

# From Immigrant to Establishment A Black Family's Journey

Hilary J. Dawson

Volume 99, Number 1, Spring 2007

Forging Freedom: In Honour of the Bicentenary of the British  
Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065795ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065795ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this article

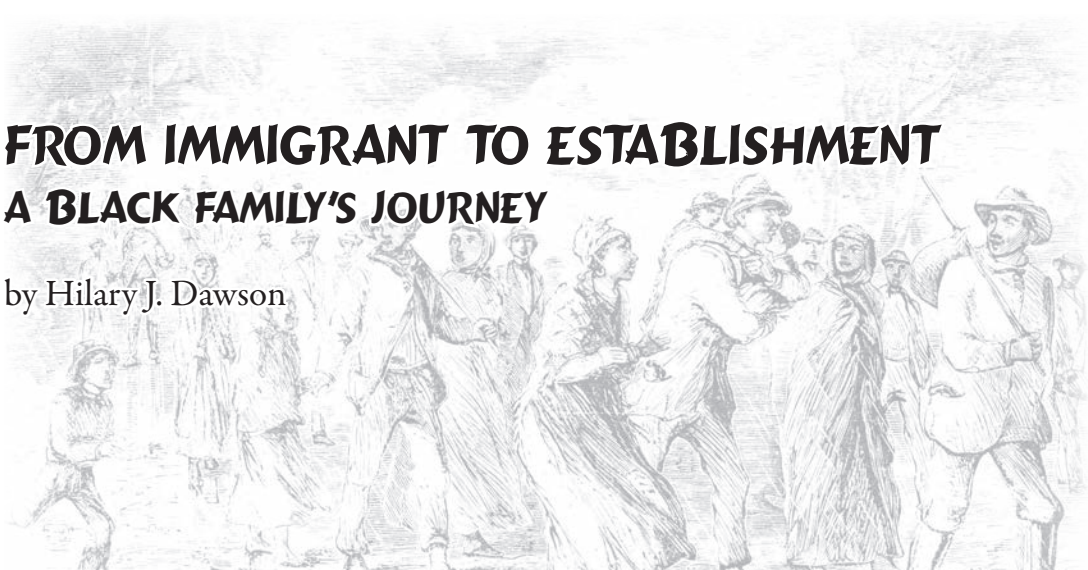
Dawson, H. J. (2007). From Immigrant to Establishment: A Black Family's Journey. *Ontario History*, 99(1), 31–43. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065795ar>

Article abstract

This is the remarkable story of a Black family who came to Toronto in the 1830s, escaping from bondage and racism in the United States. The Lafferty family achieved levels of education and professional prominence that could only be dreamed of by free Blacks south of the border. One of their sons in particular – Alfred Lafferty, born in Toronto in 1839 – would rise to the position of principal of several grammar schools in different parts of the province, and become the first Black lawyer in Chatham, Ontario. His personal history provides a fascinating illustration of race and class in nineteenth-century Ontario. It demonstrates one family's accommodation to the restrictions imposed by Canada's unspoken prejudice against people of colour.

# FROM IMMIGRANT TO ESTABLISHMENT A BLACK FAMILY'S JOURNEY

by Hilary J. Dawson



This is the remarkable story of a Black family who came to Toronto in the 1830s, escaping from bondage and racism in the United States. The Lafferty family achieved levels of education and professional prominence that could only be dreamed of by free Blacks south of the border. One of their sons in particular – Alfred Lafferty, born in Toronto in 1839 – would rise to the position of principal of several grammar schools in different parts of the province, and become the first Black lawyer in Chatham, Ontario. His personal history provides a fascinating illustration of race and class in nineteenth-century Ontario. It demonstrates one family's accommodation to the restrictions imposed by Canada's unspoken prejudice against people of colour.

In his *Report on the Toronto Negroes*, produced for the Governor General in 1841, Edward de St. Remy described the lot of Toronto's Black community, and

noted the success of Alfred Lafferty's father, William: "Some [Blacks] brought a little capital with them, as the Rosses, Sey, Wardell, Hickman, etc...The generallity [sic], however, came penniless to Canada. Among these, Lafferty, a carter, now owning several houses in King Street."<sup>1</sup>

William Lafferty was about twenty when he left the United States. Whether he escaped slavery, or was propelled north by the Black Codes (restrictive and demeaning laws regulating the actions of free Blacks) is not known. He arrived in Canada in the middle of August 1830, when William IV was being proclaimed King. With choruses of "God Save the King" and "Rule Britannia" breaking out spontaneously across the province, he must have felt warmly welcomed to the protection of the British Crown.

William settled in the Town of York, which, by 1830, had grown beyond a garrison town in the wilderness. Tired of the accumulating filth and disease of "Old

---

<sup>1</sup> Library and Archives Canada (hereafter cited as LAC), RG 7 G14 Vol.15 Lt-Gov. Correspondence U.C. 1835-1841 - E. de St. Remy, Report on the Toronto Negroes for Lord Sydenham, dated 5 Apr 1841.

