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Abstract: Between the mid-1930s and the mid-1960s, Emancipation Celebrations in Windsor, Ontario were referred to in the city as “The Greatest Freedom Show on Earth.” This article explores debates between Emancipation organizers and Windsor city officials between 1957 and 1968 to demonstrate that distance from the era of slavery did not eradicate the contested nature of Emancipation celebrations as sites of political and social agitation, but resulted in new arguments about the position of African Canadians in the community. As Emancipation Day became increasingly associated with the Freedom Movement across the border, Windsor City Council and the Windsor Police Department began to push against the celebrations, eventually culminating to the celebration’s cancellations in 1967 and 1968 in reaction to the Detroit Riot. The responses of Emancipation Day organizers and their supporters to this treatment will demonstrate how African Canadians in Windsor attempted to uncover city officials’ claims to race neutrality and attempted to define themselves rather than be defined by others.

The implementation of the British Parliament’s Abolition of Slavery Act on August 1st, 1834 generated celebrations among abolitionists and freed slaves across the Anglo-Atlantic world. The abolition of slavery in the British Empire was immediately commemorated through annual August 1st celebrations in the United Kingdom, Canada West, the northern United States, and the British Caribbean (Kerr-Ritchie 2007). While academic literature on Emancipation festivals largely spans this geographic range, it generally favours studies of nineteenth-century celebrations, with a focus on the use of Emancipation festivals to bolster abolitionism in the southern United States and agitate for full citizenship of newly freed slaves. This focus has resulted in representations of Emancipation festivals as static and outdated cultural practices which were significant primarily to generations with a direct connection to enslavement and abolitionism.

According to historian Mitch Kachun, the tradition of freedom festivals largely dissolved after 1910 in the United States, particularly in the urban North, because of new public amusements and the introduction of formal African American institutions to disseminate historical knowledge and
agitate for civil rights (Kachun 2003). While freedom festivals may have declined in the early 1900s, Emancipation Day in Windsor, Ontario regained popularity in the mid-twentieth century. Between the late-1930s and the mid-1960s, tens of thousands of African Americans still celebrated Emancipation by crossing the border into Canada to attend Emancipation celebrations in Windsor. In 1949, Windsor’s Emancipation celebration became widely referred to as “The Greatest Freedom Show on Earth” (Bristow 2007). Dr. Howard McCurdy, a prominent member the Windsor community who taught biology at the University of Windsor and who was the New Democratic Party’s first African Canadian Member of Parliament, stated that Windsor’s Emancipation Day “became the biggest event probably in North America which was attended by black people.” (McCurdy 2010).

Natasha Henry’s 2010 publication, Emancipation Day: Celebrating Freedom in Canada, is the first full length book on the Canadian tradition of Emancipation Day. Henry has begun the important work of illuminating the evolution of Canadian Emancipation celebrations in the twentieth century (Henry 2010) In one of the concluding chapters of her book, Henry contends that “the development and evolution of Emancipation Day in Canada mirrors the African-Canadian community’s struggle for equal rights: first through the abolition movement of the nineteenth century, then through the fight for equality and complete civil rights—a movement that lasted from the mid-1850s through the 1960s with Martin Luther King” (Henry 2010, 208). One element of Henry’s analysis focuses on the impact of the United States’ Movement for Black Civil Rights on the meaning of Emancipation Day in Windsor during the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, she remarks that the number of prominent civil rights activists from the United States that spoke at Emancipation celebrations in Windsor demonstrated that “Emancipation Day had returned to its roots of being an effective political vehicle for the African-Canadian community” (Henry 2010, 69).

Henry’s analysis of the use of Windsor’s Emancipation Day to promote civil rights activism is important to understanding the enduring significance of the celebration into the mid-twentieth century. While Henry uses the increasing visibility of political mobilization in Windsor’s Emancipation festivals to celebrate a return to its nineteenth century function of agitating for black equality, I contend that it was precisely this aspect of the celebration that generated anxieties among white Windsor City officials around the event. As Emancipation Day became increasingly associated with the Civil Rights Movement across the border, Windsor City Council began to push against the celebrations. As a result, Emancipation Day encountered financial struggles and was already on the decline by 1967 when the Civil Rights Movement had turned to Black Power and the celebration was cancelled for that summer following the Detroit Riot.
The Detroit Riot spanned from July 23rd to July 27th, 1967 and began in reaction to a violent police raid of an illegal Twelfth Street bar (Colling 2003). Although fewer than ten per cent of Detroit’s 500,000 African Americans were involved in the riot and whites had also participated, Windsor City Council viewed the riot in terms of African American violence which could be imported into Windsor (Widick 1972). These fears resulted in the event’s cancellation again in 1968 by the Windsor Police Commission. While the Commission maintained that their decision was based on a possibility of civil unrest, Emancipation Day organizers argued that it was a matter of racial discrimination. In 1968, the organizers launched a complaint to the Ontario Human Rights Commission and took their case to the Ontario High Court of Justice where their request for an appeal of the Police Commission’s decision was denied.

