described with unseemly glee the death in poverty of the daughter of millionaire James Mink of Toronto. She was identified under the alias “Nellie Jones.” Many of the details of Mary’s life and marriage were wholesale inventions. Mary Mink, alias “Minnie” Mink, or “Nellie Jones,” was supposed to have married James Andrews in Toronto in 1858; there is not a shred of evidence of such a marriage.

<sup>23</sup> Although, there is a reference that the article was published in the *Kingston Whig* (see note below) the article could not be found in the surviving copies of the paper currently available.

The purported dowry, either \$10,000 or \$20,000 or even \$30,000 depending on the version was excessive, and out of scale with James Mink's fortune.

According to the *Toronto Mail*, "At the time THE SINGULAR CIRCUMSTANCES of the marriage formed the theme of considerable comment, in the current public prints." [Capitals were used in the original article] In fact, there were no accounts in the 1850s about the marriage of Mary Mink to a "James Andrews" nor was there any published report of her subsequent abduction and enslavement. If the daughter of James Mink had really been sold into slavery, surely the *Toronto* press would have taken notice. Many cities, including Toronto, had more than one newspaper, and these tended to fall on opposite sides of the political spectrum, or to take entirely different views of public issues. So if one paper played down some issue, another paper was sure to play it up; and if one paper published a false story, a competing newspaper would gleefully publish a rebuttal.

The *Chicago Times'* opposing newspaper in 1880 was the *Chicago Tribune*. On 1 July 1880, a day after the *Times* published the sensationalized version of "Minnie" Mink's supposed sale into slavery, a rebuttal was printed in the *Chicago Tribune*. This rebuttal itself is an interesting mixture of fact and fiction. It makes clear that the very "commonplace colored woman of questionable repute, going by the name of Nellie Jones," who had died in a hovel in Chicago two weeks previously, had nothing in common with the respectable Mrs. Mary Johnson, née Mink.

Of Mary Mink, the *Tribune* said: "At the time of her death, [four years previously] she was a noble-looking lady, much loved by her friends, and known to be a church-member of very high standing." While the *Tribune* article confirmed that Mary Mink married William Johnson in 1852, and had a son still living and working for the North Western Railway, it also stated that James Andrews had been her first husband, and William Johnson her second. Other details were simply ludicrous. The dowry, for instance, was not \$10,000, \$20,000 or \$30,000, but the bride and groom's weight in silver. Quite possibly, part of the article was not meant to be taken seriously.

Mary's marriage to William Johnson was a matter of public record. She was married under the name Mink, by her own minister. Marriage breakdowns, divorce, annulments, death are all events that generally create a paper trail, and nothing has been found to corroborate the claim that Mary Mink was married to James Andrews before she married William Johnson in 1852.

Astonishingly, even though the family of William and Mary Johnson was known in Chicago, the rumor of her abduction and sale into slavery continued to be repeated in the local press. The original story ran and ran, far and wide, but the rebuttal by the *Chicago Tribune* was not reproduced in any other newspaper. The press continued to claim that Mary Mink was the deceased pauper known as Nellie Jones.

But what about in Toronto, the Minks' home town—had any newspaper

there published a rebuttal of the *Chicago Times* lurid tale? On the same day that the *Toronto Mail* had published its version, the *Evening Telegram* printed this brief item on the bottom of the last page:

The *Mail* this morning gives its readers a sensational story from a Chicago paper concerning the family of a respectable coloured man Mr. James Mink, who will be well known to old residents as the keeper of the Mansion House livery stables, where the present Post Office now stands at the head of Toronto street, and the owner of several stage lines running out of the city. The story published recites what purports to be the death of his daughter, "Minnie" Mink, in Chicago in a state of destitution. Mr. Mink's daughter was named Mary Mink, and she was married in 1854 [sic 1852] to Mr Johnson, an employee of Mink's, and resided here for many years, living on Terauley street near Queen. Mr and Mrs Johnson afterwards went to Niagara Falls, he being employed at the Cataract House. Johnson and his wife then went to Milwaukee, Wis. And he was head waiter at Plankinton House for five years. Some years ago, Johnson secured a position as Steward of an Albany N.Y. Club, where he is now located. His wife died four years ago in Milwaukee, and is buried there.