## Abstract

*This is the remarkable story of a Black family who came to Toronto in the 1830s, escaping from bondage and racism in the United States. The Lafferty family achieved levels of education and professional prominence that could only be dreamed of by free Blacks south of the border. One of their sons in particular – Alfred Lafferty, born in Toronto in 1839 – would rise to the position of principal of several grammar schools in different parts of the province, and become the first Black lawyer in Chatham, Ontario. His personal history provides a fascinating illustration of race and class in nineteenth-century Ontario. It demonstrates one family’s accommodation to the restrictions imposed by Canada’s unspoken prejudice against people of colour.*

*Résumé: Cet article relate l’histoire exceptionnelle de William et Sarah Lafferty qui arrivèrent à Toronto vers 1830, fuyant le racisme et l’esclavage aux Etats-Unis. Le niveau d’éducation et le statut professionnel que connut leur famille ne pouvaient que relever du rêve pour les Noirs affranchis au sud de la frontière. Un de leurs fils en particulier, Alfred Lafferty, né à Toronto en 1839, devint directeur de plusieurs écoles secondaires disséminées dans la province, et fut le premier avocat noir à Chatham en Ontario. Son parcours est un exemple fascinant de l’histoire des races et classes sociales dans l’Ontario du dix-neuvième siècle, et montre comment une famille dut s’accommoder des restrictions que les préjugés canadiens imposaient tacitement aux gens de couleur.*

Town” (six hundred died in the cholera epidemic of 1833-34, a result of the proximity of wells and outhouses, as well as the habit of upstream farmers dumping dead stock into the waters of the Don River), wealthier families were moving north and west, and building grand man-

sions. The harbour was busy with newly arrived immigrants, and the wharves were crammed with carters jostling one another as they competed to carry passengers’ belongings, or unloaded the latest imports. There were plenty of opportunities for skilled and unskilled labourers.

At first William worked as a labourer, then as a carter, carrying loads from the wharves, the market, and building sites. A carter’s license was valid for one year and cost £1.5 (one pound, five shillings).<sup>2</sup> From 1834 on, carrying water to extinguish Toronto’s frequent fires was added to carters’ duties – William was paid two shillings for carting water to put out a fire on John Street on 2 June 1835.<sup>3</sup> Duties were further expanded when the Board of Health requested that carters be employed as “scavengers” to remove the waste strewn about the streets.

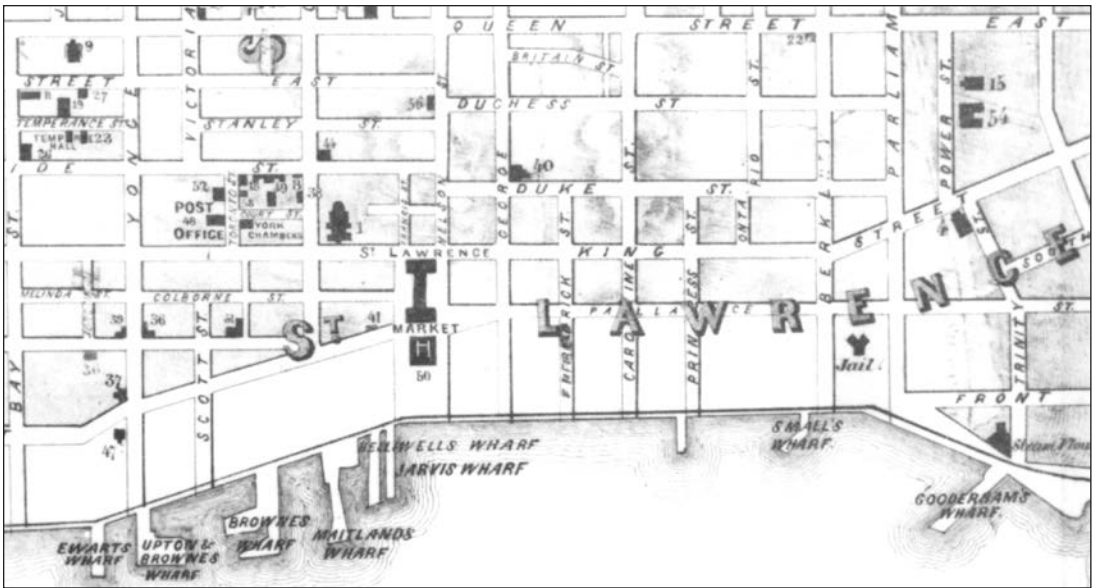
On 14 April 1833, William Lafferty and Sarah Cloud (both described in the marriage register as “of Colour”) were married by the Rev. John Barry in the wooden chapel of the Wesleyan Methodist Society on George Street.<sup>4</sup>

Like most Canadian settlers, William was drawn to real estate. Owning property was an expression of independence and freedom for all immigrants, whether it was the roof over their heads, or, for the wealthy, owning hundreds of acres more

<sup>2</sup> Archives of Ontario (hereafter cited as AO), *Upper Canada Gazette*, June 11, 1835, “An Act To Licence and Regulate the Duties and Charges of Common Carriers in the City of Toronto.” Microfilm N31

<sup>3</sup> *Correspondent & Advocate* (Toronto, 18 May 1836).

