

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

KING HERITAGE & CULTURAL CENTRE

FEBRUARY 13, 2023

LOST IN THE ARCHIVES

Although we celebrate Black History Month in February each year, our staff and volunteers are invested in researching Black history in King Township throughout the year, and every year we are thrilled to find new families and stories to tell. In our 2022 edition we found domestic servant, Gertrude Johnson in King City. This year KHCC volunteer, Sharon Bentley, turned back the census records was able to uncover another family we were previously unaware of, Eliza Lewis and John Welles.

ELIZA LEWIS: AN AMERICAN ORIGIN

As with other historical Black residents of King Township, Eliza's story starts in the United States. Our first records of her are at age 44 in the 1850 U.S. Federal Census when she was living in Cambria, Pennsylvania, with her first husband, George Lewis, and their children Mary, Rose, Matthew, Emily, Selina, Andrew, Joseph, Noah and John aged from 2 to 18. Unfortunately, we do not know much else about her early life. Born in 1806, Pennsylvania, she was likely to have been born free, with only 3% of the population enslaved in 1810 and the practice becoming less and less popular in the state until the *Act to Prevent Kidnapping, Preserve the Public Peace, Prohibit the Exercise of Certain Powers Heretofore Exercised by Certain Judges, Justices of the Peace, Aldermen and Jailors in This Commonwealth (1847)*. We know that George was a farmer, so she would have farmed along side him, as well as running the household, and raising their children. We also know George was born in Virginia, a state notorious for its history of slavery, meaning he was likely enslaved before moving to Pennsylvania.

1850 United States Federal Census for George Lewis

Pennsylvania > Cambria > Cambria

Dwelling-houses numbered in the order of visitation.	Families numbered in the order of visitation.	The Name of every Person whose usual place of abode on the first day of June, 1850, was in this family.	DESCRIPTION.			Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each Male Person over 15 years of age.	Value of Real Estate owned.	PLACE OF BIRTH. Naming the State, Territory, or Country.	Married within the year.	Attended School within the year.	Persons over 20 years of age who cannot read & write.	Whether deaf and dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, pauper, or convict.
			Age.	Sex.	White, black, or mulatto.							
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
		Patrick Staake	10	M				Ireland				
194	199	George Lewis	50	M	B	Farmer	\$710	Pa			1	
		Eliza "	44	F	B			Pa			1	
		Mary "	18	F	B			"				
		Rose "	17	F	B			"				
		Matthew "	15	M	B			"			1	
		Emily "	14	F	B			"			1	

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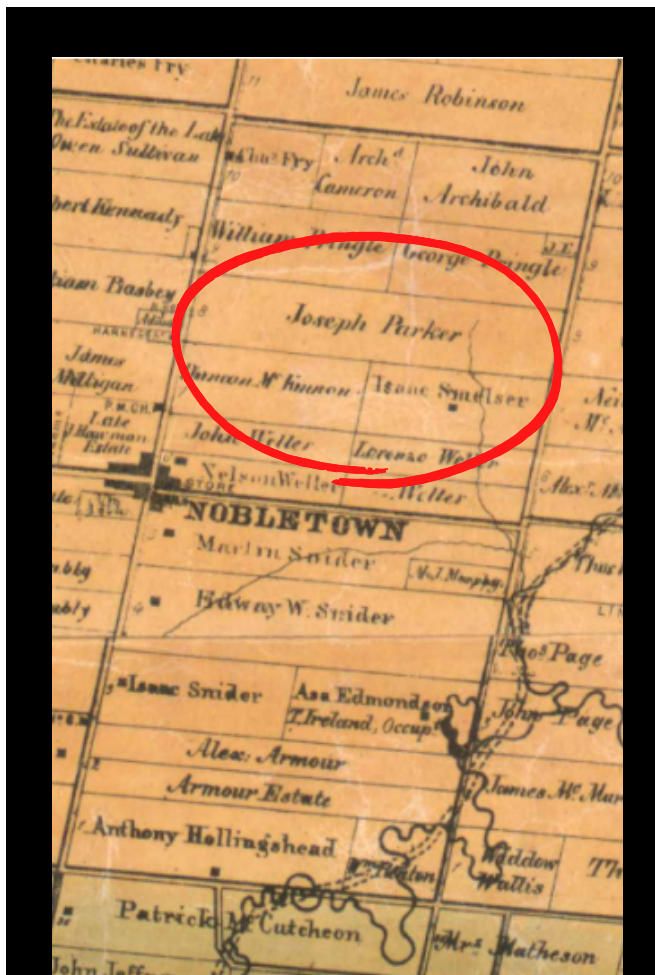
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ELIZA LEWIS AND JOHN WELLES

After 1850, Eliza's life changed. We do not know what happened to George Lewis, but we do know that by the 1861 Canadian Census, Eliza was living in King Township with a new husband, John Welles. John was also a Black man born in the United States in 1821. With her, came her sons from her marriage to George: Matthew, Andrew, Joseph and Noah (it was thanks to them that we were able to trace her). We do not know where her daughters were living at this time, but the youngest, Selina, would have been 23, so it is likely that they had started families of their own. Also living in the household was 11 year old Sarah Welles, listed as their daughter. She likely would have been John's daughter, as Eliza was still married to George at the time of her birth. All are listed as being Black.

The family of eight was not well off. John and Matthew are listed as labourers, lesser paying than a farmer. And they are all living together in what is described as a "shanty" on the 8th Concession, North of Lot 7 (see map). Life would have been hard. While we know there were other Black families in King at the time (see articles on the Rollings and Barnhards), they still would have undoubtedly faced racism, and even more poverty than some of the other families we have found. As we look at the map and see the beautiful homes that now lay on the same land, it is important to reflect on who came here before, and to continue to research their stories. We hope that with continued research we can learn more about Eliza, John and their family to honour their legacy.



Tremaine's Map, 1860. The Lewis-Welles family is listed in 1861 as living in a "shanty" on the 8th Concession just North of Lot 7. This would put them approximately in the circled area, now a developed section of Nobleton.

Do you have story to share about Black History in King Township?

Let us know at kingmuseum@king.ca and be featured in the next newsletter!