The Chicago story is therefore a huge myth and a gross libel on the Mink family. Miss Mink received an excellent education, and was most accomplished, and her father was a man respected by every Torontonians.<sup>24</sup>

All the information in this rebuttal can be verified. For example, William Johnson was indeed a waiter in Niagara Falls, and later worked at the Plankinton House Hotel in Milwaukee, where he was listed in various city directories.<sup>25</sup>

Another rebuttal was printed in the *British Whig* in Kingston on 31 July 1880.<sup>26</sup> The *Toronto Mail* article had been reprinted in Kingston and some people there who knew the Mink family objected to the slanderous article. "In short, Minnie Mink did not marry one Andrews, she was not sold into slavery, she did not lead a loose life, neither did she die the other day in Chicago."

It is significant that wherever the family of James Mink was actually known, in Chicago, Kingston and Toronto, someone did try to debunk the story. Unfortunately, while the original fiction, masquerading as a news report from Chi-

<sup>24</sup> *Toronto Evening Telegram*, 2 July 1880. The article is at the bottom of page 4, in very small type. It was probably a last-minute addition.

<sup>25</sup> 1860 U.S. Federal Census population schedules, New York, Niagara, Town of Niagara, page 61, line 8, accessed 21 September 2013, <<http://www.fold3.com>>. William Johnson, age 35, born in TN, is listed as an hotel waiter with other hotel staff. His wife and child are not listed with him; 1870 U.S. Federal Census population schedules, Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Ward 4, page 75, lines 18-19, accessed September 21, 2013, <<http://familysearch.org>>. William Johnson age 13, and Mary Johnson, age 38, both born in Canada are listed next to Daniel Lincoln. For some reason, William Johnson Sr was absent on census day, but he does appear in Milwaukee City directories in 1869, 1870, 1871, 1873 and 1874. "Johnson, William (col'd) waiter, Plankinton House," 1870 *Milwaukee City Directory for 1870-1871* (Milwaukee: John, Thickens, 1870), 158, accessed September 21, 2013, <<http://www.fold3.com>>; "Johnson, William, waiter, Plankinton House, res. 181 ½ 5<sup>th</sup>," 1871 *Milwaukee City Directory for 1871-1872* (Milwaukee: John Thickens, 1871), 164, accessed September 21, 2013, <<http://www.fold3.com>>.

<sup>26</sup> Rick Neilson, e-mail message to author, 1 August 2013.

ago, received great play all across North America, the rebuttals, when they appeared, were usually not given any prominence, and none was reproduced.<sup>27</sup>

All the articles at the time agreed on one thing: the tale of “Minnie” Mink sold into slavery was already an old one, and well-known. It thus seems that the story circulated for some years before it was revived in 1880. Writer Agnes Chamberlin, daughter of the writer Susanna Moodie, lived in the heart of Toronto’s Black neighbourhood in the 1850s and later recalled that the story of Mary Mink was common gossip. Speaking about “The Colored Citizens of Toronto” to the Women’s Canadian Historical Society of Toronto in 1910, she stated:

The gossip said (for this I have no personal knowledge) that Mink had said he would give his daughter \$5,000 if she married a white *man* and \$10,000 if she married a white *gentleman*. The poor girl did neither. She married a man of colour, but not very pronounced colour. George Mink [sic] was furious, refusing to give her anything; whereupon the husband, who had probably married her for her money, took her South and sold her. Poor old Mink was broken-hearted. He dare not go to the States to buy her back,

as he was a runaway slave himself, but he sent someone who bought her back for \$3,000.<sup>28</sup>

Because Agnes Chamberlin spoke so long after the event, it is difficult to know how much she drew from local gossip and how much from published newspaper accounts, but her version is significantly different from the 1880 Chicago tale. These differences suggest that the gossip about Mary Mink probably circulated widely, the details changing with every telling. It is also telling that she described Mink as a runaway from American slavery, and not as an African-Canadian.