<sup>4</sup> AO, RG 80, Home District Marriage Register, Vol. 10, 1831-40, microfilm MS248 reel 2, 112.



Detail of a plan of the city of Toronto published by James Bain, 1871. City of Toronto Archives, MT 00110-2.

land than relatives back in Britain. The pioneer houses of the Old Town were of little interest to the bigger players, who were looking beyond the city boundaries. A number of the small older properties were available for sale, and four years after he arrived in Canada, William Lafferty purchased a frame house for his new family, on Stewart's Lane (later renamed Francis Street), just east of St. James' churchyard. It was not a salubrious area, but the house was affordable.<sup>5</sup>

When William and Sarah's first son, William Dennis Lafferty, was born in 1834, they must have been overjoyed to know that he would never suffer the horrors of slavery, nor would he ever have to prove he was a free man. (Many states re-

quired "free persons of colour" to carry papers to prove they were not slaves.) In 1837 their second son, John, was born, and two years later their third, Alfred Mitchell. By that time, tax assessments show, the Laffertys owned two horses and two milch (dairy) cows. They also had bought an adjacent house on Stewart's Lane, which they rented to a chair maker named John Butters, and then to John Flanigan, a gardener.<sup>6</sup>

William did well in the cartage business. Soon he acquired a building lot on King Street just east of town, in the "Liberties," the area set aside for Toronto's inevitable expansion to the Don River. The three properties were valued at £230. It would have taken sixty cart-loads at

<sup>5</sup> City of Toronto Archives (hereafter cited as CTA), RSI 001310 Roll 1, Tax Assessment Rolls: Toronto 1834-38.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

the regulated rate of 7½d (seven pence ha'penny) per load for William to pay the taxes on just one of these properties. By 1842, William Lafferty owned six lots in and around the city.<sup>7</sup>

The Toronto census gives a snapshot of the Lafferty household in October 1842. They had moved from the squalid surroundings of Stewart's Lane to property William had bought on Newgate Street (which would later become Adelaide Street East). The census records that William and Sarah Lafferty had been born in the U.S., and their three boys in Canada. Two of the boys (William aged about 9 and John about 5) were attending school. School attendance was not compulsory, but the Lafferty parents clearly believed in the importance of education. Alfred joined his brothers at school in about 1844, followed shortly by their little sister Sarah, who had been born about 1842.

In 1842, William Lafferty swore the Oath of Allegiance to the British Crown, which allowed him "to be admitted to all the privileges of British birth." Nine years before, he had marked the marriage register with an "X", but on 4 August 1842 he signed his name to the naturalization register.<sup>8</sup> With naturalization came

the right to vote, although William had already cast his ballot in the election of May 1841. In the era before the secret ballot, we know that he had supported Isaac Buchanan (Reform) and George Munro (Tory, and the incumbent mayor).<sup>9</sup> In December 1847, William signed a petition proposing steam-ship magnate Donald Bethune as candidate for the legislative assembly.<sup>10</sup>

By 1846, William had moved on from the cartage business. He opened a provision store at his home at 87 Adelaide Street East, and also rented a grocery store on Yonge Street, between Adelaide and King.

While Toronto fulfilled the promise of allowing more opportunities than the U.S. for people of colour like the Laffertys, it was not always a tolerant place. On several occasions, Toronto's Black community protested against racist theatrical performances and minstrel shows, with little real success.<sup>11</sup> Interludes by black-face minstrel groups were common in theatre productions and circuses from the 1830s on, becoming increasingly popular in the 1840s. For example, in 1849, Toronto's Royal Lyceum theatre featured the Ethiopian Harmonists, white actors who donned make-up and parodied slave

<sup>7</sup> CTA, RSI 001310 Roll 2, Tax Assessment Rolls: Toronto 1839-42.

<sup>8</sup> LAC, RG 5 B47, Upper Canada Naturalization Register, Vol. 7, microfilm C-15693, no.49.

<sup>9</sup> Paul J. McGrath, ed. *The Great Contest for Responsible Government: the City of Toronto Poll Book of 1841* (Toronto: Ontario Genealogical Society, Toronto Branch, 2004), 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Globe* (Toronto 15 Dec 1847), petition from citizens "To Donald Bethune, Esq."

<sup>11</sup> For instance, CTA, Toronto Council Minutes, "A Communication from George Stewart and others praying the Council to prevent certain representations in the City," Monday July 20, 1840; CTA, RG 1, Series B1, Box 5, File 8 "Petition from people of colour residing in the City of Toronto to His Worship the Mayor of Toronto," October 14, 1841.



life on the plantation. On a previous tour they had received the public's "enthusiastic approbation" for their portrayal of "Dandy Negroes" and "Southern Plantation Darkies." Promoted on the theatre poster as a "grotesque entertainment," bigotry in shows like this must have spilled out onto the streets of Toronto.<sup>12</sup>

Windsor newspaper owner Henry Bibb (himself a former slave) described Canadian attitudes as he saw them in an editorial in his paper *The Voice of the Fugitive*. He blamed the influence of "old Capt. Slavery" south of the border.

