



# Across the River to Freedom: Early Black History in Sandwich, Ontario Curriculum Materials

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## Lesson Plan: Thornton and Lucie Blackburn

**Grades:** 7-12

**Duration:**

**Essential Question**

In what ways was Canada a land of promise for Thornton and Lucie Blackburn?

**Guiding Questions**

- When faced with unjust laws and practices, what is the responsibility of citizens?
- How did circumstances of time, place, and opportunity factor into the options available to the Blackburns and their rescuers?
- What approaches did the rescuers take to try to prevent Lucie and Thornton Blackburn from being returned to slavery? What challenges did they face?
- In times of crisis, what does it take to move from knowledge to action?



University  
of Windsor



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## Lesson Plan: Thornton and Lucie Blackburn

### Learning Objectives

In this lesson, students will:

- use the historical inquiry process and concepts of historical thinking to analyze and evaluate primary sources to develop a deeper understanding of the lives, experiences, and contributions of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn.
- create arguments and support them using relevant historical evidence.
- consider if and how Canada was a land of promise for the Blackburns.

### Overview

Prior to this lesson, students watched *Across the River to Freedom: Early Black History in Sandwich* in which they were introduced to Henry and Mary E. Bibb, Caroline Quarlls Watkins, and Thornton and Lucie Blackburn. The tasks and activities in this lesson will extend and deepen understanding of the individuals and stories presented in the documentaries.

### Materials

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Thornton Blackburn’s Runaway Notice</li> <li>◦ See, Think, Feel, Wonder</li> <li>◦ Runaway Notice – Historical Thinking Questions</li> <li>◦ Blackburn Rescue and Riots – News Articles</li> <li>◦ Blackburn Rescue and Riots – Questions</li> <li>◦ Iceberg Diagram</li> <li>◦ Image of Sandwich, Upper Canada</li> <li>◦ Image of Sandwich – Questions</li> <li>◦ An Excerpt from the Petition of Thornton Blackburn</li> <li>◦ Petition of Thornton Blackburn – Questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Upper Canada’s Decision: Robert Simpson Jameson to Sir John Colborne</li> <li>◦ James/Colborne – Questions</li> <li>◦ Image of Thornton Blackburn’s Taxi</li> <li>◦ Image of Thornton Blackburn’s Taxi – Questions</li> <li>◦ Painting Featuring Blackburn’s Taxi</li> <li>◦ Painting featuring Blackburn’s Taxi – Questions</li> <li>◦ Image of the Blackburn Gravesite</li> <li>◦ Image of the Blackburn Gravesite – Questions</li> <li>◦ 3-2-1</li> <li>◦ Life in Toronto</li> <li>◦ Culminating Activity</li> </ul>
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### Activities

#### 1. Thornton Blackburn’s Runaway Notice

- Begin the lesson by informing students that they are going to encounter a runaway notice for a man named Thornton Blackburn, who fled from enslavement in 1831 with a woman named Lucie (her former name was Ruthie). This type of image can be disturbing or triggering. Please let students know that if they prefer to skip this activity, they can start with the second one.
- While students do not need any prior knowledge to complete this lesson, it might be helpful to provide some historical context for the materials they are about to review. In the 1830s, it was legal to enslave Black people in Kentucky. Because slavery was not legal in Michigan at the time, many freedom seekers settled there. The Blackburns did so in 1831 after their bold escape. But two years later, they were arrested and tried under American federal law as “fugitive slaves.” Black residents of Detroit packed the courtroom where the Blackburns were sentenced to be returned to slavery for life. The community was outraged and threatened to burn the city to the ground. While the Blackburns were jailed in Detroit, their supporters came up with a brilliant rescue plan, which resulted in Lucie being freed from jail and spirited away across the Detroit River to Amherstburg. When Thornton was due to be taken to the steamboat that would return him to slavery, more than

200 armed men and women stormed the jail to save him. Thornton and seven others fled across the Detroit River to Sandwich. This event, and additional protests in Detroit became known as the Blackburn Riots of 1833. In Sandwich, the Blackburns were jailed. Demands for their extradition were made, but Upper Canada's lieutenant-governor, Sir John Colborne argued that because the couple would be returned to slavery for their "crimes," and since slavery was not a punishment in British colonial Canada, they could not be returned to a jurisdiction where they would face a sentence harsher than Canadian law would allow. This principle remains foundational to Canadian extradition law to this day. The couple eventually settled in Toronto.

Smardz Frost, Karolyn. "Thornton and Lucie Blackburn". *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 18 May 2021, *Historica Canada*. [www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/thornton-and-lucie-blackburn](http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/thornton-and-lucie-blackburn). Accessed 09 April 2022.

### **See, Feel, Think Wonder**

◦ For this activity, students will analyze Thornton Blackburn's *Runaway Notice*. By prompting students to slow down their thinking and simply observe before drawing conclusions and asking questions, they will engage more deeply with, and analyze more thoughtfully, the media they are viewing.

- Distribute the *Runaway Notice* to each student.
- Ask students to look at the image and text closely.
- Ask students the following questions:
  - What do you see? What details stand out? (observations only)
  - What feelings emerge as you look at this notice?
  - What do you think is going on? Why do you think that?
  - What does this make you wonder? What questions does this raise for you?

### **Think, Pair, Share**

- Distribute *See, Feel, Think, Wonder* to students.
- THINK - After they've observed and reflected, students can write their responses on the handout.
- PAIR - Ask students to pair up and share their responses.
- SHARE – When the class reconvenes, ask pairs to report on their conversations. Alternatively, you could ask students to share their partner's responses. With this strategy, students must engage in active listening.

### **Historical Thinking**

- Distribute the Historical Thinking Questions handout to students.
- Students can work with their partner from the Think, Pair, Share activity.
- Students will read and respond to the questions on the handout.

### **Class Discussion**

- Students can share and discuss their responses.

## **2. The Blackburn Rescue and Riots: News Articles**

- Students will read two articles from 1833.
- Organize students in groups.
- Distribute *The Blackburn Rescue and Riots: News Articles* and *The Blackburn Rescue and Riots: Historical Thinking Questions* to students.