The challenges that Emancipation organizers encountered from Windsor City Council in the 1950s and 1960s demonstrate that distance from the era of slavery did not eradicate the contested nature of Emancipation celebrations as sites of political and social agitation, but resulted in new arguments about the position of African Canadians in the community. This article will use the Emancipation Day debates to assess the treatment of African Canadians in Windsor during the Freedom Movement across the border. The responses of Emancipation Day organizers and their supporters to this treatment will demonstrate how African-Canadians in Windsor attempted to uncover city officials’ claims to race neutrality and assert their rights as full citizens in the community.

From 1834 to the early 1900s, Emancipation Day in Essex County was held alternately between Amherstburg, Sandwich, and Windsor (Henry 2010). In 1905, the celebrations became firmly established in Windsor. However, during this time, the celebrations began to deteriorate into occasions for drinking, gambling and brawls (Colling 2003). The emergence of gambling and alcohol as main elements of the celebration may be linked to the new public entertainments of the twentieth century which Kachun states, “vied for the attention of a working- and middle-class public that was less constrained by Victorian standards of civil conduct and social order” (Kachun 2003, 244). The deterioration of Emancipation Day during this time was widespread in North America. However, the return of Emancipation celebrations to their original messages of black equality and dignity can be witnessed in Windsor during the 1930s.

In 1931, Walter Perry, an African Canadian resident of Windsor, took over the organization of Emancipation Day in the city. The resurrection of Emancipation Day continued in 1935 with the formation of the British-American Association of Coloured Brothers (BAACB), a non-profit organization, comprised of men and women from Windsor and Detroit. The organization was founded for the single purpose of organizing the annual
Emancipation celebration in Windsor. The BAACB also launched an annual publication called *Progress*, which contained editorials written by Perry as well as the programs for Emancipation Day events. As a leading member of the BAACB, Perry continued to act as the chief organizer of Windsor’s Emancipation celebrations until his death in 1967.

In the 1943 issue of *Progress*, Perry reflected on the BAACB’s objectives, stating that they wished to “plan an Emancipation Celebration which would be a credit to the race...which would be an occasion for dignified observation of a great day...prayerful observation...organized observation. It would be, they decided, an event to which both colored and white would be welcome in brotherhood.” Perry’s central motivations for re-establishing Emancipation Day in Windsor were to facilitate interracial communal relationships and to demonstrate that a black-sponsored event could be organized and dignified. He strove to elevate the reputation of Emancipation Day, and subsequently, to raise the status of African Canadians within the community. As Perry stated in a 1953 editorial in *Progress*, Emancipation Day aimed “to show our People in the light in which they deserve to be shown... as an enlightened, advanced, educated, thinking, progressive, patriotic people.”

Perry’s objectives of facilitating interracial understanding and demonstrating the dignity of African-Canadians must be read against the racial discrimination facing African-Canadians in the area during the 1940s and 1950s. The racial discrimination that African-Canadians experienced during this time was different from the discrimination that existed in the southern United States. As historian Barrington Walker has explained, racial discrimination in the southern United States was entrenched in “a regime of discriminatory laws,” while Canadian racial discrimination was maintained through “attitudes, values, outlooks and social practices” (Walker 2010, 85). Legal scholar, Constance Backhouse has also studied the condition of Canadian racial discrimination against blacks, concluding that “The ‘colour bar’ was far more muted and informal, fluctuating over time and place, depending on the proclivities of local proprietors and their white clientele” (Backhouse 1999, 281). African-Canadian activism to eliminate this type of de facto discrimination was most prominent in the 1940s and 1950s in this area.

