



# Connecting *histories*

The Tomlinson Lake Hike to Freedom Trail pays tribute to the Underground Railway

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DALE DUNLOP

**M**any people have no idea that the Underground Railway that enslaved Americans used to escape to free states in the north and Canada had its northernmost terminus in New Brunswick. It's a fascinating story that *National Geographic* featured as one of nine ways to enjoy Canada's natural beauty.

The Underground Railway was a series of secretive routes that those on the run to freedom could use to move north. They received food and shelter from sympathetic people, many of whom were Quakers. Estimates vary widely as to the number of people who were emancipated over the many years the system was in place, but according to the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, between 30,000 and 40,000 made it to Canada. Of those, about half came between 1850 and 1860, largely due to a significant piece of American legislation in 1850.

Prior to 1850, escapees who made it to a free state were generally considered safe, but that changed with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. This permitted southern bounty hunters to capture and bring back to the South any escapees they could capture in free states. The British had abolished slavery in 1834 in

the colonies that would become Canada, which made it imperative for fugitives to get across the border to be truly free.

The most northern place of refuge on this newly revived Underground Railway was at the small community of Fort Fairfield, Me. Here James Fitzherbert, a transplanted New Brunswicker, owned a tavern where he would hide the freedom seekers in a secret room. When it was safe, he would guide the people to a logging road that crossed the border. Once the fugitives reached Tomlinson Lake, they knew they were in Canada and safe.

Largely through the efforts of two volunteers, Joe Gee and Graham Nickerson, the Tomlinson Lake Hike to Freedom trail has been re-created, and now anyone can trace the steps of those whose lives were changed forever once they reached the lake. Joe's family has been living in the Tomlinson Lake area since arriving as Loyalists after the American Revolution. Graham is a descendant of both Nova Scotian and New Brunswick Black Loyalists and is currently taking his PhD at the University of New Brunswick.

When asked about why he and Graham took on this project, Joe responds, "The

Tomlinson Lake project is important for a lot of different reasons. First, to keep this history alive. Also, sharing this story of the Underground Railroad and building up on its awareness has given folks better understanding of that history, what was happening in our community at that time." He adds, "Our past, present and future is all connected, therefore it's important to have a clear understanding of our past in order to create a better future for all."

The trail begins at a parking lot on the south side of Tomlinson Lake where interpretive panels detail the people involved on both sides of the border. Based on his research, Graham surmises that the Tomlinson family, who were early settlers in the area and for whom the lake is named, aided the refugees once they were in Canada. From here, oral history has it that the newly minted Canadians made their way to one of the existing black communities in the region, many of which dated from the Loyalist migrations in 1786. The Underground Railway was a secret organization so there are few written records; oral history plays a large role in reconstructing what transpired in the 10 years that Tomlinson



For those who have hiked here previously, a return to Tomlinson Lake will provide a new experience.



Lake was used as an escape valve.

Also at the trail head is a modern log cabin with a guest book, table, and wood stove. Just behind the cabin there is the entrance to the trail that has evolved over the years. The present trail starts at the lake and completely encircles it in a much more scenic route of about three kilometres. Much of the information about this trail online is outdated and refers to the old trail that no longer exists. For people who have hiked here before, a

return to Tomlinson Lake will provide a new experience and one that will take you to the spot where the fugitives would first know they had reached freedom.

Plans are underway to re-create, over the next two years, the squatter's hut and pit house that were built on the old trail.

In the first weekend of October, the Tomlinson Lake Hike to Freedom organization hosts a walk around the lake with re-enactors, a pop-up museum from the New Brunswick Black History Society, and traditional food cooked over an open fire. During the 2025 event, the organization will unveil a new interpretive panel detailing the role many New Brunswickers played in the American Civil War, including the story of Sarah Edwards, who, disguised as a man, served as a Union spy and soldier.

**Tomlinson Lake Hike to Freedom Trail**  
548 Miller Rd.  
Beaconsfield, N.B.

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