### Read Aloud and Mark it Up!

• Students will take turns reading the articles to each other. While reading, students will take notes and mark up the articles. On the board, write the Mark It Up! Protocol for students to use while reading the articles.

#### Mark it Up! Protocol

? – I don't understand.

I have a question.

! – This is surprising.

This part is important.

♥ - I like this part.

This is my favourite part.

C – I made a connection (text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world).

★ - This is the main idea.

E – This is evidence that supports the main idea.

• Once finished, students will read the questions, discuss and share their responses, and record them on the organizer.

#### Class Discussion

• Students will share and discuss their responses. Students can also share how they annotated their articles. Classmates can provide feedback.

Possible questions to ask:

- How did the Mark it Up! strategy help you gain a deeper understanding of the text?
- How were your peers' annotations different?

#### Iceberg Diagram

◦ This activity uses an image of an iceberg to help students gain awareness of the numerous underlying causes that gave rise to the Blackburn Riots. The image helps students remember the importance of looking deeper than the surface in order to gain a better understanding of events.

• Distribute the *Iceberg Diagram* to students.

• Ask students to list everything they know about the facts related to the Blackburn Riots of 1833 in the tip area of the iceberg. Questions they should answer:

- What happened?
- What choices were made in this situation? By whom?
- Who was affected by the riots?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?

• Beneath the surface, ask students to write their responses to the question:

- What factors influenced the choices made by the individuals and groups involved in this event?

• Once complete, debrief in a class discussion.

- What did you learn from this activity?
- What were the most important factors listed below the surface? Why?
- What more do you need to know to better understand why the Blackburn Riots of 1833 took place?
- What could have been done, if anything, to have prevented the riots from happening?
- What have you learned about how to prevent similar events from happening in the future?

- How does the information on the iceberg help you better understand our world today?

### **3. Image of Sandwich, Thornton Blackburn's Petition, Upper Canada's Decision, Image of Thornton Blackburn's Taxi, Painting Featuring Thornton Blackburn's Taxi, Image of the Blackburn Gravesite**

◦ Inform students that after Thornton and Lucie Blackburn reached Canadian soil, they were arrested and jailed in Sandwich. While jailed, Thornton Blackburn dictated a petition to a local minister. In July 1833, a decision was made regarding the Blackburns. Students are going to explore these documents to gain a deeper understanding of what happened to the Blackburns after a decision was made by the government of Upper Canada.

#### **Jigsaw**

◦ Each group of students will become experts on their specific text/image and then they will share the material and information with their classmates. This strategy provides opportunities for students to understand and retain information while developing collaboration skills. As students know that they will be responsible for teaching the new content to their classmates, they often feel more accountable for learning the material.

- Organize students into six groups.
- Group #1 will receive the *Image of Sandwich, Upper Canada, 1833* and the *Questions*.
- Group #2 will receive *Thornton Blackburn's Petition* and the *Historical Thinking Questions*.
- Group #3 will receive *Upper Canada's Decision* and the *Historical Thinking Questions*.
- Group #4 will receive the *Image of Thornton Blackburn's Taxi* and the *Questions*.
- Group #5 will receive the *Painting Featuring Thornton Blackburn's Taxi* and the *Questions*.
- Group #6 will receive the *Image of the Blackburn Gravesite* and the *Questions*.
- Distribute the double-sided 3-2-1 handout to each student.
- In their groups, students will review their material so that they can share this information. Students will respond to the questions and share this information with classmates. All group members must understand the material they will be presenting.
- Once expert groups have responded to the questions and have a good understanding of the material, they will take turns presenting information. While each group presents, students will complete the 3-2-1 activity.

#### **Class Discussion**

- Students will discuss what they've learned and can share some of their responses from the 3-2-1 activity.

### **4. Life in Toronto**

#### **Mark it Up!**

- Distribute the *Life in Toronto* handout to each student. Students will individually read the text. Again, they will use the Mark it Up! strategy while they read.
- Once finished reading and annotating, have a class discussion about the text. Students can share some of the ways they marked up the text and others can provide feedback.
- Based on this document, describe their life in Toronto.
- Why might the Blackburns have been successful pillars of the community? What factors might have motivated them?
- What does this information suggest about Thornton and Lucie Blackburn?
- What do you think were key factors in the success of the lives of Thornton and Lucie Blackburn?
- What did you find most surprising?

- What questions does this text raise for you? How can you find the answers?
- Was Canada a land of promise for the Blackburns?

### **5. Culminating Activity**

- Distribute the Culminating Activity to students.
- Students will individually respond to the question: *In what ways was Canada a land of promise for Thornton and Lucie Blackburn?*

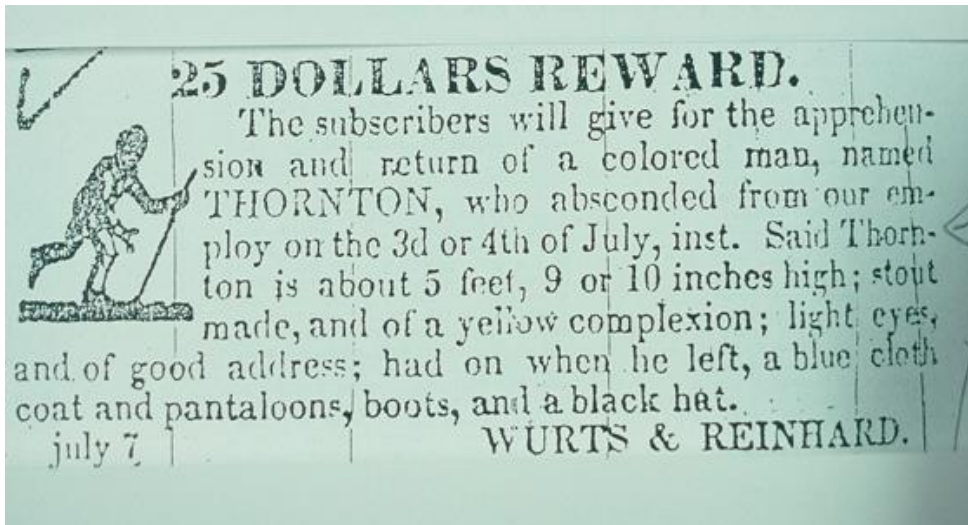
Thornton Blackburn's Runaway Notice - July 7, 1831

## 25 DOLLARS REWARD

The subscribers will give for the apprehension and return of a colored man, named THORNTON, who **absconded** from our employ on the 3d or 4<sup>th</sup> of July, inst. Said Thornton is about 5 feet, 9 or 10 inches high; stout made, or a yellow complexion; light eyes, and of good address; had on when he left, a blue cloth coat and pantaloons, boots, and a black hat.