In 1889, Toronto lawyer James Cleland Hamilton, an amateur anthropologist with a keen interest in Black Canadian history broached the topic of Mary Mink in a speech to the Society for the Advancement of Science.<sup>29</sup> The published abstract of his lecture on “The African in Canada” reported him as saying: “Professor Aytoun’s story of Haman S. Walker, as related in “Blackwood”... was referred to. ...he had found [it] to be entirely untrue. The professor was the victim of a cruel hoax. The young woman referred to married a colored man and removed to Milwaukee.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Menahem Blondheim, *News over the Wires: The Telegraph and the Flow of Public Information in America, 1844-1897* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). The same “news” was available in big cities like Chicago as well as the smallest town on the telegraph line.

<sup>28</sup> Agnes Dunbar Chamberlin, “The Colored Citizens of Toronto,” *Transactions of the Women’s Canadian Historical Society of Toronto*, no. 8 (1914): 10-11, accessed September 21, 2013, <<http://archive.org/stream/transactionofwom00wome>>.

<sup>29</sup> James Cleland Hamilton (1836-1907) was a Toronto lawyer who wrote on a variety of subject including slavery in Canada and First Nations. He also collected many stories and legends. Amongst many other works, he wrote “John Brown in Canada,” published in *The Canadian Magazine* in December 1894, and reprinted as monograph available on <<http://archive.org>>.

<sup>30</sup> James Cleland Hamilton, “The African in Canada,” *Proceedings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science*, 38 (1889), 368, accessed 21 September 2013, <[https://archive.org/stream/cihm\\_05348](https://archive.org/stream/cihm_05348)>. I wish to thank Karolyn Smardz Frost for sending me this article.



Hamilton did investigate the infamous story of Mink's daughter. He not only found it untrue, he traced the story to its source: the serialized novel *Norman Sinclair* published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1860.<sup>31</sup> The novel by Scottish attorney, author and poet William Edmondstone Aytoun, seems to contain the first detailed, published version of the story of "Minnie" Mink sold into slavery.<sup>32</sup>

A chapter of the book *Norman Sinclair* called "The Smartest Man in Creation" recounts the adventure of a Yankee-born Southern slave trader named Haman S. Walker, who travels to Toronto disguised as a Methodist abolitionist and tricks a Black livery-stable owner, named "Daddy Bungo." The hero of Aytoun's tale is actually the slave trader, and the livery-stable owner and his daughter, "Indolence Bungo," are his unwitting victims. Aytoun gave the livery-stable owner a fictitious name, but there was only one well-known Black livery-stable owner in Toronto at the time, and it was obvious, at least to Torontonians, that "Daddy Bungo" was a stand-in for James Mink.

As far as one can ascertain, Aytoun never visited Toronto. What then was the basis for his story? Aytoun was probably aware of the highly complimentary article published in the *New York Tribune* of 24 October 1857, containing a profile of the successful livery-stable owner and

other members of Toronto's black community. He might also have read another shorter article published in the *Tribune* in 1853, this one copied from the *Hamilton Spectator* of 19 March 1853:

More Kidnapping.—The recent Harvey case which created no little excitement in this city some weeks since, has been followed up by one of even greater atrocity in Toronto. It appears, as we gather the particulars from our Toronto exchanges, that a dashing young negro from the United States came over to Toronto and married the daughter of a respectable colored citizen, but receiving no money with her as he expected, went off to the Southern States and there sold his wife into slavery. The villain's pretext was that he had rich relations in the South, and the unsuspecting wife thus permitted herself to be inveigled into the kidnapper's snare and became the dupe of his treachery. The father of the young woman is now left to find his daughter, and probably will have to purchase her in the slave market of the South. When such acts are perpetrated by colored people themselves, we cease to wonder at Mr Harvey Smith attempting to make money by an operation in which the negro is as expert as the white man.