Racial discrimination in Windsor was apparent in residential segregation, employment practices, and the denial of service to blacks by certain white establishments. In 1947, a group of black and white men and women formed the Windsor Interracial Council, later renamed the Windsor Council on Group Relations (WCGR), to investigate racist practices and attitudes in the city (Bristow 2007). The group developed a survey for Windsor business owners, employers, real estate agents, and educational institutions to investigate their treatment of African-Canadians (Bristow 2007). According to historian
Peggy Bristow, one WCGR member, Les Dickirson, stated that several survey respondents indicated that they had no choice but to refuse service to blacks if they wanted to keep their white clientele. Some survey respondents also expressed that if they served local blacks, they risked being “swamped by Blacks from Detroit” (Bristow 2007, 33).

The discriminatory practices and attitudes in Windsor that were exposed by the WCGR’s surveys in 1950 were not unique to the city. The issue of racial segregation in Dresden, Ontario in Kent County provided a case around which civil rights activists could rally in the 1940s and 1950s in order to bring about legislative reforms to abolish the racist social practices of business establishments, such as those surveyed in the WCGR’s 1950 investigation. In 1946, a group of black men and women from the Dresden area formed the National Unity Association (NUA) to fight against the racist social practices of local establishments (Walker 1999). The NUA was joined by a network of support from civil rights activists, including the Toronto Committee for Human Rights, the Canadian Jewish Congress, and the Association for Civil Liberties (Walker 1999). Together, these civil rights groups successfully lobbied the Ontario provincial government for anti-discrimination legislation. In 1951, the Fair Employment Practices Act was passed, which prohibited discriminatory hiring and employment practices as well as discrimination in union membership (Lamberton 2006). This was followed by the Fair Accommodations Act in 1954 which stated that “No person shall deny to any person or class of persons, the accommodation, services or facilities available in any place to which the public is customarily admitted because of race, creed, color, nationality, or ancestry or place of origin of such person or class of persons” (Mosher 1998, 109). Despite this legislation, racial discrimination continued. For instance, the racial order in Windsor was evidenced in several areas of public life. In the 1960s, the Guardian Club, an anti-discrimination group headed by Dr. Howard McCurdy, conducted an investigation that exposed the discriminatory practices of sixty per cent of white Windsor landlords (Colling 2003). In addition, despite the Fair Accommodations Act, four golf courses in Windsor still refused access to blacks (McCurdy 2010). The African-Canadian struggle for fair accommodations and employment practices in the 1940s and the 1950s demonstrate the context of race relations during the time that Perry was organizing a celebration “to which both colored and white would be welcome in brotherhood.”

Perry and the BAACB successfully implemented a reputable Emancipation celebration. In 1942, Emancipation Day expanded to a two day event. The first day focused on the traditional spiritual and cultural themes of nineteenth-century Emancipation festivals and the second day was dedicated to entertainment and athletics, demonstrating the event’s adaptation to suit the public’s changing expectations of public gatherings. By 1948, a third day was added to the celebrations. Windsor’s Emancipation Day included
barbeques, talent contests, the Miss Sepia beauty contest, sport tournaments, speakers, and musical performers. Freedom Awards were another major component of the celebrations. The awards were presented to blacks and whites alike, from the United States and Canada, who promoted “better understanding and relationships between people of different races and color.”

The Emancipation Day carnival was also central to the celebration because it attracted large numbers from the northern United States and also was used to fund the other Emancipation Day events. The highlight of the celebration was the Emancipation parade, which spanned two to three hours along Ouellette Avenue and ended at Jackson Park where the other festivities were held. Jackson Park was significant to Emancipation Day for both practical and historical reasons. Not only was the park located in a central part of Windsor where it was visible and accessible, but it was also an area that had been cleared by early black settlers, making it an important commemorative element of Emancipation Day.

By 1953, approximately 250,000 people attended Emancipation Day from across Ontario and the northern United States. During the 1950s, the Movement for Black Civil Rights in the United States provided a struggle around which African Canadians and African Americans could mobilize. As Henry has explained, Windsor attracted several prominent leaders of the Civil Rights Movement who delivered speeches from the mid-1950s to 1960s. Among these speakers were Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth and Rev. William Holmes Borders, who were both involved in the Montgomery Bus Boycott; Daisy Bates, the president of the Arkansas state branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People; and Martin Luther King Jr., who spoke in 1956 after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. However, at the same time that Emancipation Day was becoming grounded in the struggle for black civil rights, it also began to encounter resistance from Windsor City Council.

