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## Viola Desmond

Viola Irene (Davis) Desmond was born in Halifax, NS on July 6, 1914. She was the daughter of George Davis, who operated a store and barbershop, and Gwendolyn, who was very active in the church and in various social groups such as The Criterion Club and The Gleaners. At 3 years old, she survived the Halifax Explosion of 1917, suffering only minor bruises and scratches when a set of window blinds fell on her.

Desmond received her training as a beautician in New York City under the direction of Madame C.J. Walker, who was America's first Black female millionaire. Upon completing her training, she returned to Halifax and started her own beauty school. The Desmond School of Beauty was located at 167 Gottingen Street in Halifax.

In 1946, Desmond, who was a married business woman, set out to travel from Halifax to Sydney, Cape Breton, however, she was forced to stop overnight in New Glasgow when her car broke down. While she was waiting for her car to be fixed, she decided to see a movie at the local Roseland Theatre. It was here that Desmond became the victim of a "Jim Crow Law". After purchasing her ticket, she took a seat on the ground floor of the theatre, when she was approached by an usher and asked to move to the balcony section. She thought that her ticket was for the ground floor, but due to theatre policy Black



folk were not permitted in this section. So, Desmond refused the request. After this, police were called, and Viola was arrested, thrown out of the theatre, and jailed overnight. The next day in court she was found guilty of defrauding the government of a 1 cent amusement tax, so she was fined. After paying the fine and being released, she returned to Halifax and explained what had

happened to her family and friends. The NSAACP rallied to her cause and fought the case in the Supreme Court. Although they did not succeed in a dismissal, the racist practice of the theatre stopped. It was clear that this case was an issue of Mrs. Desmond being an African Nova Scotian and there being a racist seating policy in place not to do with tax evasion. Viola Desmond stood up for her rights and fought against racism, and although she passed away before her arrest could be pardoned, she left a legacy and helped raise awareness about the realities of

segregation in Canada.

In 2010, Desmond was issued an official apology and a "free pardon", from Lt. Governor of Nova Scotia, Mayann Francis. This free pardon was the first of its kind in Canada. Desmond was also featured on a Canada Post stamp in 2012, and in 2016 it was announced the Viola Desmond would be featured on the new \$10 Canadian bill, to enter rotation in 2018, becoming the first female of colour to be featured on a bank note in all of North America.