

Tolpuddle Martyrs

Beneath a sycamore tree in Tolpuddle, near Dorchester, Dorset, England in 1834 six farm workers met to form the first trade union in Britain. For this act, the six men were tried, convicted, and shipped to exile in Australia. A public outcry forced England to pardon the men. Five decided not to remain in England after their return so journeyed with their families to Upper Canada. George and James Loveless, Thomas and John Stanfield, and James Brine all came to the London district.

George arrived in Hamilton in 1844 and the story goes that along with his son George Jr. struck out on foot for London. George built a long cabin on Fanshawe Park Road near Highbury. The Loveless family lived there for years and George and his wife were buried at nearby Siloam Cemetery. George died in 1874 at age 77. James Loveless lived in London Township then moved into town to become caretaker of North Street Methodist Church, later Queen's Ave Church, which was destroyed by fire in 1895.

Thomas and son John Stanfield settled on a farm near Bryanston. Thomas remained there for the rest of his life but John moved to London, opened a hotel in East London and was for awhile reeve of independent East London.

The Brine family had originally moved north to Huron County but moved back to London to be near the Lovelesses. John Brine and his wife lived to their 90s and were buried at St. Mary's. The Stanfields and James Loveless were buried in Mount Pleasant.

George Loveless was the leader of the six men who were arrested on February 24th, 1834. They were charged with mischievous behaviour and trying to induce labourers to attend meeting, and to enter into illegal societies or unions. Each was sentenced to seven years deportation. George Loveless was sent to Tasmania, the rest to Botany Bay, an Australian penal colony.

The story began when employers threatened to reduce the farm labourers wage from seven shillings (98 cents) per week. Loveless organized the local workers to resist when promises extracted from employers were not met. They sought the advice of the Grand Consolidated Trades Unions which was formed in London England under Robert Owen. The advice obviously was ill advised or the Tolpuddle men misunderstood the advice because they were charged under the Mutiny Act of 1797 which forbade the taking of illegal oaths.

The judge said he was making an example of these men to warn others attempting such crimes and endangering the security of the country and the maintenance of its laws. A public outcry of the deportation sentencing led to nearly one million people signing petitions of one kind or another. On March 14, 1836 the government granted full pardon to the men.

Not too many people remember the Tolpuddle Martyrs although there is a plaque on Fanshawe Park Road at Siloam Cemetery honouring the martyrs. There was also a pilgrimage to the site in 1934, 100 years after the event. The Trades and Labour Congress of Canada held its annual convention in London. John Marchbank, the delegate from the British Labour Movement

brought some earth from Tolpuddle to sprinkle on George Loveless' grave. In return Marchbank upon his return to Tolpuddle sprinkled soil from Loveless' grave upon the grave of the sixth martyr James Hammett who had remained in England.

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