Before analysing the impact of Windsor City Council’s reactions to Emancipation Day, it is important to note that not all African Canadians in Windsor view the impact of the United States’ Movement for Black Civil Rights on Emancipation Day in the same way. Dr. McCurdy has expressed that the Civil Rights Movement contributed to the deterioration of Emancipation Day in Windsor because it “had begun to destroy the reasons for what amounted to a segregated celebration” (McCurdy 2010). While Dr. McCurdy contends that Emancipation Day was largely successful because it was a segregated celebration, there is more evidence of interracial participation in Emancipation Day events. Irene Moore Davis, President of the Essex County Black Historical Society, has emphasized that Emancipation Day was attended by the interracial community, stating: “If I can just convey how important the Emancipation festival used to be to people of all backgrounds...It achieved what it set out to do, which was interracial understanding in its day” (Moore Davis 2010). This assertion...
is corroborated by Perry’s publications in *Progress*. In 1949, Perry wrote, “No other event, similar in theme, can compare with this in breadth and scope. At the same time, at no other place on earth, we are convinced, could so many peoples of divergent colours and faiths and customs meet, rub shoulders and have fun together, without one single instance of discord.” The fact that Freedom Awards were given to blacks and whites alike also demonstrates the interracial elements of Emancipation Day. Dr. McCurdy’s contention that the Civil Rights Movement eroded the reasons for a segregated celebration may not accurately explain the influence of the Civil Rights Movement on Emancipation Day. Rather, I contend that as Emancipation Day became increasingly associated with the advancement for black civil rights, it changed from being merely a commemorative event and social gathering, to a demonstrative event of black mobilization which was regarded by the white power structure of Windsor as potentially threatening to the established racial hierarchies in the city.

There is substantial evidence to demonstrate City Council’s resistance toward Emancipation Day during the civil rights era. Perry and the BAACB began to encounter problems with Windsor City Council in 1957, one year after Dr. King had spoken at the celebration. According to a 1962 editorial by Perry, entitled “One Man’s Struggle,” tensions with City Council began in 1957 when the Jackson Park bandstand was suspiciously burned down two weeks before Emancipation Day was scheduled. As a result, attendance to the celebration was cut in half and the BAACB lost $20,000 in equipment. Although the mayor announced that the BAACB would be compensated for their losses, Perry wrote in 1967 that the equipment had still not been replaced. In his 1962 editorial, Perry continued to list the mounting tensions with the City. In 1958, the mayor appointed a special committee to oversee the organization of Emancipation Day. The City’s intervention resulted in a failed celebration, with a deficit of over $5,000. In addition, the City cancelled the Emancipation parade that year, which was the most popular Emancipation event. Perry reported that he regained “full charge” of the celebration in 1959 and “tried to put it back together.” However, Emancipation Day continued to decline in attendance. In 1960, a riot broke out at the Windsor Arena during a dance that was held concurrently with Emancipation Day festivities. Although the dance had no association with Perry’s celebration, he stated that “The Emancipation got the blame and black-eye, and in 1961 many people did not come to the celebration.” By 1962, Perry reported that the celebration could anticipate a deficit of at least $2,000, but that “These expenses could be met if the people making money off the Emancipation Celebration would pay their fair share.” It was at this point that Perry began to question the survival of the celebration, asking: “What is the future of Emancipation in Windsor? It is impossible for any organization to meet the financial
demands under the present policy set by Windsor City Council. The costs are too high, and the facilities are not available.”

It was also around this time that City Council began to promote a different commemorative agenda at the expense of Emancipation Day. In 1959, the City began to sponsor the International Freedom Festival, a joint celebration during the first week of July between Windsor and Detroit which celebrated Canada Day and the United States’ Day of Independence and which aimed “to commemorate the peace and harmony which exists between the two nations” (Longo 2008, 119). According to cultural historian Julie Longo, both the City of Windsor and the City of Detroit viewed the festival as an opportunity to heighten tourism during the summer and to centre public attention on the cities’ urban-redevelopment projects. The International Freedom Festival was organized by non-profit planning agencies that were formed by the Windsor and Detroit municipal governments. The cities’ mayors acted as honorary chairmen of these organizations, whose members were largely representative of the cities’ business elite (Longo 2008). Since the festival was intimately connected to Windsor’s objectives of publicizing their urban renewal projects and drawing tourists to the area, Windsor City Council provided significant financial support to the organization of the celebrations. In 1959 alone, the City of Windsor poured $17,000 into the International Freedom Festival (Longo 2008).