The article in the *Hamilton Spectator*, written at a time when a scion of a prominent white family of Hamilton was accused of selling two Black youths into slavery, and meant to justify Smith's conduct, was reproduced in pro-slavery papers in the South. Though the *Spectator* claimed to have received the story from

<sup>31</sup> W.E. Aytoun, *Norman Sinclair* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1861) The book was published by W. Blackwood & Sons in three volumes, but prior to its publication, it was serialized from January to August 1860 in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, where Aytoun was a frequent contributor and editor.

<sup>32</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Aytoun, William Edmondstone"; Ian Campbell "W.E. Aytoun and *Norman Sinclair*," *Scottish Literary Journal*, 18:1 (1991), 46-58.

Toronto papers, no mention of it can be found in any surviving Toronto papers of the day.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, since it names no names, it is impossible to verify whether the story refers to the Mink family. Southern papers were generally pleased to reprint it, but the story was met with incredulity by at least one Southern editor. In printing the item in his paper on 28 March 1853, the editor of the *Richmond Daily Dispatch* added the line “This is a very doubtful story, but one that will be quite alarming to the abolitionists.”

Interestingly, the *Hamilton Spectator*'s unsubstantiated story was repeated and expanded in the generally pro-Abolition *New York Tribune* of 22 March 1853. From the *Tribune* the story was picked up by the pro-Abolition *Pennsylvania Freeman* on 7 April 1853, with the added editorial comment:

How true it is, as Fred. Douglass once said, that negroes prove their kindred to the whites by their crimes and vices as well as their virtues! Such an outrage, fiendish as it seems, is a very Christian and humane act according to our pious defenders and apologists for slavery as “better than freedom for the blacks” and as the “grand agent of God's Providence for their civilization and conver-

sion to Christianity.”

In this way, a dubious story originating in Hamilton, about a Black man who sold his wife into bondage, was reproduced in pro-slavery papers, as well as in Abolitionist one, offering both sides a pretext to articulate their position on slavery. It was a good story and nobody let the facts get in the way of a good story. It was not unusual for articles published in anti-slavery papers to be read and influence the way pro-slavery articles were written both in newspapers and in novels. Similarly, it would make sense for Aytoun to use articles published in anti-slavery papers to invent a pro-slavery narrative.<sup>34</sup>

The publication of such a story in 1860 was not a neutral event. Newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic were full of articles and editorials on the subject of the South's “peculiar institution,” loudly pro or stoutly con. In the lead-up to the Civil War, both the Southern and Northern States were anxious to convince people in England and her colonies of the justice of their respective causes. These articles, books, and plays were weapons in a war of words.

*Blackwood's* was a very conservative

<sup>33</sup> The *Hamilton Spectator* did not make it clear where the story came from, so the *Globe*, the *Patriot*, the *British Colonist*, the *Toronto Examiner*, the *North American Weekly*, *Mackenzie's Weekly Messenger*, and the *Hamilton Gazette* were searched for the period of February to April 1853. While many articles relating to the Harvey Smith case were found, none of the papers searched mentioned the supposedly sensational case of the Toronto woman sold by her husband. The *Spectator* story was reprinted in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 24 March 1853; the *Utica Daily Gazette*, 26 March 1853; *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, 28 March 1853; the *Massachusetts Spy*, 20 March 1853; *Plain Dealer (Ohio)*, 31 March 1853; *Nashville Union*, 1 April 1853. Many papers like the *Plain Dealer* left out all mentions of the Harvey Smith case in their copy.

