

# Primer: Black History in Canada

## CREATION OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH IN CANADA

- Stanley Grizzle organized the first celebration of Black History Month in a Toronto church in 1950. The City of Toronto first officially proclaimed February as Black History Month in 1979.
- Following a motion by MP Jean Augustine, Canada's first Black female MP, Black History Month was proclaimed nationwide in 1995.

## SELECT KEY MOMENTS

- ◆ **1629:** Olivier Lejeune (not his African name) was the **first recorded slave** sent directly from Africa to Canada, some 20 years after New France was founded.
- ◆ **1776:** About 3,500 **Black Loyalists** immigrated to Canada after the American Revolution, promised freedom, rights and land by the British. The promises weren't always kept, and they faced discrimination from white settlers.
- ◆ **1793:** Lt. Gov. John Graves Simcoe passed an **anti-slavery bill** in Upper Canada (Ontario).
- ◆ **1815–60:** Canada's reputation as a safe haven for Blacks grew after the War of 1812. Between 1815 and 1860, as many as 30,000 African Americans sought refuge in Canada via the legendary **Underground Railroad**.
- ◆ **1833: Slavery is abolished** throughout the British colonies, effective 1 August 1834. Many Canadians celebrate 1 August as Emancipation Day.
- ◆ **1945:** The **Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters** was the first trade union in Canada organized by and for Black Canadians. They sought better wages and fought discriminatory policies for Black railroad workers.
- ◆ **1960s:** Canada made **changes to immigration policy** that removed a bias against non-white immigrants. Many individuals from the **Caribbean, Africa** and beyond began immigrating, increasing the diversity of Canada's Black communities.
- ◆ **1963:** **Leonard Braithwaite** became the first Black person elected to a Canadian parliament when he was elected to the Ontario provincial legislature in 1963.

### Icebreaker: Who said it?

*"Black Slaves are certainly the only people to be depended upon ... pray therefore if possible procure for me two Stout Young fellows ... [and] buy for each a clean young wife, who can wash and do the female offices about a farm."*

### Answer:

No, not an American. This was James Murray, the governor of Québec in 1763. **Slavery happened here, too. Canada's Black communities have a long and rich history of adversity and accomplishment.**

## SELECT KEY FIGURES

- **Marie-Joseph Angélique:** In 1734, this enslaved Black woman in Montréal was unjustly hanged for arson without trial, after allegedly trying to escape her bondage.
- **Mary Ann Shadd:** The first Black female newspaper publisher in Canada, Shadd founded *The Provincial Freeman* in 1853, reporting the successes of free Blacks.
- **Viola Desmond:** This Nova Scotian businesswoman's courageous refusal to accept a theatre's discriminatory policies in 1946 inspired a generation of Black Canadians.
- **Willie O'Ree:** Scouted from the Québec Aces, Willie O'Ree was the first Black player in the NHL in 1958. Today he is the ambassador for the NHL's diversity program.
- **Lincoln Alexander:** This Ontario politician and equal rights activist was the first Black Canadian lieutenant-governor in Canada, appointed in 1985.
- **K'naan:** This Somalian-Canadian hip-hop artist fled civil war in Somalia in 1991 at age 13. Now he is a Juno-award winning artist. His song "Wavin' Flag" is an international hit.

### Make a local connection!

Highlight an event, site or individual from your community.

[Hogan's Alley](#) (Vancouver)

[Michaëlle Jean](#) (Montréal)

[Harriet Tubman](#) (St. Catharines)

[Africville](#) (Halifax)

[John Ware](#) (Alberta)

[Caribana](#) (Toronto)