Color-phobia is a contagious disease. It is more destructive to the mind than to the body. It goes with a person who is a little nervous...It makes them sing out "darkey," "darkey," "nigger," "nigger"... It sometimes makes them quack like crows. It frightens them up from the dining table at public houses, not because of a black man's cooking the dinner or waiting on them, but because of his sitting down to eat. It excites them awfully when colored passengers enter the rail cars or stage coaches, but not when they come in the capacity of waiters or servants. It sometimes gets into children through the wicked and unnatural teaching of their parents...<sup>13</sup>

Was it this personal, street-level prejudice that encouraged the Laffertys to send Alfred away to school? "No distinction exists in Toronto, in regard to school privileges," Boston abolitionist Benjamin

Drew noted, but perhaps William and Sarah Lafferty felt that their son would receive a better education at a school designed to fill the needs and high expectations of a Black community.<sup>14</sup> So about 1850, young Alfred left the noise, filth and construction of Toronto to go to a new school in the thriving farming community of the Elgin Settlement, at Buxton in Kent County, near Chatham.

The Settlement had been established in 1849 by a Presbyterian minister, the Reverend William King, as a haven for those fleeing slavery. He had obtained a grant of 9,000 acres of Clergy Reserve from the Governor General of Canada, Lord Elgin. This extended from just south of Chatham to Lake Erie. Settlers cleared land, built cabins, planted gardens, and surrounded their homes with picket fences. The first school in the settlement opened in 1850. It was designed to give the best education to those who had been deprived of it. Besides the basics of literacy, and needlework for the girls, the school taught every academic subject, including Latin and Greek. It was an integrated school, in an area where other schools were segregated. Newspaper publisher, author, educator and antislavery lecturer Mary Ann Shadd, who had been born in Delaware of free Black parents, noted in 1852, "The school for

<sup>12</sup> Toronto Reference Library, Baldwin Room, Broadside Collection, Playbill for opening of *Royal Lyceum* theatre, Toronto, September 25, 1849. [Catalogue card reads "Removed from Robertson Scrapbook B2-73a."]

<sup>13</sup> Henry Bibb, "Color-phobia in Canada," *Voice of the Fugitive* (Windsor, Canada West, 21 May 1851), in C. Peter Ripley, ed., *The Black Abolitionist Papers*, Vol. 2 *Canada, 1830-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 136-37.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Drew, *The Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1856. Toronto: Coles Canadiana Collection, 1981), 94.

the settlers at Elgin is so far superior to the one established for white children that the latter was discontinued,” and all the children attended the Buxton school together.<sup>15</sup>

Alfred was not the only member of the Toronto Black community to go to this school. The family of Anderson Ruffin Abbott, who would become the first Canadian-born Black doctor, moved from Toronto so he could attend the Buxton school. In the short time he was there, Alfred Lafferty became one of the Reverend King’s star pupils.

By the spring of 1853, Alfred Lafferty had returned to Toronto, where he lived with his family over the grocery store on Yonge Street. There were about 30,000 people living in Toronto then. At least as many as 1,000 were of African descent, and that number was rising. In 1851, the Fugitive Slave Law had come into effect in the United States. This law enforced the rights of the slave-owner, and made it mandatory for even those in the northern states to assist in the recapture of fugitives. There were harsh penalties for those who would not.

This appalling law united those who had individually condemned slavery. In Toronto, public protest against the American law included the founding of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, the

Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, and a series of lectures by well-known abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass. In September 1851, the historic North American Convention of Colored Freemen was held in the new St. Lawrence Hall. Discussion among the delegates who attended from Canada and the northern US concluded that, despite local and personal incidents of racism, “the British government is the most favorable in the civilized world to the people of color, and is thereby entitled to our entire confidence.”<sup>16</sup>

Not even the most elite of Toronto schools were closed to Black students. Alfred enrolled at Upper Canada College in the spring term of 1853.<sup>17</sup> At that time, Upper Canada College was situated on King Street West (opposite Roy Thompson Hall’s current location). Alfred was not the first Black student to attend the College. Peter Gallego, son of a former slave from Richmond, Virginia, and a brilliant protégé of Bishop John Strachan, had attended in 1837. Also starting in 1853 was William Henry Smallwood, son of a former Underground Railroad operator from Washington, D.C. In 1859, Anderson Ruffin Abbott’s youngest brother, William, enrolled at the school.

In 1856 Alfred Lafferty won an “exhibition” (scholarship), waiving his fees

<sup>15</sup> Mary A. Shadd, *A Plea for Emigration, or Notes of Canada West* (Detroit: George W. Pattison, 1852), edited by Richard Almonte and reprinted (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1998), 68.