<sup>34</sup> Calvin Schermerhorn, “Arguing Slavery's Narrative: Southern Regionalists, Ex-Slave Autobiographers, and the Contested Literary Representations of the Peculiar Institution, 1824-1849,” *Journal of American Studies* 46:4 (2012), 1009-1033, doi:10.1017/S002187581100140X. Schermerhorn argues that both pro-slavery literature and anti-slavery literature, and especially slave narratives, were mutually influential while contradictory, leading to a type of hybrid narrative of Southern slavery.



journal, that tended to promote extreme Tory views, and its editorials tended to support the Southern states during the American Civil War.<sup>35</sup> But for the Mink family, what mattered was that *Blackwood's* was widely read—and believed—in Toronto. Aytoun's book may have slipped quickly into well-deserved obscurity, but his tale of "Daddy Bungo" the livery-stable owner of Toronto, lived on and readers in Toronto were likely to assume that the story was based on actual facts about James Mink.

The character of "Daddy Bungo," and his adventures in the novel *Norman Sinclair* is a classic stereotypical pro-slavery tale, with comical effect characteristic of the minstrel-show school of entertainment.<sup>36</sup> The comical effect is accentuated with the use of supposedly "negro dialect" and an overabundant use of offensive words such as "nigger," "coon," and "darkey." While the character of "Daddy Bungo" is representative of the "Comical Negro" described by Sterling and found in many minstrel shows, the character of "Indolence Bungo" is quite different from later portrayals.

In her 1985 book *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Deborah Gray White described how the pro-

slavery apologists created the myth of the "Mammy" to rebut "abolitionist charges of Southern degeneracy."<sup>37</sup> In a pro-slavery narrative, female slaves are shielded by the white patriarch, and encouraged to chastity. The "Mammy" is maternal, but most important she is asexual. Aytoun described "Indolence Bungo" to fit the "Mammy" stereotype: "She was fat as a porcupine, large lipped, well ballasted, and showed a figure-head like the Hot-tentot Venus. I guess she was as powerful a slut as ever tied a red handkerchief over wool."<sup>38</sup> While Haman courts and marries "Indolence," he is only concerned with her monetary value, and insists on her lack of beauty and sexual appeal. Like the stereotypical "Mammy," described by White in 1985, and also by poet and scholar bell hooks in her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), "Indolence Bungo" is "first and foremost asexual" with "bestial cow-like quality."<sup>39</sup>

Aytoun's "comical" tale created for the delectation of a Southern audience, was a direct counter to the original abolitionist newspaper articles that inspired it. Even though Aytoun's story was obviously a farce, the fact that it was based on a recognizable Toronto figure and that it appeared in a reputable literary magazine

<sup>35</sup> David Finkelstein, *Print Culture and the Blackwood Tradition, 1805-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Gilbert Bonifas "Le Fléau Yankee: les Enjeux de la Guerre de Secession dans Deux Revues Conservatrices Britanniques; *The Quarterly Review* et *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*," *Cynos* 16:1 (1999), 35-81, accessed 15 September 2013, <<http://revel.unice.fr.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/cynos/index.html?id=1600>>. While Finkelstein discusses the impact of *Blackwood's* on politics in general, Bonifas discusses specifically their editorial support of the Southern States during the Civil War.

<sup>36</sup> J. Stanley Lemons, "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920" *American Quarterly* 29:1 (1977), 102-116, accessed 23 November 2013, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712263>> .

<sup>37</sup> White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Aytoun, *Norman Sinclair*, 20 .

<sup>39</sup> bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), 84.

gave it a particular odor of truth. The story was accepted and repeated in Toronto and probably elsewhere as well, because it fit existing stereotypes that demeaned Blacks, particularly successful Black entrepreneurs such as James Mink, who challenged racial stereotypes at a particularly delicate time in North American history—the eve of the American Civil War. The tale itself proved popular and it was even reproduced as a standalone story in a Montreal literary magazine.<sup>40</sup>

