

The Emancipation Day Picnic

By Shannon Gosse

Lakeside Park in Port Dalhousie was the location for Emancipation Day celebrations, also known as the "Big Picnic," held annually on the first Thursday in August. The first picnic was organized by Bertrand Joseph Spencer Pitt, bringing in between 6,000 and 8,000 guests to the park in 1924. The park's location was not only convenient for visitors in Canada and the United States, but the area also held historical significance. In 1793, Governor John Graves Simcoe signed the Act Against Slavery in nearby Niagara-on-the-Lake, which played a pivotal role in the emancipation of enslaved people within the British Commonwealth on August 1, 1834.

The Big Picnic included a variety of food, drinks, and activities and was an important event for the Black community. Lakeside Park offered a dance pavilion, restaurant, bake shop, vending stands, bathhouses, locker-rooms, a row-boat concession, and various rides. Pictures of the day show people swimming, playing on the beach, dancing, and enjoying rides. Steamboats such as *Dalhousie City* and *Northumberland* brought patrons from Toronto, while others were able to travel to Port Dalhousie by train or car from the United States and within Canada. The years after the first picnic, thousands of guests continued to attend the celebration, bringing in many tourists to Niagara.

By the 1950s, B.J. Spencer Pitt had retired from hosting the Emancipation Day picnic. It was last held by the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1951. Emancipation Day continues to be celebrated by many communities and families and became a federal holiday in Canada in 2021.

References

www.niagaraparks.com/things-to-do/black-history-niagara-river

Reconstructing Port Dalhousie: <https://exhibits.library.brocku.ca/s/reconstructing-portdalhousie/page/emancipation-day-picnic>



Emancipation Day at Lakeside Park.
Photo courtesy St. Catharines Museum



Dancing at the Emancipation Day picnic.
Photo courtesy St. Catharines Museum