July 7

WURTS & REINHARD.






### VOCABULARY

absconded - escaped

# See, Feel, Think, Wonder

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

<p>What do you see? What stands out?</p> 	<p>What feelings emerge as you look at this notice?</p>	<p>What do you think is going on?</p> 	<p>What do you wonder? What questions does this notice raise for you?</p> 



## Thornton Blackburn's Runaway Notice - Historical Thinking Questions

<b>Sourcing</b>
What type of source is it?
Why was it produced?
How many days after Thornton's escape was this document produced?
What about this source makes it good evidence about the agency of Thornton?
<b>Contextualization</b>
Who might Wurts & Reinhard be? Why do you think that?
How does this notice help contribute to a greater understanding of the conditions enslaved Blacks faced?
Why might Thornton have escaped on the 3 <sup>rd</sup> or 4 <sup>th</sup> of July?
<b>Close Reading</b>
What does the reader learn about Thornton?

## The Blackburn Rescue and Riots: News Articles

### Background Knowledge

The outraged Black community sprang into action. Members met and organized a brilliantly orchestrated rescue plan. News reports recounted the events.

On Sunday evening, the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, the woman escaped from jail and reached Canada, by the **ingenuity** of one of her female friends, who gained an admission to the prison, and effected a change of clothes, by which means, she passed out without being recognized. On Monday afternoon, when it was expected that the man, Thornton, would be taken from the jail to the steamboat, a large number of black people assembled. When the carriage which was to convey him to the boat, drove up to the jail, the crowd drew nearer, and one of the number, with a large club, placed himself on the steps, and as soon as the High Sheriff opened the jail door and passed out, Thornton presented a pistol, and at the same time the Sheriff received a blow in the face and one on the head, which brought him to the ground. While falling, Mr. Wilson discharged his pistol and wounded one of the mob. The whole party of negroes then rushed forward, and before the citizens of the town could come to the aid of the Sheriff and his party, they carried Thornton, and succeeded in bearing him off and effecting his escape to Canada. Thornton and his wife were subsequently taken and committed to jail in Sandwich, to await the demand of the authorities of the United States.

Upward of thirty who were engaged in the affair, had been committed to prison in Detroit, and several others have been taken in Canada. There seems to be little doubt that the movement of the blacks was encouraged, if not instigated by some of the white citizens of Detroit. We regret we cannot say much in favor of the editor of the Courier, who, if he does not justify, attempts to **palliate** the outrage. It is evident, he would have rejoiced in the escape of Thornton, by whatever means it could have been accomplished, had not the Sheriff been so violently assaulted. —Herald

In a move showing that negroes are not completely lacking mental sharpness, the female was rescued from jail on Sunday evening, and made her escape into Canada. One of her female companions obtained entrance into her room, and having exchanged clothes with her, suffered her to go, while she remained behind. She was not recognized by a deputy sheriff who stood near her.

But it is with sincere regret that we inform our readers of the **melancholy** scene that followed. There is but little doubt that a systematic organization existed among the negroes, and that a regular plan of operations was laid for the rescue of Thornton. Indeed, there was no hiding the fact by the negroes themselves. They had uniformly given out that such was their intention, though most thought it was nothing more than a **braggadocio** threat. We have been informed that individual blacks were scattered about on various parts of the common and near the jail for an hour or two before the **affray** happened. When Mr. Wilson, the Sheriff, came out of the jail, a cart drove up, Wilson was attacked, and after a short struggle, in which he was injured, had discharged his pistol at a negro, Thornton was put into the cart, and driven off. By this time, about forty negroes were on the spot. The citizens in town caught the alarm and a general rush took place to the jail. The negroes having rescued their man made for the woods. They were followed by men on foot and on horseback, some armed with clubs, some with pistols, and others with guns. The cart was overtaken a mile or more, a little distance from Fort Gratiot turnpike; but the prisoner had escaped. Several of the blacks were taken to jail. As it was known they would make for the river, horsemen were **dispatched** up and down to prevent them. The prisoner it is presumed, made his escape into Canada. On Monday night, patrols were stationed in all parts of the city and up and down the river to intercept any that might attempt to cross. Since then, there has been a capturing of blacks, whether involved in the attacks or not. Between twenty and thirty have been imprisoned. Let not the innocent, because they are black, suffer with the guilty.

Source: Excerpt adapted from *The National Banner and Daily Advertiser*, Nashville, Tennessee, Jul 2, 1833.

Source: Excerpt adapted from "Trouble Among the Blacks." *The Liberator*, Boston, Massachusetts, Jul 6, 1833. (republished from The Detroit Courier)

## VOCABULARY

ingenuity – skill, cleverness

palliate – ease

melancholy – sad mood

braggadocio— bragging

affray – fight

dispatched— sent for

### Mark it Up! Protocol

Use this protocol to annotate while you read the articles.

? – I don't understand.

I have a question.

! – This is surprising.

This part is important.

♥ - I like this part.

This is my favourite part.

C – I made a connection (text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world).

★ - This is the main idea.

E – This is evidence that supports the main idea.

### The Blackburn Rescue and Riots: Questions

	The National Banner and Daily Advertiser	The Liberator
When was the article written?		
What tactics or strategies were used in the Blackburn rescue and riots?		
Which locations are mentioned?		
Who were the key players?		
What was the goal of the rescue plan and the riots?		

According to the news articles, what were the consequences of the Blackburn Riots?