While Aytoun's 1860 story represents a classic pro-slavery tale, its revival twenty years later in the *Chicago Times* is more representative of a post-Reconstruction stereotype, the "tragic mulatto," described so well by Sterling A. Brown in his 1933 publication "Negro Characters as Seen by White Authors." The "tragic mulatto," is always female, and her gender plays a crucial part in her degradation: "Half-white equals reason; half-black equals emotion. She too finds her ideal knight in a white man, and death comes again to the tragic octoroon who should never have been born."<sup>41</sup>

The emphasis in the 1880 version is much different than Aytoun's story. It has shifted away from the character of the white slave trader. In Aytoun's narrative, the white husband is a Yankee, while the

later Chicago story transforms the white husband into a nondescript English cabman. Aytoun's narrative includes a modest dowry of a span of horses, while in subsequent retelling the dowry grew to thousands of dollars. Instead, the story rests on the character of James Mink, described as a Black man who became immensely rich, and wished to "elevate" his daughter by having her marry a white man. Thus the daughter's later misfortune and downfall, are brought on by her father's hubris in trying to mix the races, and as a result, Mink loses everything for which he had worked. It is a cautionary tale about the danger of miscegenation, and a way to denigrate the success of a Black businessman. Similar slanderous tales were circulated about successful Black businessmen, including an oft-repeated tale about "Gentleman of Color" James Forten of Philadelphia in the 1830s, who was rumored to have bought a "whiter species" of husband for his daughter.<sup>42</sup>

While Aytoun's tale took pains to paint "Indolence Bungo" as utterly unattractive, in the 1880 tale, there is great emphasis on "Minnie's" or as she is named in the Chicago story, "Nellie's," beauty. She is described by some as a "mulatto" or a "quadroon", but with no reference to her ancestry.<sup>43</sup> These terms were not used

<sup>40</sup> *The True Witness and Catholic Chronicle*, 7 September 1860.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, "Negro Characters," 195.

<sup>42</sup> Julie Winch, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 261. Such tales were not innocent since they could be used to spark mob attack like they did in Philadelphia when a mob attacked James Forten's business.

<sup>43</sup> Kathy Davis, "Headnote to Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons" and Slavery's Pleasant Homes," *The Online Archive of Nineteenth-Century U.S. Women's Writings*, ed. Glynis Carr, posted Summer 1997, <<http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/gcarr/19cusww/lb/HNQSPH.html>>. The terms "mulatto" and "quadroon" were used by slave owners to classify slaves with various degrees of black and white ancestry. Scholars now describe these racial classifications as socially constructed, but they were often used historically to describe light skinned slaves intended for the "fancy girl" markets.

to describe her appearance so much as to underline her sexual desirability, and to make her appearance fit with the stereotype of the “Tragic Mulatto.” In the later tale, the responsibility for the tragic fate of “Minnie” Mink rests, not with the perfidious husband, but with the “Uppity” father and his too beautiful daughter.

This story is similar to thousands of others perpetuating the stereotypes of the degradation of African-Americans that could be found in even the liberal press in North America from the Reconstruction Era to the First World War, the period that Rayford Logan called the “Nadir of American race relations.”<sup>44</sup> Post-Civil War American racism easily crossed the Canadian border. “Canadian blacks, once individuals to many whites, now became the stock figure they had been in Southern mythology.”<sup>45</sup> Tales of the degradation of Black women were also common in Canadian newspapers of the period.

By the early 1880s, the *Toronto Evening Telegram* was the most widely read paper in Toronto, and its emphasis on local news makes it an important source for the history of the city. Even

though it was the *Telegram* that published a rebuttal of the *Mail's* Mary Mink story in 1880, its publisher John Ross Robertson could not resist including the story of James Mink's daughter in the first volume of his *Landmarks of Toronto* (1894).<sup>46</sup> He must have known it was not true, but it was simply too juicy to be omitted.<sup>47</sup>

Robertson was an antiquarian, a collector of historical documents and his version of the history of Toronto as told in the six volumes of his *Landmarks of Toronto* issued between 1894 and 1914 came to dominate the local historical narrative. His stories were read and used by later historians, and became the canon. For example, when W.H. Pearson published his *Reminiscences of Toronto* in 1914, he drew on his personal diaries, but he also included accounts taken straight from Robertson's *Landmarks*.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in *Toronto from Trading Post to Great City* (1934), Edwin Guillet cited Robertson liberally, including the story of James Mink.<sup>49</sup> Because most of the accounts published after 1894 were probably influenced by Robertson's article, it is difficult to rely on later account of the Minks.