Emancipation organizers contended that the City of Windsor was using the International Freedom Festival to replace Emancipation Day as the main summer event. In 1967, Perry wrote an editorial in Progress expressing his concern over the City’s motives: “The City has (2) Two standards, especially since this International Freedom Festival is promoted by Detroit and Windsor. It appears to me at any cost, KILL the Emancipation and support the Freedom Festival in Windsor.” Many African Canadians in Windsor are still of the opinion that the City of Windsor was attempting to “kill” Emancipation Day. For instance, Irene Moore Davis has described the enduring resentment among African Canadians toward City Council’s strong promotion of the International Freedom Festival:

There are a lot of people in the African Canadian community to this day who have a great resentment and hostility about the International Freedom Festival. It was seen by the black community, or by many in the black community, as a way to take the spotlight away from the Emancipation festival [and] build a lot on what the Emancipation festival had already achieved, you know, not reinvent the wheel, but copy a lot of their ideas and just about a month earlier do very similar things that would of course make it less likely for folks to come back
and participate in the August event. It was really viewed as something deliberate and cruel and I’ve heard a lot of the older folks say that for quite a while they did not participate in the Freedom Festival because they felt it had been a slap in the face (Moore Davis 2010).

With the increasing prominence of the Freedom Festival, a lack of financial support from City Council, increasing deficits, and declining attendance rates, Emancipation Day had already begun to deteriorate by the time of its cancellation in 1967 following the Detroit Riot.

In the aftermath of the Detroit Riot, Windsor City Council feared that Emancipation Day, which was known to attract about 10,000 African Americans from Detroit, could provide an occasion for civil unrest (Colling 2003). Ultimately, Perry agreed that the riot was a just reason for cancellation since it had ended only a few days before Emancipation Day was scheduled to begin. In an article in the \textit{Windsor Star} following the cancellation, Perry stated, “We called it off to be on the safe side and to protect all citizens in Windsor.” Members of Windsor’s African Canadian community largely agreed with the decision, expressing a concern not only for the possible danger that could be imposed on the community, but for the possibility of tarnishing Emancipation Day’s clean record. However, other African Canadians wanted the celebration to simply be postponed so that there would be a chance to hold the event if the situation in Detroit improved.\textsuperscript{21} Nevertheless, the celebration was cancelled entirely, with only a morning prayer service held at First Baptist Church (Colling 2003). Tragically, Walter Perry passed away in 1967. The impact of the loss of his leadership on Emancipation Day is incalculable. Ted Powell took over as the lead organizer in 1968 and faced the dual challenge of replacing Perry and fighting for the survival of Emancipation Day.

The 1967 riot transformed the relationship between Windsor and Detroit, a subject which has been explored by Windsor CBC journalist, Herb Colling in his book, \textit{Turning Points: The Detroit Riot of 1967, A Canadian Perspective}. Colling states that “Prior to the riot, Windsorites spent a lot of time in Detroit. After, that all changed, Windsor treated Detroit with more caution, perhaps even suspicion or fear” (Colling 2003, xviii). Colling’s interviews with members of the Windsor community who witnessed the effects of the 1967 riot reveal the changing perceptions of Detroit and African Americans. For instance, Colling reported, “The Detroit riot was a wake-up call. It made Rosalind Ward’s father load his World War II pistol, afraid that Blacks might invade Windsor” (Colling 2003, xxi). Colling devotes one chapter of his book to Emancipation Day’s cancellations in 1967 and 1968. He uses the cancellations of the celebration as an example of the effects of Windsor’s changing perceptions of Detroit. As President of the Essex County Black
Historical Research Society, Moore Davis has heard many stories about the impact of the Detroit Riot on the treatment of African Canadians in Windsor during the 1960s. She states:

Unfortunately, people’s hidden fears about African Canadians kind of rose up during the Detroit Riots...then the silent racism became much more overt...and there was just a great cloud of suspicion over black people in Windsor. Friends and relatives and people that I know remember the RCMP pulling in a lot of African Canadians and claiming that they have been accused of having some participation in the riot in Detroit, which was ludicrous...So there were a lot of people here who were detained for questioning. It was a very difficult time. So, around that time, City Council got scared (Moore Davis 2010).