What information do both articles support?

Which article is more trustworthy? Why?

How could these articles be more reliable as evidence of what took place in June 1833 in Detroit concerning Thornton and Lucie Blackburn?

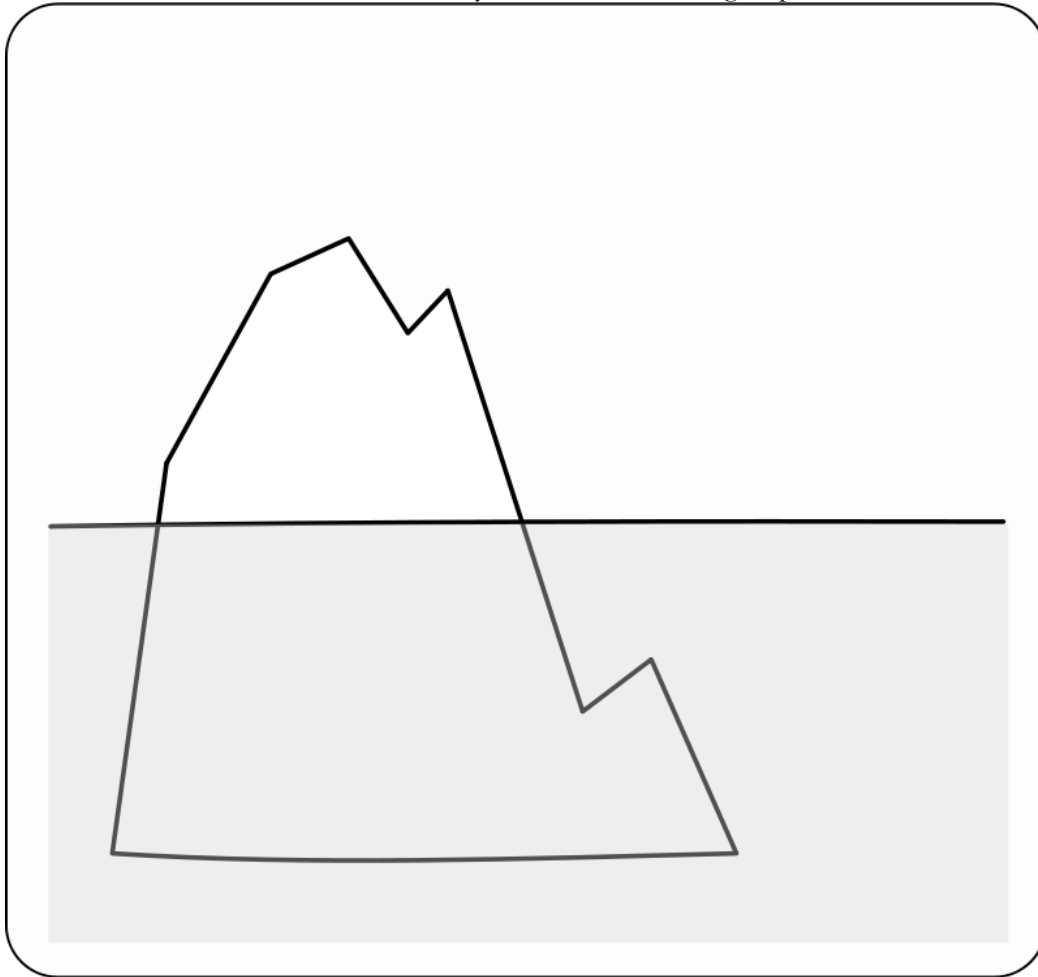
## The Blackburn Riots of 1833: Iceberg Diagram

List everything you know about the facts related to the Blackburn Riots of 1833 in the tip area of the iceberg.

- What happened?
- What choices were made in this situation? By whom?
- Who was affected by the riots?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?

Beneath the surface, answer the following question:

- What factors influenced the choices made by the individuals and groups involved in this event?