<sup>44</sup> Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Collier, 1965).

<sup>45</sup> Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1971), 290.

<sup>46</sup> *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, s.v. “John Ross Robertson”, accessed 21 September 2013, <[http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/robertson\\_john\\_ross\\_14E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/robertson_john_ross_14E.html)>. “The weekly articles were republished at Robertson's expense in a massive six-volume series. *Robertson's Landmarks of Toronto* constitutes a detailed record of Toronto from 1792 to 1914, a “goldmine of information,” though the work contains many errors.

<sup>47</sup> John Ross Robertson, *Landmarks of Toronto*, vol.1 (Toronto: J. Ross Robertson, 1894), 50.

<sup>48</sup> W.H. Pearson, *Recollections and Records of Toronto of Old with References to Brantford, Kingston and other Canadian Towns* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1914), 63-64. Pearson was a clerk in the Toronto Post Office and he is usually a good witness for people he met and knew, but he also used other published and unpublished accounts to expand his story. For example, when he describes James Mink thus, “He did a large business and was reported as being well off,” he is speaking of a man he only knew by sight and by reputation at best

<sup>49</sup> Edwin C. Guillet, *Toronto from Trading Post to Great City* (Toronto: Ontario Publishing, 1934), 314..

The various descriptions of Mary Mink do not fit, and they seem to be based on stereotypical representations instead of direct observation. For example, Pearson in 1894 described Mary Mink as “very black though she had good features, was tall and quite dignified, and attracted considerable notice,” but the author of the previously cited *Toronto Mail* article in 1880 had described her quite differently: “Minnie was 22 years of age, a quadroon, possessed of fine scholastic attainments, and very pretty in feature and form.” The only person who stated that she actually saw the real Mary Mink, and that only once and many years previous is Agnes Chamberlin who stated in 1910: “his only and much-loved daughter was what was called ‘a yellow girl’; and yellow she was most decidedly, something the shade of yellow ochre. This was the only time I ever saw her in her father’s carriage, dressed most gorgeously, and she really was a very handsome woman.”<sup>50</sup> These descriptions tend to reveal more about the observers’ point of view, rather than about Mary Mink herself.

Almost 100 years after the death of James Mink, a young Ph.D. candidate at the University of Toronto named Daniel Hill read Guillet’s *Toronto from Trading Post to Great City* and discovered the

story of James Mink.<sup>51</sup> He included it in a footnote in his doctoral thesis “Negroes in Toronto: a Sociological Study of a Minority group,” in 1960 as well as in his seminal volume, *The Freedom-Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada* cited above.

In this way, a fictional story published in Edinburgh in 1860, was revived and re-targeted by an unscrupulous Chicago journalist in 1880, to then be enshrined in Toronto history by John Ross Robertson in 1894. Robertson’s article engendered Hill’s account, which in turn, was rediscovered in the 1990s, and as we have seen, formed the basis of a popular TV movie.<sup>52</sup>

The film not only brought this entirely false “James Mink Story” to a new and larger audience, it added embellishments. In earlier stories, Mary’s mother was absent, but in the movie she became an Irish woman who fled the potato famine. Most of the information available on the Web about the Mink family is actually based on this movie. Since then, the story of Mary Mink, the millionaire’s daughter sold into bondage has become a staple of Toronto history, including as a character in a popular detective novel.<sup>53</sup>

Why do these false portrayals of the Mink family endure in the face of denials and rebuttals? Probably, because the real

<sup>50</sup> Pearson, *Recollections and Records*, 64 ; Chamberlin, “Colored Citizens of Toronto,” 11.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel G. Hill, “Negroes in Toronto: a Sociological Study of a Minority group” (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1960), 29nn33-34. The story of Mink is mentioned in a footnote and it cites Guillet.

