



BLACK HISTORY MONTH

February is Black History/African Heritage Month, now in its 79th year of celebration. This month is extremely important to people of African heritage. It is a time to celebrate their contributions, achievements, hard work, determination and strength to overcome obstacles.

Celebrating Black History Month is an opportunity for CUPE members and staff to acknowledge the contributions of people of African origin in our union, communities, Canada and throughout the world. It is also an opportunity to highlight the importance of building and strengthening membership solidarity, fighting for anti-racism and social and economic justice.

People of African descent have contributed to Canada's workforce and communities since the 17th century.

Matthieu da Costa, originally from the Azores, is the first documented person of African descent to set foot on Canadian soil. He landed with the expedition of Pierre de Gua, which founded Port Royal in 1605. Da Costa worked as an interpreter for the French with the Mi'kmaq, suggesting that he had been to Canada on an

earlier voyage. Since then there has been a continuous presence of African people in Canada. It is said that Black people were settled in Nova Scotia as early as 1604.

Montréal had a small Black population as early as 1628. The first Black woman in Ontario was probably Sophia Burthen, who was brought to the province around 1764 by Mohawk leader Joseph Brant. The first Black family in Toronto – then called York – was headed by Peter Long, who owned land east of the mouth of the Don River as early as 1793. In 1802, at a time when the city's population was numbered only in the hundreds, there was a Black community of 18 people. As depicted in a National Archives print of an 1807 function in Québec, Black musicians and guests took part in social activities.

In the 1950s, "And Still We Rise" chronicled the Canadian Negro Women's Association's bringing Black History celebrations to Toronto. By 1978, the Black History Society of Ontario petitioned the City of Toronto to have a formal monthly recognition of the celebration. Black History Month is now proclaimed across Canada.

Black history extends into areas of identity building, role models and the sense of empowerment that comes from recognizing some of the notable roles and contributions of Blacks in Canadian Society. Here are just a few:

William Edward Hall of

Nova Scotia was the third Canadian and first sailor to win the Victoria Cross for valour as well as being the first Black recipient.

Herb Carnegie was one of the best Black professional hockey players of his time. But, he was denied the opportunity to play in the National Hockey League. A hockey arena is named in his honour in North York, where he has resided for the past 78 years. Herb skated with the Boston Bruins and Montréal Canadiens but was not permitted to sign with the big clubs because of his skin colour. He skated with hockey stars such as the great Jean Béliveau.

Portia White, a renowned concert singer and teacher, established an international reputation as a contralto. When she sang at New York's Town Hall in 1940, one critic wrote: "Hers was the finest contralto voice to reach this city since Marian Anderson." Portia is the niece of the late Jack White, a CUPE National representative known as a Workers' Compensation Board/ Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WCB/WSIB) pioneer for precedent case setting.

Danny Braithwaite, with the help of his contemporaries, successfully challenged Toronto's Board of Education to remove the book, "Little Black Sambo" from its schools in 1956. Braithwaite's friends included Jack White, who worked diligently with him to get the book removed from schools.

Viola Desmond was arrested for resistance in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, when she failed to adhere to racist segregation policy. Africans and African descendants were barred from sitting on the ground level of the theatre with whites. Ms. Desmond chose not to sit in the balcony and was arrested for defrauding the Town of New Glasgow of one cent. The news of her resistance resonated throughout the province and across Canada.

Dr. Carrie Best was an Equality rights activist known for subscribing to the motto "lifting as we climb". She challenged racism and discrimination in education, politics and communities throughout the province of Nova Scotia and to the highest levels of Government in Canada. Dr. Best is recognized as a pioneer and pillar in Equality rights work in Canada.