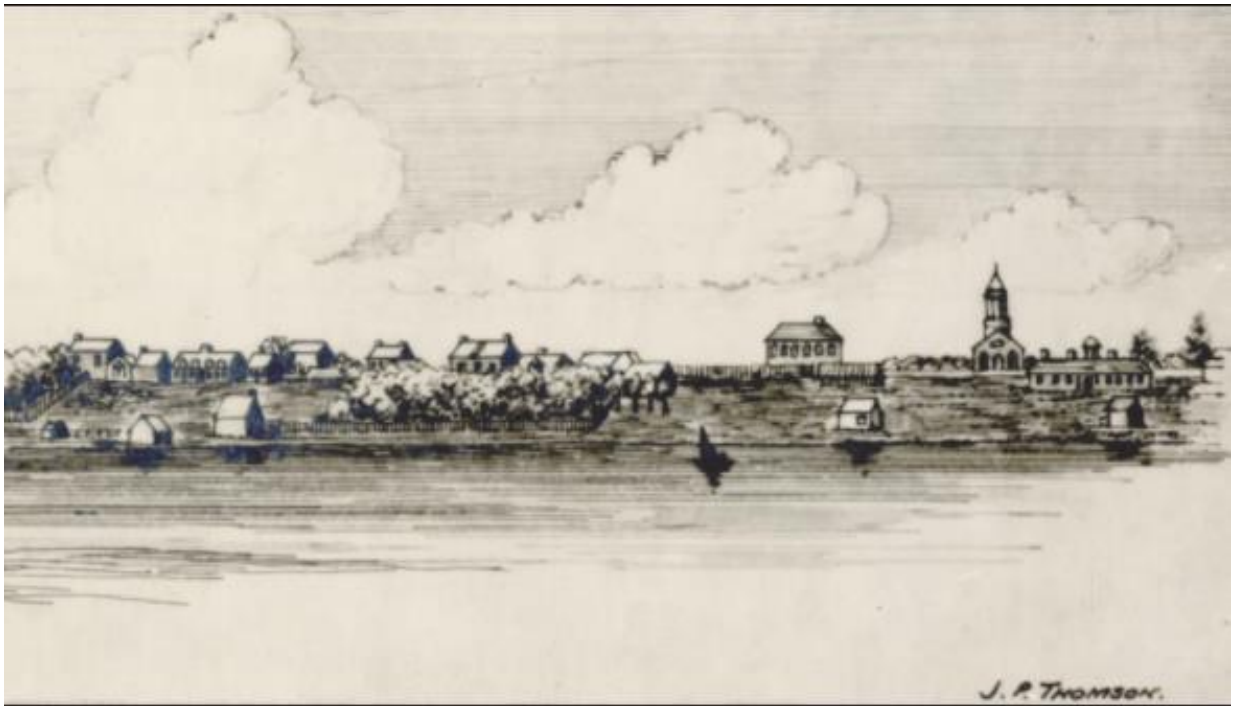


## A Sketch of Sandwich, Upper Canada, 1833

### Background Knowledge

Thornton and Lucie, along with others, made it to Canadian soil where they were again arrested and jailed. The mayor of Detroit sent a letter across the river requesting that the Blackburns be held while their formal extradition request was prepared.

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*Source:* Pencil sketch of Sandwich, Upper Canada, drawn during the summer of 1833, probably while the Blackburns were incarcerated in the jail, which is the large building to the left of the church. Appeared in Karolyn Smardz Frost. *I've Got a Home in Glory Land*. Thomas Allen Publishers, 2007. Retrieved from: <http://cdigs.uwindsor.ca/omeka/exhibits/show/publichistory497/item/238>

## A Sketch of Sandwich, Upper Canada, 1833

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

What do you see? Provide at least five details about the image.

What do the details you have noticed make you think about or feel?

Why is this image historically significant?

What historical event is connected to the image?



According to SHEG, an image is historically significant if it:

- was important or influential at the time an event occurred
- had lasting effects on people and/or society
- was a moment of change or transition in history,
- was representative of broader trends or changes in society

Source: <https://sheg.stanford.edu/>

## An Excerpt from the Petition of Thornton Blackburn

### Background Knowledge

While the Blackburns were jailed at Sandwich, the acting governor of Michigan demanded their extradition on the grounds that the Blackburns had incited the riot and tried to kill the sheriff. Thornton Blackburn, unable to read or write, dictated his petition to a local minister who passed it to the local elites. Many signed the petition. It was then forwarded to Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Colborne who happened to be an abolitionist. This is the only document that survives in Thornton's own words.

The Petition of Thornton Blackburn on behalf of himself, and his wife Ruth Blackburn, both people of colour, at present confined in the Gaol of Sandwich, Western District. Humbly Showeth... Your Petitioner is convinced that the object of the Party is to have him and his wife carried back to Hopeless Slavery, where complaints can neither be heard, nor **grievances** redressed... Your Petitioner therefore Humbly begs that Your Excellency will be graciously pleased to permit him to pass his days in this Land of Freedom, and in particular that his unfortunate Wife against whom there is not the slightest shadow of crime, except her exertions to escape from Slavery, may not be delivered up from under Your Excellency's protection, to those who are only exerting themselves to accomplish their own **avaricious** ends.

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*Source:* Karolyn Smardz Frost. *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad*. Thomas Allen Publishers, 2007, pp. 215-218.

### VOCABULARY

gaol – jail

grievances – injustices

avaricious – having an extreme greed for wealth



## The Petition of Thornton Blackburn - Historical Thinking Questions

<b>Sourcing</b>
What was the purpose of this document?
Who was the intended audience of this document? How might that have influenced the tone and overall content?
Why might Thornton have lied or exaggerated?
Why wouldn't Thornton have lied or exaggerated?
<b>Contextualization</b>
Because Thornton Blackburn was illiterate, his words were dictated to someone else. How might this context have influenced the content of the petition?
<b>Corroboration</b>
How does information in the Petition support or extend information from the Runaway Notice?
<b>Close Reading</b>
What does the Petition reveal about slavery?
What does the Petition suggest about Thornton Blackburn?
What does the Petition suggest about Thornton's thoughts of Canada?
How does the author feel about being sent back across the Detroit River? How does the phrase " <i>hopeless slavery, where complaints can neither be heard, nor grievances redressed</i> " capture his feelings?

## Upper Canada's Decision: Robert Simpson Jameson to Sir John Colborne

### Background Knowledge

Robert Simpson Jameson was the Attorney General of Upper Canada. Sir John Colborne was the Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada. The Blackburns were set free from the Sandwich jail about July 22, 1833.

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Sir, I take the liberty of reminding you that in consequence of the decision of the Governor in Council that the law did not warrant His Excellency in complying with the requisition of the Acting Governor of Michigan for the **restoration** of Thornton and other fugitives committed to custody at Sandwich, it becomes necessary to **advise** the Sheriff, that such an order has been made and that it is against their being delivered up.

### VOCABULARY

restoration – returning

advise – inform

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*Source:* Karolyn Smardz Frost. *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad*. Thomas Allen Publishers, pp. 224.

## Robert Simpson Jameson to Sir John Colborne - Historical Thinking Questions

<b>Sourcing</b>
What about this source makes it good evidence about Canada's status as a safe haven for refugees from slavery?
Who wrote this document? Why is this important?
What was the purpose of this document?
<b>Contextualization</b>
Why would the Lieutenant Governor, Sir John Colborne, refuse to send the Blackburns and the other fugitives back to the United States?
<b>Corroboration</b>

Image of Thornton Blackburn's Taxi



“York Pioneer and Historical Society with Thornton Blackburn's cab in front of the Scadding Cabin,” *TPL Virtual Exhibits*, accessed April 3, 2022, <http://omeka.tplcs.ca/virtual-exhibits/items/show/204>.

## Image of Thornton Blackburn's Taxi

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

What do you see? Provide at least five details about the image.

What do the details you have noticed make you think about or feel?

How are the details connected to what you know about Thornton and Lucie Blackburn?

Why is this image historically significant?

What historical event is connected to the image?