<sup>52</sup> Sid Adilman, “TV Drama Illuminates a Piece of Local History,” *Toronto Star*, 9 April 1996.

<sup>53</sup> Maureen Jennings, *A Journeyman to Grief* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007). The newest incarnation of the “Minnie Mink” story is in a popular historical novel featuring Detective Murdoch. In this version, Minnie does not get rescued and she comes back to exact a terrible vengeance on both her husband and father.

story of James Mink, a second-generation Canadian who was a successful businessman, and his accomplished and virtuous daughter did not fit existing stereotypes in the press and literature. The Mink family did not fit the usual narrative of the Underground Railroad either, but instead they were a reminder that slavery had existed in Upper Canada, and that Canadians of African descent were an integral part of Canadian history. While the novel *Norman Sinclair* and the later stories of “Nellie Jones” were created by unscrupulous writers, the stories were accepted and repeated by the reading public because they conformed to accepted stereotypical behaviours of African-Americans and African-Canadians. The various versions of the “Minnie Mink” tale serve to recast Canadian race relations in the past in a benevolent view, while hiding under-currents of anxiety about interracialism, and struggles against discrimination. While the later versions of the tale seem to celebrate the success of businessman James Mink, the story is presented in ways that undermine his personality and achievements. His rise is attributed to the positive Canadian context, while his downfall is brought on by his own paternalistic attitude and desire for advancement. Similarly, Mary Mink’s real life and struggles as a woman of African descent in nineteenth-century Toronto was erased and reconfigured to fit existing stereotypes, first the “Mammy” and

then later the “Tragic Mulatto” and she became exclusively a product of the white male gaze. At the same time, the reality of the African-Canadian community in Toronto in the 1850s was ignored, and in the later representations, especially the 1995 movie, James Mink and his daughter are presented as isolated anomalies in a Anglo-Saxon city, as opposed to active members of a vibrant community. All their lives were reshaped to fit the dominant narrative of the Underground Railroad, which cast Canada as the land of the free, while presenting slavery and racism as purely American institutions.

With the exception of Bristow, Brand, Carty, Cooper, Hamilton, and Shadd’s seminal book *“We’re rooted here and they can’t pull us up,”* published in 1994, there is a paucity of scholarly publications into Black women’s history in Ontario. Frost’s book *I’ve Got a Home in Glory Land*, published in 2007, did fill many gaps about the life and contribution of some of Toronto’s residents of African descent, especially Thornton and Lucy Blackburn, but there is certainly room for more research on the life of individual Black women in Toronto. Given the few examples available, it is important to challenge and expose the lies that underpin one of the few well-known stories about a Black woman in Toronto.<sup>54</sup> The tale of “Minnie” Mink was a hoax was written by a pro-slavery

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<sup>54</sup> Peggy Bristow et al., *“We’re rooted here and they can’t pull us up” Essays in African Canadian Women’s History* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1994). This ground breaking work is a good introduction to real stories of Black women in Canada.

writer and it was designed to mock free Blacks in Canada. This hoax evolved into an ever-changing story, reflecting the racial prejudices of the times and locations where it appeared. The story was acceptable and accepted because it fits in with known stereotypes of the benign treatment of African-Canadians compared to African-Americans.

Mary Mink, daughter, wife, mother and teacher deserves to be remem-

bered as a real person who faced real challenges, not least of which were the racial and gender stereotypes of her times, and not as a false object of either pity or malice. Similarly, James Mink, the successful businessman who aroused such envy and who was vilified by such slander during his life time should be remembered for his real accomplishments and not according to the narrative of his enemies.

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