

John Baker

John Baker's story is a remarkable tale of life in slavery and freedom in Canada. As an elderly man, he was interviewed by Toronto lawyer James Cleland Hamilton in 1868, who wanted to record a sketch of his interesting life. Baker was born into slavery in Lower Canada, now Quebec, in the 1780s.¹ He was of mixed African and European ancestry. John was owned by Major James Gray and his wife Elizabeth who also owned his mother, Dorinda – who was of African descent² – and his older brother, Simon.³ His father was a German man named Jacob Baker who was not enslaved.⁴ According to the law at the time, children born to enslaved women were made to follow the condition of the mother. Thus, even though their father was a free man, John and Simon were considered slaves. However, his sisters Elizabeth and Bridget,⁵ who were born after the passage of Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe's Act to Limit Slavery, were born free. This Act stipulated that children born after 1793 could be enslaved until the age of 25, and that their children would be born free.

John's owner, Major James Gray, served with the British in the King's Royal Regiment of New York during the American Revolutionary War. After defeat, British subjects who remained loyal to the Crown – referred to as the United Empire Loyalists – came to live in Lower and Upper Canada. When they migrated, many brought their slave property with them or acquired new slaves as they settled. For his service to the British Crown, Major Gray was granted land in Upper Canada and the entire Gray family relocated to New Johnstown (present-day Cornwall).⁶ John Baker, as slave property of the Grays, accompanied them. When Major Gray died in 1795,

John and his family were bequeathed to Major Gray's only son, the Solicitor General of Upper Canada, Robert Isaac Dey Gray.⁷

While enslaved by the late Major Gray and later by his son Solicitor General Gray, John and his brother Simon worked as body servants.⁸ John Baker performed many chores for his master, such as cleaning, washing clothes, and running his bath. It is also likely that he shaved his master and looked after his horse, making sure it was groomed and well fed. As his personal attendant, John also would have accompanied the Solicitor General on trips, carrying baggage and assisting in any other way he was needed.⁹ Likewise, when Solicitor General Gray moved to the Town of York to take up a government post, John and Simon moved with him.

In his account to James Cleland Hamilton, Baker related that his older brother Simon and Solicitor General Gray died tragically on October 8, 1804: both drowned when the ship H.M.S. *Speedy* sank on Lake Ontario during a gale.¹⁰ In his will drafted on August 27, 1803, Solicitor General Gray ordered that Dorinda and her children be freed from slavery. The Solicitor General also gave her a trust fund of £1,200. Additionally in the will, John was given 200 acres of land on Lot 17, Concession 2 in Whitby and £50. Had he lived, Simon also would have been awarded 200 acres of land on Lot 11, Concession 1 in Whitby, along with £50.¹¹ In fact, Simon would have received other items from Robert Gray, as indicated in his writing "... I leave all my wearing apparel to my servant Simon, and also my Silver Watch ..."¹²

John, now a free man, decided to join the British Army. In 1804, he was approached in York by recruiters for the New Brunswick Fencibles (later called the 104th Regiment of Foot of the

British Army). He enlisted and left Upper Canada to train at their base in New Brunswick.¹³

Baker was one of several Black men in the 104th Regiment. This point is significant, because it reveals that Blacks were part of the British Army and were not restricted to serving only with the Coloured Corps militia (see *Coloured Corps*). Author William Austin Squires writes that approximately ten men of African descent served with the 104th in the pioneer unit, with some also being company musicians.¹⁴ Indeed, within this regiment there was a pioneer unit made up entirely of Black soldiers. This unit included skilled men who performed various construction tasks such as clearing and building roads and bridges, as well as repairing entrenchments and fortifications.¹⁵ A laborious job, they would go ahead of the infantry companies to clear a road through the forest and set up camp for the soldiers coming behind them. Privates Henry Grant, George Lawrence, and John and Thomas Pomphrey were fellow Black company men who served in the 104th Regiment alongside John Baker. Lawrence was also the bass drummer in the regiment band.¹⁶

When the War of 1812 broke out, John's regiment was called upon to defend Upper Canada. Private John Baker and his unit made the gruelling 52-day and 1,126km overland trek to Kingston to help secure the St. Lawrence River from American attack.¹⁷ The winter of 1812/13 was particularly harsh, seeing heavy snowfall, and several accounts reported that the regiment endured a difficult journey.¹⁸ In his interview with James Cleland Hamilton, Baker recounted his involvement in the War of 1812. One such memory was a raid on Sacket's Harbor in New York on May 29, 1813. In an attempt to weaken the American navy stationed there, Baker's unit and others of the 104th carried out an attack, however the overall effort was not a success.¹⁹ Following their defeat, the 104th garrisoned in Kingston for 14 months, after which several

companies of the Regiment, including John's, went on to the Niagara frontier. Here, John participated in such military actions as the Battle of Chippawa on July 5, 1814, the Battle of Lundy's Lane on July 25, 1814, and the Siege of Fort Erie in August and September 1814.²⁰

Having fought in numerous campaigns, Baker sustained injuries from battle. Reports on his life suggest he was wounded either in the unsuccessful offensive at Sacket's Harbor, as is reported in *Lunenburg, or the Old Eastern District*, or, according to his interview with James Cleland Hamilton, at the bloody Battle of Lundy's Lane. However, he recovered enough to remain on active duty. After the war, John went overseas with another regiment of the British Army and fought in the Battle of Waterloo on June 18, 1815, in present-day Belgium. Of this experience, John stated, "I saw Napoleon."²¹ Of his many military experiences, John asserted that he enjoyed his time serving the Crown.²²