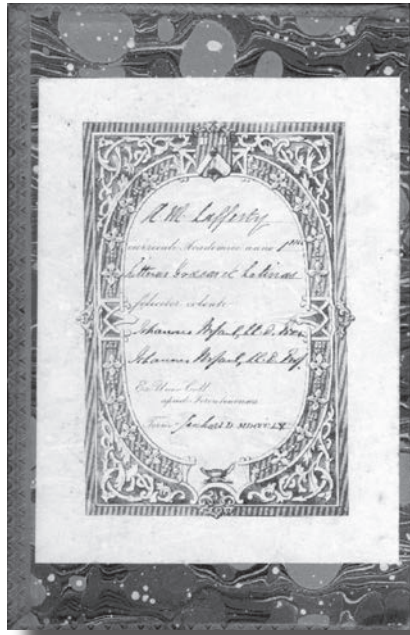
<sup>16</sup> “Proceedings of the North American Convention Convened at St. Lawrence Hall, Toronto, Canada West, 11-13 September 1851,” Ripley, ed. *Black Abolitionist Papers*, vol 2 *Canada*, 155.

<sup>17</sup> University of Toronto Archives (hereafter cited as UTA), A74-0018/036, Upper Canada College Register of Admissions 1830-1861, Spring Term from 1st March 1853 to 15th May 1853.

for the duration of his studies.<sup>18</sup> In his last two years at Upper Canada College he learned German, and, in 1859, he was vice-president of the College Debating Society. He matriculated (graduated) with honours, winning two of the college's four major awards: "His Excellency the Governor General's Prize" and "The Mathematical Prize."<sup>19</sup> His name is inscribed on the honour roll in the Laidlaw Hall at the "new" (1891) Upper Canada College in the north end of the city on Avenue Road.

While Alfred was embarking on his academic career, his father was expanding his real estate interests. William Lafferty held a mortgage on a farm in Col. Smith's block in Etobicoke Township, west of Toronto, and in 1851 he purchased this fifty-acre property for £120. The fertile land of Etobicoke was a sound investment, and he could hope to grow produce for his grocery store in Toronto. He and his sons built a fieldstone farmhouse, and his eldest, William Dennis Lafferty, moved out to live on the farm.

On 24 February 1859, William Laf-



ferty wrote his will. It was drawn up and witnessed by George B. Ware, and signed in William's shaky hand. The second witness was Isaac Gilmour Cary, a freeman from Virginia who worked as a barber in Toronto.<sup>20</sup> Four days later, William died. His funeral was held on 2 March, at the First Baptist Chapel at the corner of Queen and Victoria Streets. William Lafferty's estate included houses on Yonge and

Adelaide Streets (each valued at \$2,000), goods in the store, furniture, livestock, agricultural implements, and wagons. His children were well provided for: William D. Lafferty had a farm in a very desirable agricultural area; John was set up in a grocery business on Yonge Street, and Alfred was showing great academic promise. Young Sarah had the protection of her brothers, and the contacts to marry well. William's most important legacy, though, must have been the freedom in which his children lived, and the education they received.

At the time of William's death, three properties on Maitland Street were in

<sup>18</sup> UTA, A74-0018/021(03), Upper Canada College Fees Book, 1855-1857.

<sup>19</sup> UTA, A76-0003/053(03), Upper Canada College Prize Lists: Supplement to the Boys' Paper, 1859.

<sup>20</sup> AO, RG 22-305, York County Surrogate Court Estate Files 1800-1864, microfilm MS638 reel 88. William Lafferty Will, 29 February 1859.



the name of “Mrs. Wm. Lafferty.” Sarah Lafferty and her two youngest children moved from the Yonge Street grocery store to one of the Maitland Street houses. Although it was small, the new house was an easy walk to the University of Toronto, where Alfred had won a matriculation scholarship in mathematics.

It must have been a proud moment for Sarah Lafferty when her son left for his first day at University College in 1860. It will have been a sad moment, too, as his father, who had learned to write as an adult, had not lived to see his son’s success. Alfred’s excellent early schooling stood him in good stead: he was awarded prizes of \$10 each for first class standing in Classics and Mathematics. These were useful prizes when the fee for one academic term was \$20. He continued to win scholarships and prizes throughout his university career.<sup>21</sup>

The university’s president, Dr. John McCaul, remembered Alfred’s exceptional performance in his response in 1863 to questions posed by Samuel Gridley Howe of the Freedman’s Inquiry Commission, who visited Toronto on a fact-finding mission for the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission. The Commission was established by President Abraham Lincoln to determine what government

measures would be necessary to allow emancipated slaves to become self-sufficient. Dr. McCaul told Howe:

I can give you my own experience in regard to the capacity of the blacks...We had a mulatto here...who took the “double first” in both classics and mathematics. He has very great ability. There are few whites who can do what he did...I do not think there have been more than three instances in which it has been done since the University was opened twenty years ago. Laferty [sic] is the young man’s name. His father was a man of very humble capacity, and, I think, a full black...I do not hesitate to say, in regard to Mr. Lafferty, that he is equal to any white man...far superior to the average of them. It was a great subject of astonishment to some of our Kentucky friends, who came over here last year in October, when they saw this mulatto get the first prize for Greek verse which he had to recite; and he was the crack man of the day, all the others listening to him with great pleasure.<sup>22</sup>

In March 1860, Alfred was nominated by J.M. Gibson (who would become Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario) as secretary of the University College Literary and Athletic Society.<sup>23</sup> In October of the same year, Alfred proposed his old school friend W.H. Vandersmissen (later, Professor of German at University College) to membership of the society.<sup>24</sup>

Other members of “The Lit.” were the “Kentucky friends” mentioned in Dr.

