

## **Black Canadians – A Brief History**

*Black slavery arrived in what is now Canada shortly after it was brought to North America. For 200 years, Black Canadian slaves were bought and sold at public auctions, whipped publicly, and, in some instances, tortured.*

So begins Colin Thomson's (1979) book *Blacks in deep snow: Black pioneers in Canada* which has a particular focus on Black people in Western Canada.

Today, the term 'Black Canadian' conceals the wide diversity of black people in Canada who come from many different geographic regions. The earliest black settlers came in the 1600s. Today, black immigrants come mostly from Africa and the Caribbean, and from many different cultures within those regions. There is no typical Black Canadian, but like the rest of Canadians, they reflect the exciting individual and group capabilities and strengths we have come to expect from citizens of a pluralistic society.

The term black does not refer to biological race which is an unscientific and groundless construct. What it represents is a range of skin colours and cultures that are socially defined as 'black'. As with members of any 'race' there is more within group differences than between group differences.

### **A Historical Timeline**

- 1492 First known black man to reach North America is Pedro Alonso Nino who sailed with Columbus in 1492.
- 1608 Beginning of black settlement in Canada coincides with the establishment of Port Royal, a French outpost in what is now Nova Scotia.
- 1628 In Montréal, the first known black man to be sold into slavery in Canada is a black slave from Madagascar given the name of Olivier Le Jeune.
- 1685 French Law "Code Noir" regulates the practice of slavery in New France. Among its statutes are that slaves are chattels to be owned by their masters.
- 1700s Most of the roughly 1200 black slaves in Canada are domestics.
- 1709 Slavery is declared legal in New France. Black slaves can be bought and sold (the existing practice is now codified in law).
- 1734 A black woman named Angelique is arrested, tried, tortured, convicted and hanged for allegedly setting fire to her owner's house after she threatened to sell her (see <http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/angelique/accueil/indexen.html> for more information). She was tortured and then hanged in public view near the Place d'Armes, Montréal. Black men and women are routinely whipped for misdemeanours such as entering an all-white public hall or petty theft.

- 1777 Canadian slaves escape to Vermont where slavery has been abolished.
- 1790 Underground Railroad begins operating.
- 1788-
- 1792 Black people living in the Maritimes flee slavery and racism in Canada for the Northern U.S. via a south-bound 'underground railroad'. As many as 60% of Black people in Ontario return to the U.S. after the civil war and 1200 free Blacks leave for Sierra Leone, Africa.
- 1793 Slavery is abolished by the legislature of Upper Canada but continues in practice.
- 1797 A slave, Emmanuel Allen is sold in Montréal.
- 1800 Slavery ends in Québec.
- 1833 Slavery is abolished within the British Empire. Black enslavement ends, but the history of second-class citizenship begins. Black people in Canada receive sporadic, badly financed and, in Ontario and Nova Scotia, segregated schools by fact and by law (1850) until 1964 (no, not a typo!).
- 1839 Black Canadians are allowed to sit on juries.
- Mid-
- 1800s Attempts are made to drive black people out of Canada by citing the climate as being unsuitable and too harsh for them to endure (despite the fact that they had been here for more than 2 centuries).
- 1840s Africville established in Halifax.
- 1907 Oklahoma adopts statehood. The movement of white settlers into the area forces black people to flee persecution. About 1000 come to Western Canada (Saskatchewan and Alberta) in 1911 while others go to Manitoba and Ontario.
- 1910 Life expectancy for Black North American males is 34 years (49 years for white men), 38 for women (52 for white women).
- 1911 Protests around black immigration are circulated in Edmonton and the issue becomes a political hot potato as noted by L.M. Fortier of Canadian Immigration at the time:

*There is nothing in the Canadian immigration law which bars any person on the ground of colour, but, since coloured people are not considered as a class likely to do well in this country, all other regulations respecting health, money, etc., are strictly enforced and it is quite possible that a number will be rejected on such grounds.*

Actually, this was untrue as the 1910 immigration act gave the government enormous discretionary power to regulate immigration through Orders in Council. Section 38 allowed the government to prohibit landing of immigrants under the "continuous journey" rule, and of immigrants "belonging to any race deemed unsuited to the climate or requirements of Canada, or of immigrants of any specified class, occupation or character". The Act also extended the grounds on which immigrants could be deported to include immorality and political offenses (Section 41). The Act introduced the concept of "domicile" which was acquired after three years of residence in Canada (later five years). In 1910 when Black Oklahoman farmers developed an interest in moving to Canada to flee increased racism at home, a number of boards of trade and the Edmonton Municipal Council called on Ottawa to prevent black immigration. In 1911 an order in council was drafted prohibiting the landing of "any immigrant belonging to the Negro race, which race is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada". The order was never proclaimed, but the movement was nevertheless effectively stopped by agents hired by the Canadian government, who held public meetings in Oklahoma to discourage people, and by "strict interpretation" of medical and character examinations. Of more than 1 million Americans estimated to have immigrated to Canada between 1896 and 1911, fewer than 1,000 were African Americans.' The Canadian border was virtually closed to black people.

1920s-

1930s Court rulings allow black people to be legally refused service in Canadian restaurants.

1920s Ku Klux Klan enters Canada.

1950 Order in council issued replacing previous measures on immigration selection. The preference was maintained for British, Irish, French and U.S. immigrants. The categories of admissible European immigrants were expanded to include healthy applicants of good character with skills and who could readily integrate. The order gave wide discretion for refusals and Blacks continued to be for the most part excluded.

1951 Rosemary Brown, human rights activist, feminist and former MP (1972) arrives in Canada from Trinidad to study at McGill University.

1952 A new Immigration Act was passed, less than a month after it was introduced in the House (it came into effect 1 June 1953). This Act, which did not make substantial changes to immigration policy, gave the Minister and officials substantial powers over selection, admission and deportation. It provided for the refusal of admission on the grounds of nationality, ethnic group, geographical area of origin, peculiar customs, habits and modes of life, unsuitability with regard to the climate, probable inability to become readily assimilated, etc. Homosexuals, drug addicts and drug traffickers were added to the prohibited

- classes. The Act provided for immigration appeal boards, made up of department officials, to hear appeals from deportation.
- 1960 Significant numbers of immigrants from West Indies begin to arrive.
- 1962 Minister of Citizenship and Immigration implemented new Immigration Regulations that removed most racial discrimination, although Europeans retained the right to sponsor a wider range of relatives than others.’
- 1964 Racially segregated schools in Ontario legally abolished.
- 1968 Bylaw cited in a Nova Scotia town prevents the burial of a black child in the cemetery.
- 1970s Africville destroyed. Cited as one of the worst examples of Canadian racism. See <http://hrsbstaff.ednet.ns.ca/waymac/African%20Canadian%20Studies/Unit%208.%20Afro-Canada/africville.htm> for the story.
- 1992 A group of black youth gather in Toronto to protest the ‘innocence’ of police officers who shot a black youth in the back of his head. In another case, one of “mistaken identity,” police shot and killed Marcellus Francois while he sat in his car (Montreal).
- 2005 Michaëlle Jean becomes Governor General of Canada