

OUR HISTORY OUR HEROES

Mrs. Viola (Davis) Desmond
1914-1965



Mrs. Desmond was an African Nova Scotian from Halifax who used her skills and talents to establish a " School of Beauty Culture" for young Black women during the 1940's. The school was very successful and she trained the women in this art form to pursue their dream in the hairdressing field. Many hailed from various regions of Nova Scotia.

Viola Desmond was the victim of a "Jim-Crow" practice being perpetrated in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, which occurred in 1946. While on a visit to New Glasgow, and awaiting car repairs, Mrs. Desmond purchased a movie ticket at the Roseland Theatre. She sat down stairs to watch the show when she was approached and requested by the usher to go to the balcony section. She thought that her ticket was for the first floor but due to theatre policy Black folk were prohibited in this section. So, Mrs. Desmond refused the request. Then Police were summoned, she was arrested, removed from the theatre and thrown in jail over night.

The next day in court she was found guilty of fraud and fined. After paying the fine and being released she returned to Halifax revealing the racist incident to family and friends. The N.S. Association for the Advancement of Colored People rallied to her cause and fought the case in Supreme Court. Although they didn't succeed in a dismissal the racist practice of the theatre ceased.

Sixty –four years later on April 15, 2010 the Government of N.S. issued an official apology and "free" pardon to the late Viola Desmond , the first instance of its kind in Canada.

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William Hall, V.C.

1827-1904



William Hall was the first person of African descent, the first Canadian born sailor and first Nova Scotian to be awarded a Victoria Cross. He was recommended for this outstanding award for extreme bravery during the "Battle of Lucknow" in India on November 16, 1857. His gallant deed was highly responsible for the British Navy success in this gruesome battle. Hall joined the Royal Navy at the age of seventeen and traveled around the globe, served three navies and fought in four wars. After sailing for twenty years with the British Navy he retired in 1876 settling close to his home stead of Horton Bluff near Avonport. He died in 1904.

In February, 2010, Hall was recognized by Canada Post with a commemorative postage stamp. Then on October 8, 2010 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada proclaimed William Hall V.C. an National Hero within our nation. In November 2010, the Provincial Government of Nova Scotia announced a designated section of highway 101 to be named in his honour.

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Rev. Richard Preston

1790-1861



Rev. Richard Preston became one of the most important Religious and Black Community leaders in Nova Scotia. Rev. Preston escaped slavery and came to Nova Scotia in or about 1816, miraculously finding his mother. He was a leading figure in helping to establish Cornwallis St. African Baptist Church in Halifax in 1832 as well as eleven other African Baptist Churches across Nova Scotia's Black Communities. He encouraged church members to strive for changes that would enrich their lives.

Known as "Father Preston" by his congregation, he was the first Black man to be ordained as a Baptist minister for Nova Scotia. Rev. Preston was also very influential in the Slavery Abolition movement of Nova Scotia, forming the "African Friendly Society" to help escaped Africans to freedom. However, his highest achievement is considered the creation of the African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia in 1854. Still active today it consist of twenty-one African Baptist churches positioned province - wide, which has become a significant Black organization in the lives of African Nova Scotians.

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Portia White

1911-1968



Portia White was born in the town of Truro, Nova Scotia to a Baptist minister's family. Where by she began her musical life early in her father's church. At the age of 17, while teaching school she received her high recognition by winning first place in vocals, a "Silver Cup" award in the 1928 Nova Scotia Music Festival. This experience produced other opportunities, thus receiving a scholarship from the Halifax Ladies Music Club so she could attend the Halifax Conservatory of Music for further "classical" vocal training. The Nova Scotia government also recognized her amazing talent and assisted her by establishing the Nova Scotia Talent Trust to aid her music career. This talent trust still exists today and is called the "Portia White Prize"! It is awarded annually to any Nova Scotian artist highly regarded by his or her peers

After making successful debuts in Toronto and New York, she began touring over the world and became an important musical ambassador for our country. Specializing in singing "Spirituals" style genre to rave reviews was her greatest gift.

One of the many highlights of her career was singing before Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth 2nd at the opening of the "Confederation Centre" in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island in 1964. Ms. White died of cancer at the age of 57 in 1968 while residing in Toronto, Canada.

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Sam Langford

1886-1956



Nova Scotia has produced many of Canada's finest boxers. Sam Langford, being considered one of the best ! Langford was born in Weymouth Falls, Digby County , N.S. He fought in all weight divisions but is well known as a remarkable heavyweight boxer. After moving to the United States at the age of 14 and fighting out of Boston, Massachusetts, he was nick-named " the Boston Terror". He was avoided from chances to compete for world boxing titles because of his incredible punching power and speed. However, toward the end of his career, Langford did hold the Heavyweight titles of England, Spain and Mexico to go along with his impressive ring record. Becoming rated at #7 greatest fighters of all time by "Ring Magazine" top hundred boxers.

Early on in his boxing life of 1906 he fought but lost by decision to African -American Jack Johnson, who eventually went on to become the first Black man to hold the World Heavyweight Championship Title. Johnson evaded Langford continually after this happened, though to avoid a rematch.

Sam Langford was credited with having over six hundred bouts in his prize-fighting career, but died penniless in New York rooming house of malnutrition at 74 years of age. He is recognize by the American and Canadian "Sport Hall of Fame" and was named as a National Sport Hero by Ottawa's Site & Monuments Board in 1993.

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Rose Fortune



In 1783 Rose Fortune became an entrepreneur pioneer working in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia. She was an independent woman, who went into business on her own as a baggage handler, meeting the boats from Boston, Mass. and Saint John, New Brunswick. Her duties also included pushing the loads of trunks, boxes and carpet bags from the wharf to homes and hotels. As the town grew she became an unofficial police woman of Annapolis Royal, keeping order on the wharf. Her special responsibility was to walk with important people to the dock so they would arrive safely and on time to catch their boats.

More of Rose Fortune's legacy can be found at the Fort Anne National Museum site in the Annapolis area of Nova Scotia.

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Mathieu da Costa (ca 1605)



Mathieu da Costa was a “free” African who is reported as the first-known Black man to arrive in Eastern Canada. He came with an expedition led by Pierre Dugas de Mons and assistant Samuel de Champlain who founded the colony of Port Royal now Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia in 1605. Da Costa served as interpreter between the French explorers and the Mi'kmaq natives of the region. The involvement of da Costa in early trade was vital in the French colony's settlement attempt to adapt to this new territory.

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Edith (Drummond) Clayton

1920 - 1989



Edith Clayton was born September 6, 1920 in Cherry Brook, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. She grew up watching her mother make maple – splint wood baskets and at eight years of age made her first basket. These type of baskets were based on a long African –Nova Scotian tradition passed on in their family which created a livelihood since the mid-1800s at “City Markets”.

Mrs. Clayton basket weaving became very popular in her lifetime and she even represented Canada in this artistic craft at Expo' 86 in Vancouver, British Columbia ! Many of her baskets can be found world wide and are considered personal treasures by the owners that have collected them.

Edith Clayton died on “Thanksgiving” weekend Sunday, while attending church, October 8, 1989. Today, the legacy is continued by her daughter Clara Gough in her honour.