

Thornton Blackburn: A story of freedom that began in Mason County

Ron Bailey

History has a way of hiding its most extraordinary figures in plain sight. One of them was born right here in Mason County. Around 1812, in a world that denied him freedom, dignity, and even the right to his own future, Thornton Blackburn entered life in Maysville as an enslaved child. No one then could have imagined that he and his wife, Lucie, would one day help shape the legal and moral identity of an entire nation.

Blackburn's early years were marked by the brutal instability of slavery. He was separated from his mother, sold multiple times, and forced to navigate a system designed to break the human spirit. Yet somewhere in those years, he developed a resilience that would carry him far beyond the Kentucky hills.

In the 1830s, Thornton met Lucie slave in Louisville, a woman whose courage matched his own. When he learned she was about to be sold into the Deep South, the couple made a desperate decision: they ran for their lives. Their escape led them to Detroit, where they lived for two brief years as free people. But freedom along the border was fragile. They were recognized, arrested, and slated for return to Kentucky.

What happened next

changed history.

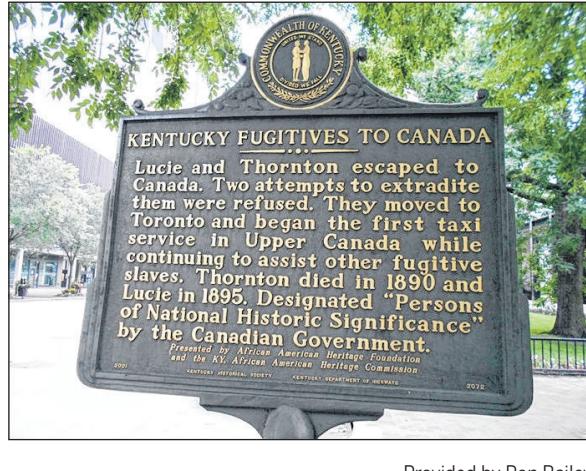
Detroit's Black community refused to stand by. Lucie was smuggled out of jail and ferried across the river to Canada. When authorities attempted to move Thornton, the city erupted in what became known as the Blackburn Riots. In the chaos, he too escaped to Canada, setting off an international dispute that forced Upper Canada to take a stand.

The ruling was simple and revolutionary: no person would be returned to slavery. That decision became a cornerstone of Canada's identity as a sanctuary for freedom seekers and a defining moment in the story of the Underground Railroad.

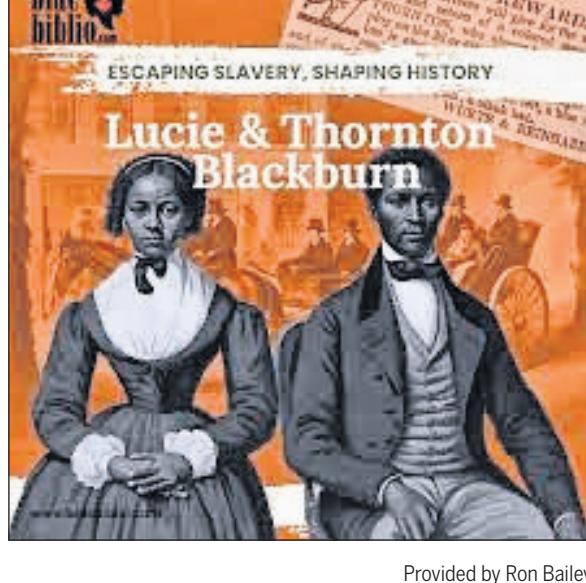
Safe at last, the Blackbourns settled in Toronto. They didn't simply rebuild their lives — they helped build a city. In 1837, Thornton launched "The City," Toronto's first taxi service, a bright red-and-yellow horse-drawn cab that became a familiar sight on the streets. Their home became a refuge for others escaping slavery. Their success became a platform for generosity and activism.

Today, Thornton and Lucie Blackburn are honored as national historic persons in Canada. Their names appear on plaques. Their story is taught in classrooms. Their legacy is woven into Toronto's civic identity.

And it all began in Mason County.



Provided by Ron Bailey
A historical marker commemorating Lucie and Thornton Blackburn.



Provided by Ron Bailey
An artistic rendering of Lucie and Thornton Blackburn.

The Blackburns' journey reminds us that history is not only shaped in capitals or battlefields. Sometimes it begins in a small Kentucky river town, in the life of a boy born enslaved who refused to accept the future laid

out for him. Their story is one of courage, ingenuity, and the unshakable belief that freedom is worth any risk.

It's a story worth remembering — and one that belongs to us as much as it belongs to Canada.

Maysville Lions Club Feb. meeting held

Submitted by Dallas Doyle

The Mason County Lion's Club met for their regular monthly meeting on Feb. 5.

There were five members in attendance and one guest. After the Pledge of Allegiance a blessing was given. Dallas Doyle conducted the meeting.

Glenn George gave the Treasurer's report. Mike Walton made a motion to approve the report and Robbie Detro seconded the motion. All members

approved.

