

The Home of Alexander Grant- Montreal's first Black "Activist" **80 Rue Saint-Paul, Montreal**

Amalie Alver Løseth

In 1830 at approximately 29 years of age, a black man moved to Montreal from New York. He settled at the address 80 Rue Saint-Paul, today situated in Old Montreal right by the Old Port. His name was Alexander Grant, and he worked as a scourer (clothes-cleaner), and hairdresser.¹ Advertising his profession in the laundry service in the summer of that year in the Canadian Courant, he also became the first black man to ever publish a newspaper notice in the city of Montreal.² (fig. 2) Promising that he could make his clients garments look "AS WELL AS NEW," Grant established himself like fellow free blacks in Ontario, within one of the few industries in which they could make a decent living serving a multi-racial clientele relatively free from white aggression and interference: labourers, barbers/hairdresser, and launderer/laundress.³

In Frank Mackey's Done With Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840 (2010) details of Alexander Grant's life were explored, which portrayed the complex status of blacks in Montreal through the transition from slavery to freedom. In 1833, in his Saint-Paul residence, Grant called together a meeting with his fellow "Coloured brethren," where eleven men were present. They were to discuss the legislation of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire,⁴ and ended up creating a press release which would be published in The Gazette two days later.⁵ This press release could be looked at as a sort of manifesto, where they stressed the need to extend their "sacred blessings" which they enjoyed in Canada to the whole of the British Empire particularly with the enslaved populations of the British West Indies in mind. According to Mackey, this is the first record of blacks in Quebec "speaking as one on a public issue."⁶ Later that summer without impact from Grant's press release, the slavery abolition act was passed throughout the British Empire on 28 August 1833 and was to take effect the following year. Still, as Mackey notes, this had little consequence for Quebec, because the last fugitive slave and sale advertisements were printed in 1798.⁷

As a minority in Montreal where racist and colonial legacies were still prominent, many blacks lived in a precarious state with second class citizenship and bound labour regimes. For example, there was "no measure condemning those already enslaved to a life of servitude or imposing a disguised form of slavery such as the six-year 'apprenticeship' provided for in the British law of 1833."⁸

As an example of persistent black exclusion, unwritten rules kept blacks from serving on juries. This was also a time where juries were part of almost every minor trial, and thus it affected the lives of black people in Montreal in many ways. However, this was not addressed as an issue until Alexander Grant did so in 1834.⁹ Two years later, Grant was involved in the case of a black girl about fifteen years of age Betsy Freeman, who had arrived in Montreal seemingly together with her white mistress Ann Gelston.¹⁰ According to Grant, Freeman told him that she was enslaved, which led him to offer her refuge at his own home in 80 Rue Saint-Paul. However, as Ann Gelston swore out a complaint before the justice of peace, the case ended up in court, where the status of Betsy was heavily debated; in sworn testimony Gelston claimed that Betsy had been born free, and that she was "just" an apprentice or servant, even though that was contrary to what Betsy had supposedly told Grant. At the same time, Grant's lawyer found it suspicious that Gelston did not have a copy of Betsy's alleged indenture, but it was also not certain that she had been born free: she could in fact have been enslaved prior the indenture¹¹ by whoever handed her over to Gelston. However, when Betsy Freeman herself was put in the witness box, she stated that she was under no restraint, claiming that she wanted to return to her mistress.¹²

Nevertheless, despite the outcome of Grant's legal intervention, the case of Betsy Freeman marked the first time where a black person had accused a white ranking member of society on a criminal charge and "secured his conviction before four of his colleagues and an all-white jury."¹³ The call for the freedom of enslaved black people in the Caribbean in 1833, along with the calling out of juridical injustice in 1834, closely followed by the case of Betsy Freeman two years later, makes Alexander Grant a prominent figure in the time of transition from slavery to freedom in Montreal and Quebec. The complexity and fluidity of slavery, indentureship, and the question of freedom were tied to the colonial and racist legacies that continued to exist after the 1833 abolition act. Legacies which still persist today.

¹ Frank Mackey, "There ought to be a law," Done With Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), p. 36.

² John Kalbfleisch, "No-nonsense New Yorker inspired city's black community," Montreal Gazette (Montreal, QC), Sunday 25 July 2010.