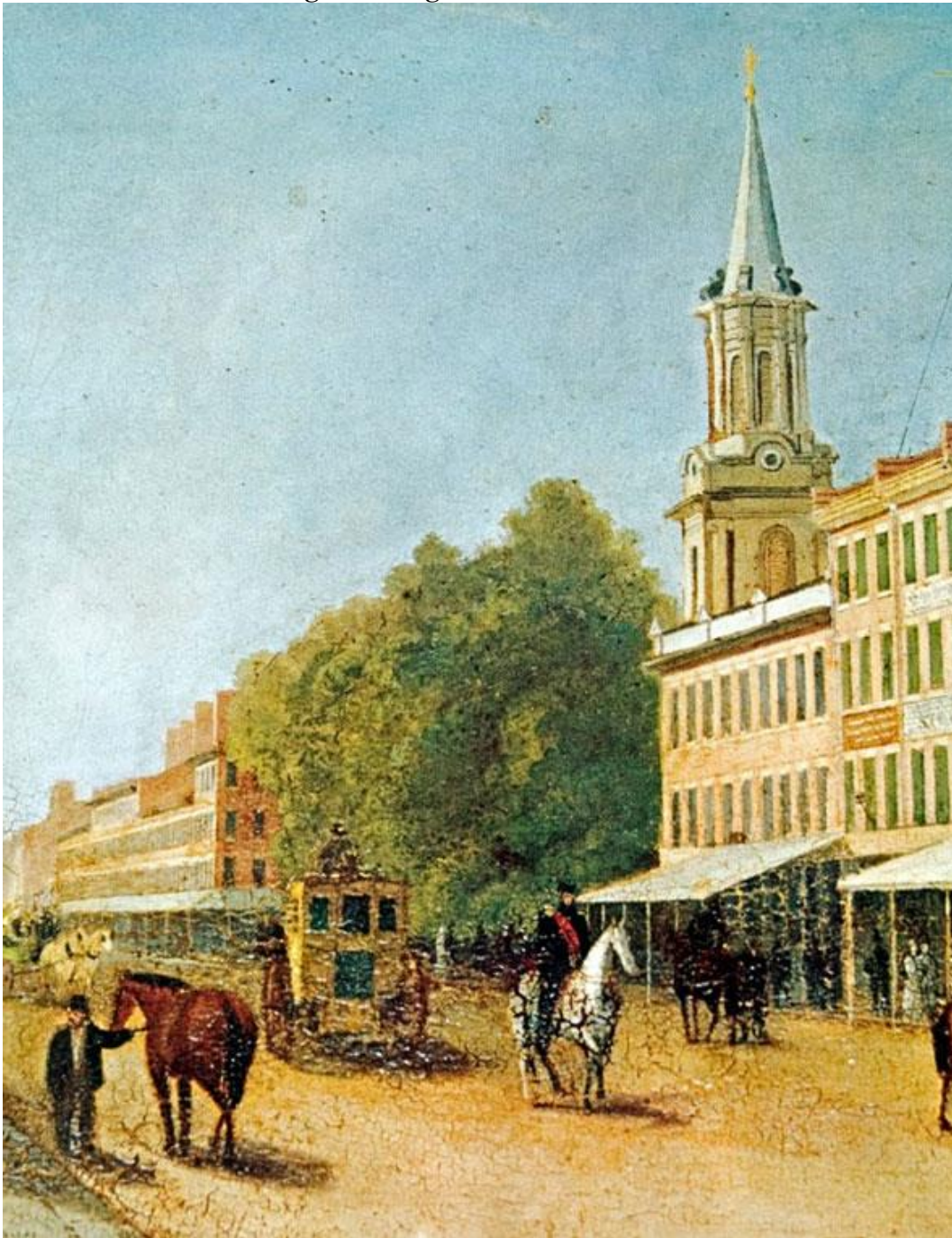


According to SHEG, an image is historically significant if it:

- was important or influential at the time an event occurred
- had lasting effects on people and/or society
- was a moment of change or transition in history,
- was representative of broader trends or changes in society

Source: <https://sheg.stanford.edu/>

### A Painting Featuring Thornton Blackburn's Taxi



This painting of Toronto's King Street in 1846 features Thornton Blackburn's taxi "The City," travelling down the street.

Accessed April 2, 2022, <https://oughtthought.wordpress.com/2010/02/06/bhm-toronto-history-thornton-blackburn/>

## A Painting Featuring Thornton Blackburn's Taxi

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

What do you see? Provide at least five details about the image.

What do the details you have noticed make you think about or feel?

How are the details connected to what you know about Thornton and Lucie Blackburn?

Why is this image historically significant?

What historical event is connected to the image?



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Source: <https://sheg.stanford.edu/>



Image of the Blackburn Gravesite in the Toronto Necropolis



Accessed March 31, 2022, <https://www.cabbagetownpeople.ca/person/thornton-and-lucie-blackburn/>.



## Image of the Blackburn Gravesite

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

What do you see? Provide at least five details about the image.

What do the details you have noticed make you think about or feel?

How are the details connected to what you know about Thornton and Lucie Blackburn?

Why is this image historically significant?

What historical event is connected to the image?



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Source: <https://sheg.stanford.edu/>

**3-2-1**

**1. Image of Sandwich, Upper Canada, 1833**

3 things I learned -

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2 things I found interesting/surprising -

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1 question I have -

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**2. The Petition of Thornton Blackburn**

3 things I learned -

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2 things I found interesting/surprising -

---

---

1 question I have -

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**3. Upper Canada's Decision**

3 things I learned -

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2 things I found interesting/surprising -

---

---

1 question I have -

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**4. Image of Thornton Blackburn's Taxi**

3 things I learned -

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2 things I found interesting/surprising -

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---

1 question I have -

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**5. Painting featuring Thornton Blackburn's taxi**

3 things I learned -

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2 things I found interesting/surprising -

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---

1 question I have -

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**6. The Blackburn Gravesite**

3 things I learned -

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2 things I found interesting/surprising -

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---

1 question I have -

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## Life in Toronto

In 1834, a year after being released from the Sandwich jail, Thornton and Lucie moved to Toronto where Thornton was reunited with his brother, Alfred, who was employed as a carpenter. They hadn't seen each other since 1825. Alfred had followed the North Star to freedom in Canada. Soon after their arrival, Thornton found work as a waiter at Osgoode Hall. When Thornton and Lucie had saved enough money, they rented a property near Alfred's home.

