

Emancipation Day was community celebration of history, learning and looking forward



It was a day of reflection, celebration, and conversation on Saturday morning as the community came together to mark Emancipation Day.

Organized by the Aurora Black Caucus, in conjunction with the Town of Aurora, the event which marks the anniversary of the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire was held for the first time at Aurora Town Square.

Prior to the opening of Aurora Town Square last fall, Emancipation Day ceremonies were held at Town Hall, but the new venue provided new opportunities for the Caucus, and included not only a flag-raising ceremony, but a panel discussion and an opportunity for community members to bond over culinary traditions.

“Thank you for joining us on this meaningful occasion as we gather to commemorate the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, and reflect on the enduring legacy of freedom, resilience and community,” said Caucus Chair Milton Hart, welcoming guests to the observance. “Emancipation Day is not only a historical milestone, it is a living reminder of the strength and contributions of Black Canadians, past and present. It is a day to honor those who fought for liberation, those who continued to advocate for justice, and those who built bridges of understanding and equity in our communities. Today we come together, all of us, in the spirit of remembrance and celebration.”

The day's program, he said, included a panel discussion focused on “exploring what Emancipation means in our lives today from education, to leadership, to security,” and those in attendance were invited to “share stories, connect with one another, and enjoy the richness of our shared culture.

Addressing the assembled dignitaries, including Newmarket-Aurora MP Sandra Cobena, Newmarket-Aurora MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy, Mayor Tom Mrakas, and several members of Council, Hart added: “Your presence here affirms the importance of this day and the work that still lies ahead.”

“Let us commemorate the past, honour the present, and inspire the future together.”

Reflecting on Emancipation Day, MP Cobena recalled the "simple life" of her childhood in Ecuador and, in coming to Canada, reflected on "the challenges for somebody who looks different."

"When I came here, I didn't feel Canadian enough, I didn't speak the language, and in trying to find a new home, there are challenges and lessons that you carry with you," she said. "I kept that in mind when I prepared these words" but really, I'm a neighbour, I'm a friend, I'm a sister of everybody here today. Today, we gather not just to mark a day, but to honour a turning point in human history."

Emancipation Day, she continued, is "a day edged in memory and meaning."

"We look back and we see a people who walked through fire " men, women, mothers, and sons, who were stripped of their liberty but never surrendered their dignity; who were denied the rights of citizens, yet carried themselves with the grace of kings. The law one day finally caught up with the truth that no one can own another, and no soul is born to serve. But long before the law changed, the longing for freedom lived within them " a kind of freedom, quiet but unbreakable; a kind of music in the heart that no chain could silence. But this day, of course, isn't only about the past " it's about the road you've travelled, the miles still ahead, because freedom is not just the breaking of shackles, but it's the building of justice. It's not only what we're freed from, but what we're freed for " to dream, to speak, to live without fear, and to be treated with dignity.

"Progress doesn't happen in solitude. It is a shared endeavour. One generation leads the next. One neighbour reaches for another. When we forget that, we forget that freedom is a responsibility as much as it is a right, we risk losing what was so dearly wanted, so let this day not be one of ceremony only, but of great commitment. Let us raise our voices for those still unheard. Let us honour the past by shaping a future, one where every child is seen, every family is saved, and every dreamer has a chance."

One organization doing just that, she said, was the Aurora Black Caucus, a sentiment shared by MPP Gallagher Murphy, who has been involved with the organization since its inception.

Gallagher Murphy acknowledged the Caucus for its "leadership in our community" and as a "champion of equity, civic engagement, and cultural celebration."

"This organization has become a vital voice in shaping a more inclusive Aurora," she said. "I remember when I first met Milton via telephone in 2020 during the Pandemic, and we spoke about racial inclusivity here in Aurora. The conversation went further into the weeds of what it means to live in a community that is truly diverse, equitable, and accepting. That conversation opened my eyes, and of course, I went into problem-solving mode with Milton and started regular participation with the Aurora Black Caucus". Today, as we mark Emancipation Day, we are reminded of the importance of both reflection and action, and this is the journey to which I'm speaking. Emancipation Day is not only a commemoration of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, it is a powerful opportunity to recognize the strength, resilience, and contributions of Black communities in Canada, both past and present. More broadly, the emancipation signifies liberation from any form of restraint, and that is what we are here today to celebrate.

"The message at the heart of Emancipation Day, one of freedom, unity, and hope, continues to resonate through the initiatives and the impact of this organization. At a time when organizations are dropping their DEI strategies, I believe that we cannot fall prey to being sheep. We need to stand strong together and continue this work so that history is never repeated.

"As a provincial representative, I know how essential grassroots organizations are to driving lasting change. The Aurora Black Caucus is a shining example of that, of what it means to bring people together, to honour heritage, and to advocate for a better, fairer future for all. To the leadership, members, and volunteers of the Aurora Black Caucus, thank you. Thank you for your courage, your vision, and your commitment to building a community where everyone feels seen, heard, and valued. It is truly an honour to stand with you today."

Mayor Mrakas also expressed gratitude for the opportunity to make Emancipation Day a community tradition, and thanked Hart for being "a dedicated and thoughtful leader in our community" organizing the event.

“The work you and your team does makes a real difference in our community, helping ensure more people understand, appreciate and celebrate the history and culture of Black Canadians and the issues that are important to the community,” he said.

“Emancipation Day celebrates a turning point in the long fight for freedom and human rights, a moment that moved things forward for so many people. But as we celebrate, we also reflect. We reflect on the terrible injustice that millions of people face, people who were taken from Africa, enslaved, and stripped of their humanity. And importantly, we recognize the deep and lasting harm that history has caused for generations. The truth is that the legacy of slavery in the Americas still shapes the world we live in.

“We know that anti-Black racism sadly still exists, both here in Canada and beyond our borders. As a former British colony and Commonwealth country, Canada is part of a broader history, and Emancipation Day truly gives us a chance to look honestly at the past and to keep doing the good work to build stronger communications, better understanding, and real trust with the Black community members. Now, I think it's equally important to remember that emancipation wasn't just a decision made in the British Parliament back in the 1830s. It was fought for by enslaved people who resisted and by abolitionists who refused to stay silent about the injustice that they saw. Today is not just a day of remembrance; it's a day to recognize those in our community who continue to keep this history alive and who honour the legacy of those who came before them by pushing to ensure inclusion and equity are a core part of what we do each and every day.”

By Brock Weir
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