<sup>21</sup> UTA, P78 - 0158 (01), University of Toronto Class & Prize Lists 1852-61, 1863-87.

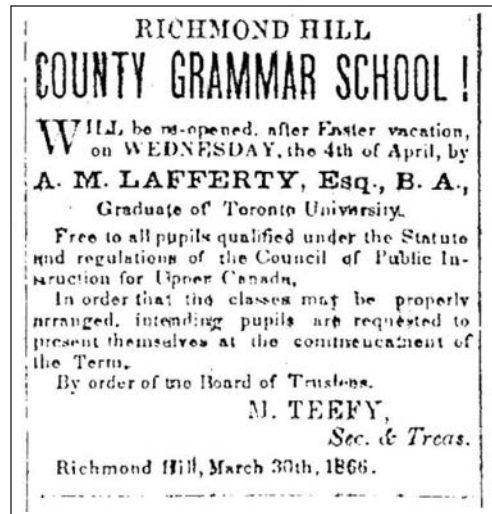
<sup>22</sup> S.G. Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West: Report to the Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission* (Boston, 1864), Dr. John McCaul, President of the University of Toronto, to S. G. Howe, of the Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission, 1863. CIHM microfiche 28569.

<sup>23</sup> UTA, A69-0011/001(01), University College Literary and Athletic Society, Minute Book 23 March 1860 – 4 December 1868.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

McCaul's report. A number of Southern families had sent their sons to be educated in Toronto, away from the mounting tensions that would erupt in the Civil War. It must have been a shock to these young men to find themselves at university with Alfred Lafferty, a Black man and a brilliant student, when they had grown up in a country where it was illegal in many states for Blacks to learn to read and write. These students unsuccessfully contested Alfred's membership in the Literary and Athletic Society. The situation must have been unbearable for him, and while the details are not recorded, Alfred was censured by the Chairman for some action at a meeting, and ejected. A student delegation asked Dr. McCaul for a decision as to whether Alfred should be permanently expelled from the Society. Dr. McCaul declined to rule, saying he had confidence that the students would come to a decision that would reflect favourably on the university, the city and the country. Alfred continued as a member of the Literary Society, but his attendance was less frequent.<sup>25</sup>

In 1863, Alfred M. Lafferty received his BA, one of sixteen conferred that year by University College. (In 1867, University College granted him an MA.) He was offered the position of headmaster of the Richmond Hill County Grammar School in 1866, in a prosperous farming commu-



nity sixteen miles north of Toronto. The board of trustees was delighted to have “secured the services of Mr. A.M. Lafferty, B.A. a Graduate and Silver Medalist (in both Classics and Mathematics) of the Toronto University” who started after the Easter vacation.<sup>26</sup> He was the only teacher, and was paid \$600. The school had forty students, and the Annual Report for 1867 showed that by the end of that year enrolment at the school had increased to forty-six. Six pupils had received prizes as a result of their exam marks, and one student had matriculated to the University of Toronto.<sup>27</sup> In Richmond Hill, Alfred Lafferty joined the management committee of the Mechanics’ Institute (the fore-runner of the Richmond Hill Library) and

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> AO, RG2-21 Cont. 16, Ministry of Education Records: Grammar School Trustee Half Yearly Records - Richmond Hill 1863-67. Letter from the Board of Trustees to the Chief Superintendent of Education, 29 June 1866.

<sup>27</sup> AO, RG2-21 Cont. 16, Ministry of Education Records: Grammar School Trustee Half Yearly Records - Richmond Hill 1863-67. Annual Report for 1867, dated 17 January 1868.

the Richmond Masonic Lodge.

In 1870, the Lindsay Grammar School offered Alfred \$1,000 a year. Richmond Hill could not compete with this salary offer. The *York Herald* recorded his departure with regret:

Mr. Lafferty has ably and successfully discharged the duties of Head Master in the Richmond Hill County Grammar School, during the past five years...Diligentia omnia vincit seems to have become the motto of his professional life, and it is small marvel that he should succeed in inspiring with similar sentiment the young men entrusted to his tutorial care.<sup>28</sup>

Alfred's grateful pupils presented him with a writing desk "as a token of their esteem and regard."