Thornton and Lucie had an idea that would ensure their names would be permanently etched in the city's history. In 1837, they began the first taxi business in Upper Canada. A new type of transportation called the hackney cab had arrived from England and there was one in operation in Montreal. In Louisville, Thornton had seen horse-drawn hacks carrying passengers and luggage, but he had an idea to become an independent owner of a cab that would be hired by the trip or the hour. He would be able to set his own hours and no longer be subject to scheduling by someone else. But perhaps the most important thing of all, his earnings would belong to himself and Lucie. Blackburn called his red and yellow cab "The City," and it became a well-known sight on the streets of Toronto. The cab could carry four passengers while their luggage was strapped to the roof. Thornton rode up top. Thornton and Lucie's cab company was a great success. They were able to purchase investment properties. Several of their tenants were recently arrived freedom seekers. By 1840, despite knowing that slave catchers were on the prowl and that he was a wanted man, Thornton embarked on a more than one-thousand-mile journey and returned to the United States to rescue his mother. He hadn't seen her in 12 years and had no way of knowing if she was still alive. The two were eventually reunited and he brought her back to Toronto where she would be reunited with her son Alfred Blackburn. In the 1840 census of Toronto's Black population, Thornton Blackburn was noted as having a family of four, which included his wife Lucie, his brother Alfred, and his elderly mother Sibby.

The Blackburns prospered and became well-to-do members of the African Canadian community in Toronto. They were heavily involved in the abolitionist movement, the local church and were known to be upstanding citizens. An article published in a leading African American newspaper *The New York Age* described Thornton, "*Old Blackburn ... is a venerable fixture of Toronto. He is over 85 years of age and healthy. He resides on Eastern Avenue. He used to be a hack driver and laid up a considerable fortune. He is now retired and lives in opulence with his swarthy lady.*"

Thornton died on February 26, 1890. Almost five years later, Lucie passed away and was interred with Thornton in the Necropolis, a cemetery in downtown Toronto. Today, Thornton and Lucie Blackburn rest under a red granite obelisk in the [Toronto Necropolis](#). Buried with them are Thornton's mother, Sibby, his brother, Alfred, and lifelong family friend Ann Maria Jackson and her son Richard.

Sources: Karolyn Smardz Frost. *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad*. Thomas Allen Publishers, 2007.

Peter Meyler. Northern Terminus: The African Canadian History Journal/ Vol. 5/ 2008

### Culminating Activity

In what ways was Canada a land of promise for Thornton and Lucie Blackburn?

Sources (list title and date; you must use at least three sources)	<b>Evidence from the Text or Image</b> (Use clear and specific examples.)	<b>Explanation</b> (Explain how the evidence supports your response.)

## Teaching Strategy Sources

Activities are adapted from:

Project Zero (<https://pz.harvard.edu/thinking-routines>).

Facing History and Ourselves (<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies>).

**LOUISVILLE, June 27** — On the 17th instant, a serious affray took place at Detroit, in the attempt to rescue a fugitive slave from the hands of an officer. — The circumstances connected with it, as we learn from the Detroit papers, and from verbal information, are briefly, the following:

Some time since, a colored man belonging to Mrs. Brown, and a woman belonging to Mr McKnight, of this city, run off and reached Detroit. On being apprized of their residence there, two gentlemen of this city, left here two or three weeks since, for Detroit, for the purpose of claiming and arresting them, under the provisions of the laws of the United States, in relation to runaway slaves. Proper proof of ownership having been made, they were arrested and committed to prison. As soon as this fact was known, considerable excitement was produced among the negroes at Detroit, many of whom are fugitives from this State and Tennessee, and a plan, as it afterwards appeared, was laid to rescue them.

On Sunday evening, the 16th, the woman escaped from jail and reached Canada, by the ingenuity of one of her female friends, who gained an admission to the prison, and effected a change of clothes, by which means, she passed out without being recognized. 'After this, the movement of the negroes,' says the Free Press, indicated a spirit of desperation and audacity incompatible with the due enforcement of the laws by ordinary means,' and on Monday afternoon, when it was expected that the man, who passed by the name of Thornton,



would be taken from the jail to the steamboat, a large number of black people assembled on the commons. When the carriage which was to convey him to the boat, drove up to the jail, the crowd drew nearer, and one of the number, with a large club, placed himself on the steps, and as soon as Mr Watson, the High Sheriff, opened the jail door and passed out, Thornton presented a pistol, and at the same time the Sheriff received a blow in the face and one on the head, which brought him to the ground. Whilst in the act of falling, Mr Wilson discharged his pistol and wounded one of the mob. The whole party of negroes then rushed forward, and before the citizens of the town could come to the aid of the Sheriff and his party, they carried Thornton, and succeeded in bearing him off and effecting his escape to Canada. Thornton and his wife were subsequently taken and committed to jail in Sandwich, to await the demand of the authorities of the United States.

We learn that when our informant left Detroit, no hopes were entertained of the recovery of the Sheriff. The negro who committed the assault, had not yet been identified—upwards of thirty who were engaged in the affair, had been committed to prison in Detroit, and several others have been taken in Canada. There seems to be little doubt that the movement of the blacks was encouraged, if not instigated by some of the white citizens of Detroit. The editors of the Journal and Free Press deserve praise, for the manner in which they have expressed themselves in relation to this matter; we regret we cannot say as much in favor of the editor of the Courier, who, if he does not justify, attempts to palliate the outrage. It is evident, he would have rejoiced in the escape of Thornton, by whatever means it could have been accomplished, had not the Sheriff been so violently assaulted.—*Herald*.

### TROUBLE AMONG THE BLACKS.

We republish from the Detroit Courier, the following account. To the prefatory remarks of the Editor, we have nothing to add, except our most sincere advice to all our colored friends to render a strict obedience to the laws of the land. Let them be as distinguished for their good conduct as they are for their unjust treatment, and the day of their deliverance will draw near.

