

Emancipation Day

August 1, 2022

On March 24, 2021, the House of Commons voted unanimously to officially designate August 1st Emancipation Day, the day in 1834 when slavery was abolished across the British Empire. However, Emancipation Day celebrations were around before Canada's official proclamation.

Emancipation Day in Ontario

Owen Sound, Ontario – recognized as the farthest north-endpoint for the Underground Railroad – has been celebrating Emancipation Day since 1862. It began as a picnic by its Black settlers and has evolved into a festival, which is thought to be the oldest of its kind in North America.



Their celebrations also acknowledge the Indigenous Peoples of the area who helped enslaved Black people escaping the U.S. to Owen Sound through the Underground Railroad.



In Windsor, Ontario, resident Walter Perry – otherwise known as Mr. Emancipation – organized a celebration that took place between the 1930s to 1960s. It would go on to be called The Greatest Freedom Show on Earth.



The event was "part celebration, part education," featuring parades, carnival rides, and speeches from activists around issues of racism and segregation.

It famously attracted people to Windsor from the United States, including Civil Rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and musician Stevie Wonder.

Emancipation Day's Connection to Carnival



Carnival is an Afro-Caribbean celebration of freedom against oppression. It is influenced by pre-Lenten Christian masquerades that French and British masters held.

When slavery was abolished, people of African descent used costumes, music, and performances to celebrate emancipation as more than just a piece of legislation. This cultural occasion has been passed down generationally and is now celebrated around the world. In Canada, Carnival was introduced in 1967 in Ontario as a gift from the Canadian Caribbean community to honour Canada's 100th birthday.



This day – and every day – we should learn about the past, reflect on the present, and take action to prevent any kind of enslavement in our future. We cannot blindly celebrate freedom without engaging in the work to be done.