Fears of African American militancy hardened white city officials’ treatment of African Canadians in Windsor. The Windsor Police Commission’s decision in 1968 to cancel Emancipation Day was not only in response to perceived threats of African Americans from Detroit importing violence into Windsor. Rather, the Windsor Police Commission’s treatment of the Emancipation Day issue served to send a message of white authority to African Canadians in the city. The reactions of Ted Powell and his supporters demonstrated their efforts to preserve control over the reputation of Emancipation Day and to expose the realities of racial discrimination in the city.

In March, 1968, City Council requested that the Windsor Police Commission launch an investigation into the potential for civil unrest if Emancipation Day were to be held that summer (Colling 2003). The City’s request was based on lingering fears from the Detroit Riot of 1967 and on the opinions “of knowledgeable persons that similar riots could be anticipated this summer.” The Police Commission, headed by Judge Bruce Macdonald, recommended to City Council that Emancipation Day not be held. Macdonald suggested that Council deny Emancipation Day the permits to hold their carnival and parade because they were the main events that attracted large crowds from Detroit. Although the parade permit was eventually granted, Macdonald refused to give Powell the license to operate the Emancipation Day carnival. The carnival was imperative to the rest of the celebration since funding for the other Emancipation Day events largely came from the midway. Because Emancipation Day did not charge admission to its events and did not receive any financial support from the City, it relied largely on its annual carnival and concession fees for funding. It can be argued that the denial of the carnival license was a covert method of ensuring the cancellation of the celebration in its entirety.
Emancipation organizers made a strong effort to reverse the Police Commission’s decision. On April 1st, Powell launched a complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Commission, arguing that the Police Commission’s decision was grounded in racial discrimination. Two anti-discrimination groups in the area, the Guardian Club and the South-Essex Citizens Advancement Association, joined Powell’s campaign. Dr. Howard McCurdy and his uncle Ralph McCurdy represented these associations at meetings between Powell and the Police Commission. In a meeting between Powell, his supporters, and the Police Commission on April 6th, 1968, Powell expressed his position that it was problematic that the City was not considering cancelling the International Freedom Festival, which also attracted large crowds of blacks and whites from Detroit. In response, Macdonald stated, “we don’t expect any riots from those occasions.”

For decades, Emancipation Day in Windsor served as a demonstration that large numbers of blacks and whites could gather together without civil unrest. The prevailing message of the 1968 cancellation was that the City did not trust that there could be an Emancipation gathering without a riot.

During the April 6th meeting, Macdonald continuously denied that the cancellation was a matter of racial discrimination. Macdonald stated, “This isn’t a racial matter we are discussing at all. It is simply a calculated risk involving the question of the maintenance of law and order in our community and that’s our responsibility under the law.” Macdonald’s claim to race neutrality must be questioned. In the 2001 book, Crimes of Colour: Radicalization and the Criminal Justice System in Canada, sociologist Wendy Chan draws on the example of “illegal” Chinese migrants in British Columbia to demonstrate how the state can mask racism “in the rhetoric of public interest and concerns about maintaining social stability” (Chan 2001, 15). Chan states:

By attaching the label of criminal to the migrants the government claimed legitimacy for imprisoning and eventually deporting the migrants. Not only was its approach characterized by racist overtones, but framing the problem as a threat to public order and safety effectively stifled any opposition to the management of the issue (Chan 2001, 15).

This example resonates with the claims of the Windsor Police Commission that their decision was simply based on “a calculated risk involving the question of the maintenance of law and order.” Within the contextual framework of City Council’s lack of support for Emancipation Day, the celebration’s connections to the Freedom Movement, and fears of African American militancy across the border, it becomes possible that Macdonald’s decision was undergirded by a desire to maintain the racial status quo in Windsor.
Macdonald refused to negotiate with Powell and his supporters at the April 6th meeting, stating, “We are not making any deals or negotiations with you at all. We have a statutory responsibility to do something and we will tell you what we will do.” Macdonald’s display of absolute authority was met by allegations from Dr. McCurdy that his statements were reflecting the broader racially discriminatory practices of Windsor. Dr. McCurdy stated, “We are citizens of this community. We have a right to disagree with you and if necessary as citizens to try to change the situation that permits such a decision...There have been in the City of Windsor over the years quite a number of instances of racial discrimination.” Dr. McCurdy’s response demonstrated not only a refusal to accept Macdonald’s treatment, but the reality of racial discrimination facing African Canadians in the city. Furthermore, Dr. McCurdy’s reminder to Judge Macdonald of his rights as a citizen of the community resonated with one of the original messages of black citizenship that Perry used Emancipation Day to demonstrate.