Doyle gave the Secretary's report next. Bill Boggs made a motion to approve it and George seconded the motion. All members approved.

The club went into discussing old business. George contacted Mason County Schools to set up a schedule of dates for upcoming eye screenings. The school is in the process of getting those dates planned.

An election for new officers was rescheduled for the next meeting which

will be held on Feb. 19.

Members also discussed the challenges of increasing applications for scholarships. They discussed two options. The first was to increase the scholarships from \$500 per term to \$1000 per term. The other option is to decrease the standard eligibility to maintain a required GPA. The topic was tabled until next month's meeting.

Under new business, members were assigned their vendor list for the yearly Radio Auction. The group discussed

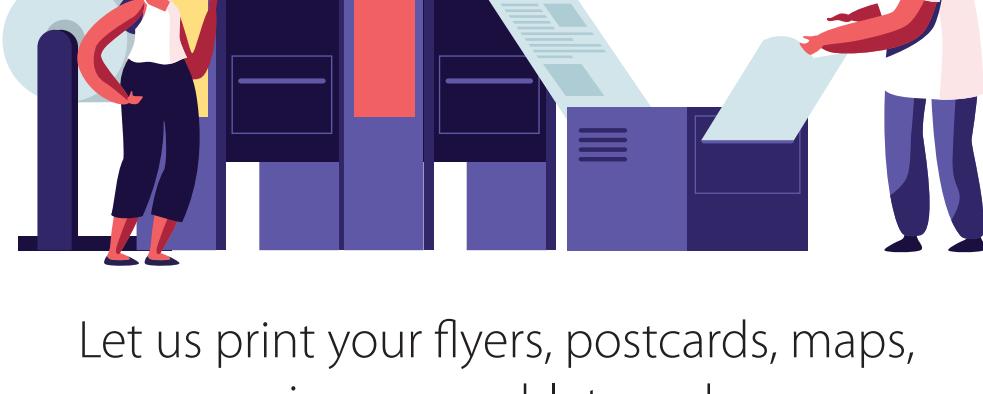
foreseeable issues with some vendors. They also discussed using a social media auctioning method. It was decided that some additional research will be done on the subject.

Doyle asked Lion's Club members to inform him of personal updates pertaining to membership dues.

The group were also encouraged to write encouragement letters for a sick child.

The next meeting will be held on Feb. 12.

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THE LEDGER INDEPENDENT

Nominations open for 2026 Karem Award for Excellence in Education Policy

Submitted by the Kentucky Department of Education

FRANKFORT, Ky.

— The Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) is accepting nominations for the 2026 Karem Award for Excellence in Education Policy. The award, named for former board chair David Karem, recognizes a state policymaker, education leader or citizen who has made notable, state-level contributions to the improvement of Kentucky's public education system.

Criteria for the award include:

Demonstrated leadership in policy development, passage or implementation resulting in increased educational opportunities for students;

Improved educational, postsecondary or workforce outcomes for stu-

dents; or

Increased capacity of teachers or school staff to better meet the academic, social or emotional needs of Kentucky students.

Karem served on the KBE from 2009 to 2016 and from December 2019 to April 2020. He served on education committees in the House and Senate for all but six months of his 33 years in the Kentucky General Assembly. During his tenure in public office, Karem championed the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) and led the efforts for the 4% school tax levy by school districts.

Nominations for the 2026 Karem Award for Excellence in Education Policy, which will be accepted online, are open through 3 p.m. ET on March 10. The award will be presented at the KBE's June meeting.

Governor signs proclamation naming February as Gifted Education Month in Kentucky

Submitted by the Kentucky Department of Education

the Kentucky Youth Assembly and Kentucky United Nations Assembly to explore civic leadership and global problem solving. Many districts provide opportunities for high school students identified in the gifted area of leadership to mentor elementary and middle school students.

"These initiatives not only enhance our students' leadership skills, but also benefits the school community through their leadership," Fletcher said.

Gifted students throughout the state also participate in passion projects and fine arts collaborations. Students collaborate with artists and experts in music, dance, drama and art to develop their talents. They attend plays, ballets and musicals to deepen their understanding of the fine arts.

Commissioner of Education Robbie Fletcher said gifted education is an important part of helping students develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills that will prepare them for their future careers.

"We want every student across the Commonwealth to be exposed to vibrant learning opportunities," he said. "Our gifted students deserve the chance to learn about and explore the world around them, so they can be the next generation of Kentucky's leaders. We are here today to celebrate gifted students and the educators who challenge those students and help them thrive."

Fletcher shared how middle and high school students across the state participate in

These projects showcase the authentic, student-driven learning that defines gifted education, blending creativity, critical thinking, leadership and community service," Fletcher said.

Fletcher also thanked the educators who provide differentiated instruction and support to gifted and talented students. He said gifted and talented coordinators, gifted education teachers and general education teachers all work together to ensure students reach their full potential.

"At KDE, we are proud to support gifted and talented students, their families and the dedicated educators who provide advanced opportunities for acceleration and enrichment," Fletcher said.

"Collaboratively, we are paving the way for a more promising future for everyone."

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