Upon his discharge, John returned to Cornwall in Upper Canada where he was reunited with his family. Re-entering civilian life, John worked as a general labourer including working odd jobs at a local store owned by P. E. Adams,²³ and spent his free-time carving wood as a hobby.²⁴ In 1867, John Baker was called as a witness in a court case in Ottawa's Court of Assize. In the lawsuit of Morris vs. Henderson, he was asked to prove the deaths of two people. His appearance in court was covered in the local newspaper, speaking to the public interest in his unique legend.²⁵

In 1861, forty-five years after the end of his service with the British Army, John Baker finally received his war pension of one shilling sterling per day from the British government. This

pension would continue for nine years until he died on January 17, 1871, at over ninety years of age.²⁶ In addition to his reputation for his remarkable life of bravery serving with the British military in both Canada and Europe, John Baker was also noted at his death as having been the last surviving enslaved person of African descent in both Lower and Upper Canada.²⁷ John Baker's intriguing story of being an enslaved person and subsequently manumitted, then rising to become an honourable soldier and an upstanding citizen is one that should not be forgotten.

¹ Jacob Farrand Pringle, *Lunenburg, or the Old Eastern District* (Cornwall, ON: Standard Printing House, 1890), 320; *Toronto Telegraph*, December 15, 1869.

² Pringle, 318: Dorinda's grandfather, Cato, was a native of Guinea in West Africa. He became the slave of John Low, father of Elizabeth Gray. Cato's daughter, Lavine, and her daughter, Dorinda, also belonged to Low. Dorinda was given to Elizabeth as a gift.

³ Pringle, 318.

⁴ Pringle, 319; *Telegraph*, December 15, 1869.

⁵ *Toronto Telegraph*, December 15, 1869; Alex Fraser and Rhonda Ross, ed., *St. Andrews Presbyterian Church, Williamstown, Ontario--Register of baptisms and marriages, from 1779-1804*, (Lancaster, ON: A. W. Fraser, 1999).

⁶ Cornwall was founded as New Johnstown by Loyalists in 1784. It was renamed in 1797 for the Duke of Cornwall, the eldest son of King George III.

⁷ Will of Robert I.D. Gray, Esq., March 19, 1804, Town of York, Court of Probate estate files, RG 22-155, MS 638, reel 50, Archives of Ontario (hereafter AO).

⁸ Body servants were also called personal servants, valets, or butlers.

⁹ Details of the duties of an enslaved body servant can be found in accounts on the lives of William Lee and Christopher Sheels, both valets to US president George Washington as well as publications on the body servants of Confederate soldiers in: Jennifer McCreery, "Interpreting History at Mount Vernon," accessed October 22, 2012, <http://www.georgewashingtonwired.org/2012/06/19/interpreting-history-at-mount-vernon/>; Tim Westphal, "Black Confederate Participation," accessed October 22, 2012, http://www.stonewallbrigade.com/articles_black_confeds.html; James Cleland Hamilton, *Osgoode Hall: Reminiscences of the Bench and Bar* (Toronto: Carswell, 1904), 128.

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- ¹⁰ Friends of Presqu'île, "Remembering Speedy 1804-2004," accessed October 9, 2012, <http://www.friendsofpresquile.on.ca/speedy/index.html>.
- ¹¹ Will of Robert I.D. Gray, Esq., March 19, 1804.
- ¹² Will of Robert I.D. Gray, Esq., March 19, 1804.
- ¹³ *Toronto Telegraph*, December 15, 1869.
- ¹⁴ William Austin Squires, *The 104th Regiment of Foot (the New Brunswick Regiment) 1803-1817* (Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1962), 54.
- ¹⁵ Jack L. Summers and Rene Chartrand, "History and Uniform of the 104th (New Brunswick) Regiment of Foot," accessed October 22, 2012, <http://www.warof1812.ca/104th.htm>.
- ¹⁶ "The New Brunswick Fencibles," by G.H. Markham, 9 November 1955, Major G. Harold Markham fonds, MC 300 MS 15/1, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick; Squires, 128.
- ¹⁷ Squires, 135; John Le Couteur, *Merry Hearts Make Light Days: the War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104th Foot* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1993), 93-102.
- ¹⁸ W. E. Campbell, *Mapping the March of the 104th (New Brunswick) Regiment of Foot* (Fredericton: The St. John River Society, June 2011).
- ¹⁹ Squire, 112; Le Couteur, 115-118.
- ²⁰ *Toronto Telegraph*, December 15, 1869.
- ²¹ *Toronto Telegraph*, December 15, 1869; James Cleland Hamilton, *The African in Canada: The Maroons of Jamaica and Nova Scotia* (Hamilton: n.p., 1980), 364-370. The 104th Regiment was discharged in Montreal on May 24, 1817.
- ²² *Toronto Telegraph*, December 15, 1869.
- ²³ Pringle, 324; *Cornwall Freeholder*, November 11, 1851.
- ²⁴ *Toronto Telegraph*, December 15, 1869.
- ²⁵ *Ottawa Times*, May 2, 1867.
- ²⁶ Pringle, 324.
- ²⁷ Ontario Deaths, 1869-1937 and Overseas Deaths, 1939-1947, Record for Cornwall, 1871, John Baker, accessed July 26, 2012, <https://familysearch.org/pal:MM9.1.1/JK7R-7ZJ>; *The Globe*, January 18, 1871; *Volunteer Review and Military and Naval Gazette*, 5:6 (February 1871).