During the April 6th meeting, Powell and his supporters also questioned how the Police Commission could predict in April what the situation in Detroit would be in August. Daniel Hill, a prominent African Canadian historian and the first president of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, recommended that the Police Commission grant Powell a provisional license to operate the carnival and parade which could be revoked “if conditions turn out to be as they were in 1967.” Macdonald refused the Ontario Human Rights Commission’s conciliation proposal stating that “it does not reckon sufficiently the explosive, unpredictable and irrational nature and causes of riots.” With little room for recourse, Powell and Dr. McCurdy hired Alan Borovoy of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association to launch an appeal of Macdonald’s decision at the Ontario High Court of Justice. The application for appeal was reviewed by Justice Stark on June 14th, 1968. Based on a review of the Police Commission’s justifications for denying the carnival license, Justice Stark decided not to upset their decision, stating that “The members of the Commission exercised their discretion honestly and impartially. The decision which they reached was based upon the evidence of what had occurred in 1967 and what had only recently occurred in April, 1968 [riots in the northern United States following the assassination of Dr. King on April 4th].” As a result, the celebrations were cancelled in their entirety in 1968.

Although Emancipation Day was reinstated in 1969, the event never returned to its original scale. The City relocated the celebrations to Mic Mac Park in 1976 (Colling 2003). Powell complained that Mic Mac Park was inaccessible and was not properly equipped for the celebrations. It is important to note that white-sponsored events such as the Fireman’s Field Day and the International Freedom Festival were also moved to Mic Mac Park during this time. However, the City eventually moved the Freedom Festival
back downtown because its success dropped while it was held in the Mic Mac Park venue (Colling 2003). Powell pleaded with the City to allow Emancipation Day to also be held downtown, but the City refused his requests. The celebration deteriorated considerably while it was held at Mic Mac Park. In 1982, the Windsor Star reported: “This year’s festival wasn’t as large as previous ones, but organizers vowed nevertheless to maintain the festival in the future. Organizer Ted Powell thinks Emancipation Day, celebrating the freeing of slaves in 1834, should get the same commitment as the International Freedom Festival.” The next year in 1983, Powell decided to relocate the celebration to Amherstburg, where he hoped Emancipation Day could flourish again. Unfortunately, the celebration continued to decrease in scale and attendance. By 1993, it became a small one day event, organized by the North American Black Historical Museum in Amherstburg. The museum’s curator at the time, Elise Harding-Davis, stated “We’re simply trying to have a nice family get-together and commemorate the abolition of slavery. We don’t want people to ever forget.”

The gradual decline of Emancipation Day, which can be traced back to 1957, was largely the result of the City of Windsor’s lack of support. I have argued that City Council’s reactions to Emancipation Day during the era of the Civil Rights Movement were often motivated by the fear that the political message of the celebrations could undermine the racial hierarchies of the city. This article has further aimed to demonstrate that the Detroit Riot not only affected Windsor’s perception of African Americans, but directly influenced attitudes toward African Canadians in the city. These attitudes were demonstrated by the message of white authority that the Windsor Police Commission sent to Powell and his supporters by denying the Emancipation carnival permit, and effectively cancelling the celebration in 1968. It can be argued that the celebration’s connections to the Freedom Movement, coupled with riots across the border, prompted feelings of insecurity among white city officials in Windsor. Windsor City Council and Judge Macdonald acted on perceived threats to the status quo of race relations in the city by refusing to support Emancipation Day. Although Emancipation Day has declined in scale and attendance over the years, the Emancipation Day Coalition, which was established in 2008, is currently working toward the restoration of the event. How the City chooses to engage with the celebration will be important to the message that they convey to the Windsor community about how race relations have evolved in the city since the 1960s.

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Interviews

Interview with Dr. Howard McCurdy, Windsor, Ontario, September 9th, 2010.


Endnotes


12 E. Andrea Moore Papers (Private Collection), Box 8 II-2/32-V/7, File 2/35 Emancipation Celebration Programme 1983, “You’ve Got a Date with Mr. Emancipation” By Alvin Marsden, reprinted article from 1951.
Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie has argued that in the northern United States, following the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, “the celebrations shifted from being commemorative to being demonstrative, and were concerned with the self-defense of black people and war on slavery.” See Jeffrey R. Kerr-Ritchie, Rites of August First: Emancipation Day in the Black Atlantic World. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 9.