An unusual degree of excitement has prevailed among the black, and no less among the white population of our city since Friday last, growing out of a claim made to a couple of mulattoes, by the professed agent of a family in Kentucky. In common with the whole community, our sympathies have been enlisted; and whatever may be the abstract right given by the constitution and laws of our country to traffic in human flesh, we have found it a difficult task to divest ourselves wholly of those spontaneous prepossessions in favor of natural liberty which gain a foot-hold in the breast of most men on viewing and appreciating the necessary consequences of legalised slavery. We will therefore refrain from any expressions of feeling on the subject, and confine ourselves to the facts as they have come to our knowledge. The latter part of last week a gentleman from Kentucky in company, we believe, with an attorney, arrived in town, and laid claim to a colored man known by the different names of Thornton, Smith and Blackburn, and his wife, who is to all appearance a genuine Creole, and was born, as she says, in the West Indies. Thornton is a respectable, honest and industrious man, and considerably superior to the common class of negroes. In short he is the kind of person that had numerous friends, and few enemies, among those of his own color, and of course, whose arrest

would be most likely to cause disturbance. The moment, therefore, the object for which the agent had come was known, the blacks began to murmur. Another cause was traceable to the abortive attempt made a few years since to kidnap a number of negroes from this frontier. The recollection of this was a preparatory stimulus to action. They were consequently prepared to carry through almost any measure that might be prompted by lacerated feelings. The law of this land in regard to the surrender of fugitive slaves is imperative; its requisitions are plain and positive; and any justice of the peace, if satisfied with the evidence adduced, is bound by that law to do justice to the person setting up a righteous claim. Application was made to Judge Chipman, who, on the strength of the testimony before him saw fit to authorize the surrender of Thornton and his wife to the claimant from Kentucky. They were delivered over to the jailer for safe keeping until the agent could take them off. The blacks, on hearing this, and conceiving that a fair examination was not had, were loud in their dissatisfaction, and even went so far as to hazard threats of resistance to the laws.

Thornton and his wife they had ever looked upon and associated with, as free; and, free or not, they were by no means disposed to see them dragged off again into servitude. This accounts for the feeling which germed on Friday and came to its maturity on Monday afternoon. By a contrivance that demonstrates that negroes are not wholly wanting in shrewdness, the female was rescued from jail on Sunday evening, and made her escape into Canada, where she is now. It seems that one of her female companions obtained entrance into her room, and having exchanged clothes with her, suffered her to go, while she remained behind. So effectual was the disguise that she was not recognized by a deputy sheriff who

stood near her when she passed. If the affair had ended here, or even if Thornton himself had escaped without any further occurrence, the whole would have passed off pleasantly enough. But it is with sincere regret that we have to inform our readers of the melancholy scene that followed. There is but little doubt that a systematic organization existed among the negroes, and that a regular plan of operations was laid for the rescue of Thornton. Indeed, there was no concealment of the fact by the negroes themselves. They had uniformly given out that such was their intention, though but few, if any of the citizens, believed it to be any thing more than impulse or a braggadocio threat. It turned out, however, too true. We have been informed that individual blacks were scattered about on various parts of the common and near the jail for an hour or two previous to the time when the affray happened. The prisoner, Thornton, was to be taken out in time to embark in the steamboat at four o'clock. About this time they had grown quite numerous, but still kept scattered. When Mr. Wilson, the Sheriff, accompanied, we believe, by Messrs. McArthur and Goodell, came out of the jail, a cart drove up, Wilson was attacked, and after a short struggle, in which he was dangerously, ~~if not mortally injured, and one of the deputies~~ had discharged his pistol at a negro, Thornton was put into the cart, and driven off. By this time it is supposed that upwards of forty negroes were on the spot. Who it was that wounded Wilson is not positively known; but the jailer thinks he can be identified at sight. The citizens in town now caught the alarm, and a

general rush took place to the jail. The negroes having rescued their man made for the woods in a body. They were followed by men on foot and on horseback, some armed with clubs, some with pistols, and others with guns. The cart was overtaken a mile or more, a little distance from Fort Gratiot turnpike; but the prisoner had escaped. The woods were scoured in all directions, and several of the blacks secured, and taken back to jail. Pistols were found on some. As it was known they would make for the river with a view of crossing to the Canada side, horsemen were despatched up and down to prevent them. By evening a good number had been caught, and it was ascertained that some had actually succeeded in getting over. One young negress was brought back as she was waving her handkerchief from a canoe. The prisoner it is presumed, made his escape into Canada. Thus was begun and carried through a plot that for ingenuity and daring has seldom been equalled—and that in broad day light. On Monday night patrols were stationed in all parts of the city, and up and down the river to intercept any that might attempt to cross. Since then, there has been a promiscuous capturing of blacks, whether concerned or not in the supposed conspiracy. How far this course can be justified our readers must determine. Suffice it to say that many, against whom nothing possible can be brought, and who, we are sure, are able to make out a perfect *alibi* at the time of the riot, are now in jail. At this time, (Tuesday) between twenty and thirty have been imprisoned. We are not for having crimes pass unpunished, nor ought those blacks, who were instrumental in the outrageous and barbarous assault upon Mr. Wilson, to be shielded from the consequences of such an uncalled for proceeding. We hope they will be ferreted out, and brought to punishment. But let not the innocent, because they are black, suffer with the guilty. Let not the excitement that exists operate to the injury of those who are now the more than injured.



**FURTHER PARTICULARS.**—We learn that Thornton and his wife have been re-taken, committed to Sandwich jail, and that their examination before the Justice on that side takes place to-day. Several other blacks have also been taken and confined in the same jail. A requisition, we presume, will be made on the Canada authorities to have them delivered up. A question will present itself; whether Thornton, if taken over as a fugitive from justice, and imprisoned in our jail on a criminal charge, is any longer liable to be carried off as a slave? At any rate, whether the law, if violated, had not a paramount right to that of the individual claimant?

☞ If it is a violation of the law of God to retain a human being as property, how can a Court be justified in giving up a runaway slave?