The increased salary and his impending departure in the New Year prompted Alfred to ask for Miss Isabella Campbell's hand in marriage. The Campbells were a white family, originally from Scotland. Isabella's mother, Mrs. Isabella Russell Campbell, had moved to Richmond Hill when she was widowed. There, assisted by her daughters, Isabella and Christina, she opened "Mrs. and the Misses Campbell's Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies." Alfred and Isabella were married on 29 December 1870, in Port Lewis, Quebec (east of Montreal) "at the residence of Malcolm Campbell, Esq., uncle of the bride."<sup>29</sup>

The newlyweds moved to Lindsay,

but Alfred found the position frustrating, despite the increase in salary. As headmaster (and only teacher) of the Lindsay Grammar School, he was also the headmaster of the public school. Alfred felt he could not run both the senior and junior schools without an assistant, and when the Lindsay trustees denied his request for additional staff, he resigned.<sup>30</sup>

Alfred found another position as headmaster of the high school in Guelph. He was paid \$1,000 a year, and provided with a house near the school, on Paisley Street. The Guelph school inspector was impressed with Alfred, whom he described as a "superior teacher" and "A good scholar, a fair disciplinarian."<sup>31</sup> Thirty-six pupils were registered at the school, but the inspector noted that enrolment was not what it should be, as the public school inspector did not encourage students to go on to secondary education.

While in Guelph, the Laffertys attended the Wesleyan Methodist Church on Norfolk Street, where Alfred became a local preacher (lay preacher). Alfred and Isabella's daughter Isabella Sarah Euphemia (Effie) was born in Guelph on 21 April 1873. In 1875, the Lafferty family moved again when Alfred was appointed principal of the recently opened Wilberforce Educational Institute (WEI) in Chatham. The WEI was an incorpora-

<sup>28</sup> AO, *The Victoria Warder* (Lindsay, Ontario, Wed. Dec. 28), 1870, microfilm N166, quoting from *The York Herald* (Richmond Hill).

<sup>29</sup> AO, *The York Herald* (Richmond Hill, Ont., 6 January 1871), microfilm N48.

<sup>30</sup> <[www.ontariogenealogy.com/victoria/lindsayeducation.html](http://www.ontariogenealogy.com/victoria/lindsayeducation.html)> (consulted January, 2005).

<sup>31</sup> AO, RG2-105-0-2 Cont. 2, Department of Education High School Inspectors Annual Report, A-M 1873-4, Inspector's Half-Yearly Report of High School at Guelph, 8 December 1873, 3 June 1874.

tion of two earlier Kent County schools established primarily for the education of Black settlers. These were the Nazrey Institute in Chatham Township, founded by the Rev. Willis Nazrey; and Josiah Henson's British American Institute near Dresden. The WEI offered courses from basic literacy and primary instruction through university matriculation, as well as practical skills like blacksmithing. Academic courses taught during Alfred's administration included science, mathematics, classics and German. The Institute was open to everyone, but most students and staff came from the Black community. The WEI's president was Dr. Anderson Ruffin Abbott, a classmate from Alfred Lafferty's early schooldays.

Alfred, Isabella and two-year-old Effie first lived in a house on King Street, near First Street in Chatham. In August 1877, they purchased an eleven-room brick house on Thames Street in North Chatham for \$880. The property ran down to the Thames River. This may not have been the best location, as so many Chatham industries were based on the river, and the Laffertys' neighbours included J.M. Smith's tannery and Hadley's lumber yard. The area was also prone to the Thames River's all too frequent floods.

It is interesting that in Chatham, where parallel Black and White organiza-

tions existed, all of Alfred's affiliations were white. His commitment to Methodism continued, and the Lafferty family joined Park Street Methodist Church. The grand new building on Park Street was virtually a cathedral. In 1876, Alfred was confirmed as a local preacher by the quarterly meeting. He became a member of the quarterly committee, and was asked to "prepare an address to the congregation setting forth just how we stand" when the church had financial difficulties. He was a class leader, a Sunday school representative, a steward, and a delegate to the Temperance Association.<sup>32</sup> Isabella was a member and speaker of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

Alfred's community interest extended beyond his own church. In October 1879, he was featured in a fund-raising "literary and musical entertainment" at the North Chatham Methodist Church on Elizabeth Street, where he performed his popular recitation of "The Diver."<sup>33</sup> In the newspaper review of the evening, Alfred's performance was judged one of the best on the programme.<sup>34</sup> The next year, he took part in the entertainment at the "oyster social" of the William Street Baptist Church.<sup>35</sup>

While he was principal of the Wilberforce Institute, Alfred studied law by correspondence, returning to Toronto

<sup>32</sup> United Church of Canada/Victoria University Archives, 77.417L, Records of Park Street Methodist Church, Chatham.

<sup>33</sup> Perhaps *Der Taucher* by Friedrich Schiller, written in German in 1797, set to music by Franz Schubert in 1814.

<sup>34</sup> Chatham Public Library (hereafter cited as CPL), "Literary and Musical" in Chatham *Tri-Weekly Planet* (Chatham, 29 October 1879).