³ Colin McFarquhar, "The Black Occupational Structure in Late-Nineteenth-Century Ontario: Evidence from the Census," Racism, Eh?: A Critical Inter-Disciplinary Anthology of Race and Racism in Canada, eds. Camille A. Nelson and Charmaine A. Nelson (Concord, Ontario: Captus Press, Inc.), pp. 50-62.

⁴ Mackey, "There ought to be a law," p. 36.

⁵ Kalbfleisch, "No-nonsense New Yorker inspired city's black community," 2010.

⁶ Mackey, "There ought to be a law," p. 38.

⁷ Mackey, "There ought to be a law," p. 40.

⁸ Mackey, "There ought to be a law," p. 77.

⁹ Frank Mackey, "The color of justice," Done With Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1860-1840, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), pp. 236-37.

¹⁰ Mackey uses the term "mistress," which is also the term used in Alexander Grant's own recording of the incident. However, while Betsy Freeman's status was debated, Grant suspected the mistress Ann Gelston to be the "Wife of a Slave-Holder in North Carolina". It seems that the term "Mistress" is used because the status of Betsy remained unclear, and thus it was also unclear whether Ann Gelston was actually her employer or her owner. See: Frank Mackey, "The color of justice," pp. 367-73.

¹¹ Mackey, "The color of justice," pp. 261-63.

¹² Mackey, "The color of justice," pp. 261-63.

¹³ Mackey, "The color of justice," pp. 264.

Bibliography:

Kalbfleisch, John, "No-nonsense New Yorker inspired city's black community," Montreal Gazette (Montreal, QC), Sunday, 25 July 2010.

Mackey, Frank, "There ought to be a law," Done With Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010)

Mackey, Frank, "The color of justice," Done With Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010)

Plate List:



Fig. 1: Samuel Edward Dawson, "Map of the city of Montreal: Compiled from the latest surveys," [Internet Archive](https://archive.org/details/McGillLibrary-rbmc_montreal-surveys_G3454_M65_1888_D3-16891/mode/1up), (date of last access 3 May 2020) https://archive.org/details/McGillLibrary-rbmc_montreal-surveys_G3454_M65_1888_D3-16891/mode/1up

3 Montreal, 1830

ECONOMY AND ELEGANCE.

OLD garments cleansed and made to look AS WELL AS NEW, by ALEXANDER GRANT, *from New-York*, at No. 80 St Paul Street nearly opposite to Mr Rollings, Barber.

Orders will be received at Mr Rollings' Barber, St Paul Street.⁸⁰

22d May, 1830.

[*Canadian Courant*, 21 July 1830]

Fig. 2: “Economy and Elegance,” Canadian Courant, 21 July 1830, transcribed in Frank Mackey, “Appendix I Newspaper Notices,” Done With Slavery: The Black Fact in Montreal, 1760-1840 (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), p. 344.

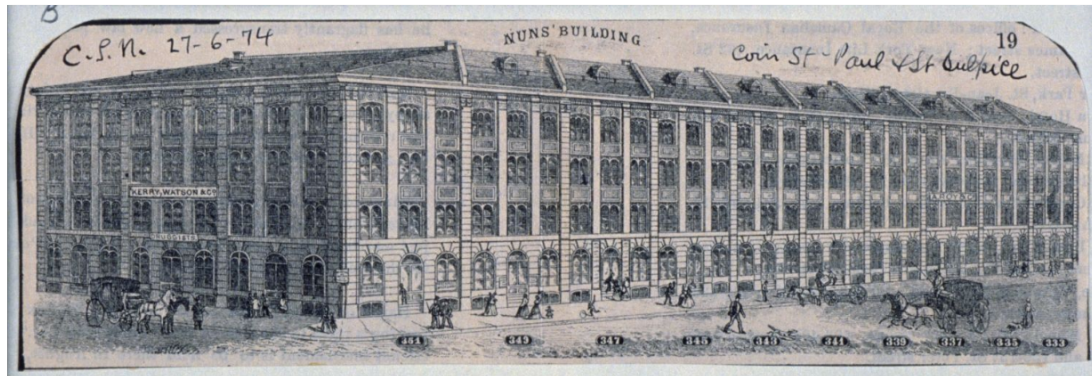


Fig. 3: “On the corner of St. Paul/St. Sulpice, 1874,” BANQ Archive, (date of last access 2 April 2020)

<http://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/2084536?docsearchtext=st.%20paul>



Fig 4: “80 Rue Saint-Paul,” Google Streetview, (date of last access 2 April 2020)