

The History of Black History Month

"If a race has no history, if it has no worthwhile tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated."

Carter G. Woodson

Black History month began in 1926 at the urging of Black Historian, Carter G. Woodson who sought to celebrate the history, contributions and culture of African Americans. Woodson created Negro History Week, and chose the month of February so as to link the celebrations to the birth dates of President Abraham Lincoln and abolitionist, Fredrick Douglass. Woodson's vision was expanded when the week long celebrations were extended and became National Black History Month, as part of the American Bi-Centennial celebrations.

At the dawn of the 1950s, the Canadian Negro Women's Association successfully petitioned Toronto City Council to acknowledge the contributions of Black Canadians. They were successful. The council, in the 1970s also lobbied the newly formed Ontario Black History Society and soon after declared that February would be known as Black History Month.

On December 14th, 1995, following a motion that was introduced by the first Black Canadian woman elected to Parliament – the Honourable Jean Augustine, M.P. national recognition was given when the House of Commons unanimously agreed to a motion formally recognizing Black History Month.

In British Columbia Black History Month was officially proclaimed on February 01st, 1996.

Black History in British Columbia and Vancouver

Although often overlooked, there's a rich tapestry of black history going back to the early colonial origins of Canada. Here in BC and Vancouver, we have a number of significant people and events to celebrate this February.

In 1858, nearly 800 free black people left the oppressive racial conditions of San Francisco for a new life on Vancouver Island. Governor James Douglas had invited them to settle in British Columbia. Though still faced with intense discrimination, these pioneers enriched the political, religious and economic life of the colony.

Unknown to many, Douglas was himself the product of a mixed marriage -- his father was Scottish and his mother Guyanese. Douglas strove to be known as Caucasian; however, he quickly agreed to the appeal from the San Francisco delegation. In turn, the black pioneers pledged their support to Douglas and to the cause of British sovereignty.

Many from that initial group have contributed notably to BC life: Mifflin Gibbs became a prominent politician; Charles and Nancy Alexander initiated the Shady Creek Methodist Church; and John Deas established a salmon cannery. The group also formed one of the earliest colonial militia units, the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps. A ceremony took place on February 20, 2000 in Saanichton, BC to honor the original arrival of black pioneers in British Columbia.

Notable Blacks in British Columbia

Seraphim "Joe" Fortes (b.? - 1922)

Seraphim "Joe" Fortes was one of the most notable early black settlers in Vancouver, where he lived from 1885 to 1922. He was born in Barbados and arrived in Vancouver on a ship which he worked aboard. In Vancouver, Joe Fortes worked as a porter and bartender and moved into a small cottage on English Bay near Stanley Park. Later, he saved many lives and taught children how to swim after becoming English Bay's first official life guard in 1901.

Joe Fortes was much-loved. The City of Vancouver honoured Joe in 1910 in appreciation of his work. Joe received his greatest accolade after he died and the city staged a public funeral attended by hundreds of friends and admirers. A fountain was also erected at Alexandra Park near his former home in the West End using funds raised by children of the city. The fountain shows Joe's face above children splashing around in water and bears the inscription "Little Children loved Him." The library on Denman Street in the West End also bears his name.

Harry Jerome (1940-1982)

Harry Jerome was one of Canada's leading athletes and set track records in the 1950s and 60s, becoming known as "the world's fastest man". He was born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan in 1940 and moved to North Vancouver with his family in 1952. His grandfather had represented Canada in the 1912 Olympics. Harry Jerome earned his master's degree in physical education at the University of Oregon and came back to Vancouver to be a gym instructor, but decided instead to become an Olympic athlete. He shattered several 100-metre and 100-yard records in a sports career spanning over a decade. He won a bronze medal at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, a gold at the Commonwealth Games in 1966, and a gold at the 1967 Pan Am Games. He also overcame many injuries from which many thought he'd never recover or be able to compete again. After his track records, he worked for Sport Canada, and in 1971 was awarded the Order of Canada. Vancouver's tribute to Harry Jerome is a large bronze statue of him on the seawall facing Coal Harbour.

Rosemary Brown (1930-2003)

Dr. Rosemary Brown fought for both women's rights and the equal treatment of black people most of her life. She was born in Jamaica in 1930 and came to Canada to study at McGill University in 1950, earning a master's degree in social work.

She was elected to the BC legislature in 1972, becoming the first black woman to become a member of a Canadian parliament, serving until 1986. A mother of three as well as an active member of the New Democratic Party, in 1975 she became the first woman to run for the leadership of a federal political party in Canada (defeated by Ed Broadbent on a fourth ballot).

Rosemary Brown's honours were many and included honorary degrees and becoming an Officer of the Order of Canada. Adding to her many honours is the stamp issued this month by Canada Post. She once famously said "... to be black and female in a society which is both racist and sexist is to be in the unique position of having nowhere to go but up!"