<sup>35</sup> *The Daily Advertiser* (London, Ontario, 20 November 1880).

to take his exams. In 1882, he was admitted to the Law Society, and he was called to the Bar early in 1886. He advertised his practice in the *Chatham Tri-Weekly Planet*: “A.M. LAFFERTY, M.A. - Barrister, Solicitor, &c. Office Urquhart’s Block, Division Court Entrance, King St., Chatham. Money to Lend - Terms easy. Fees moderate.”<sup>36</sup> Kent County documents show that in his practice, he served both Black and white clients.

Effie Lafferty followed in her father’s footsteps. She obtained her BA from University College, Toronto, in 1896. She, too, was a teacher. She returned to the Chatham area, and taught at schools in Wallaceburg, where she taught Classics, Comber and at Chatham Collegiate Institute. When her aging parents’ health deteriorated, Effie stayed home to care for them, working part-time at the Chatham Library. Her mother, Isabella Campbell Lafferty, died in August 1910, at the age of 79.<sup>37</sup>

Alfred and Effie continued to live at 58 Thames Street in Chatham until 1912. On 27 September 1912, Effie Lafferty took advantage of the last cheap summer

excursion train to Detroit. Just before it arrived back in Chatham, it derailed. Miraculously, no one was killed, but Effie was paralysed for the rest of her life.<sup>38</sup>

With Effie in hospital, Alfred was unable to look after himself. For some years, he had been suffering from Bright’s disease, a degenerative kidney condition. He was moved to a hospital in London, where he died on 18 October 1912.<sup>39</sup> Funeral arrangements were made by the Oddfellows’ Lodge. (Alfred had served Oddfellows Western City Lodge No. 93 as Noble Grand, Chaplain, and Financial Secretary.) The funeral was held at

the Oddfellows’ Auditorium. Members of Western City Lodge No.93, and Chatham Lodge No. 29, I.O.O.F. and other friends attended.<sup>40</sup> Alfred was buried beside his wife in Old Maple Leaf Cemetery



in Chatham.

A moving obituary appeared in the *Chatham Planet* on 18 October 1912:

A.M. LAFFERTY PASSES AWAY

...He was well known in Chatham as a prominent Oddfellow and as a man of great intellectual attainments. He was a master of

<sup>36</sup> CPL, *Chatham Tri-Weekly Planet* (Chatham, through 1887).

<sup>37</sup> CPL, *The Chatham Planet* (Chatham, 11 August 1910).

<sup>38</sup> Wallaceburg Public Library, “Big R.R. Wreck” in *The Wallaceburg News* (Wallaceburg, 26 September 1912).

<sup>39</sup> AO, Registrar General of Ontario, MS935 R177, Death Registrations, Co. of Middlesex, Division of London Tp, Reg. 021423 Alfred Mitchell Lafferty.

<sup>40</sup> CPL, *The Chatham Planet* (Chatham, 19 October 1912).



arts of Toronto University, and had practised law for many years in this city, until prevented by his illness...It was upon [his daughter] that her father depended for care, and when the accident occurred he was deprived of a bright element in his life...<sup>41</sup>

The newspaper did not mention that Alfred Lafferty was Chatham's first lawyer of African descent.

Although Effie Lafferty spent the next thirty-five years in St. Joseph's Hospital, Chatham, she maintained her good humour. She acquired a radio, and won the 1927 contest to name a Chatham radio station (CFCO - Coming From Chatham Ontario). She was listed in the Chatham telephone book, and among her frequent visitors were writers seeking literary advice.<sup>42</sup> She became an avid birdwatcher, and in a memoir wrote: "Unable to go to look for my birds, I am deeply grateful that conditions were such that my birds could come to me. I am indeed proud of my list of eighty-two kinds of birds identified and recorded in the course of the years..."<sup>43</sup>

Effie's passion for nature, albeit in a small area by the Thames River behind St. Joseph's Hospital, led her to publish several nature articles. She died in 1947,

and was buried with her parents, Alfred and Isabella Lafferty, in the Old Maple Leaf Cemetery, Chatham.

When William Lafferty arrived in Canada in 1830, he was destitute and illiterate. Within ten years he was a property owner and businessman, and had learned to write. He and his wife, Sarah, ensured that their children were well educated,

and set them on the road to finding their own success. Alfred Lafferty rose, with the support of his family, his talents and hard work, from the slums of Toronto to the Chatham establishment. His father's influence gave Alfred his lifelong love of learning, which he passed on to his daughter, Effie, along with the seven books he had won at University College.<sup>44</sup> The Lafferty family had travelled a long way in a hundred years.



<sup>41</sup> CPL, *The Chatham Planet* (Chatham, 18 October 1912).

<sup>42</sup> CPL, *Chatham Daily News* (Chatham, 26 April 1947).

<sup>43</sup> CPL, *St. Joseph's Hospital, 1890-1990. Share the Journey* (St. Joseph's Hospital, Chatham, 1989), 112.

<sup>44</sup> AO, RG22-397, Kent County Surrogate Court, Grant #129-47, Probate in the Estate of Isabella Sarah Euphemia Lafferty.