

Our Mothers Grand and Great

Black Women of Nova Scotia

BY SYLVIA HAMILTON

As Sylvia Hamilton points out in this article, which first appeared in Multiculture (Vol. 4, No. 2, 1982), media accounts of racially motivated incidents are not, as the media would have us believe, new to this country. The history of racism dates back to the beginnings of Canada. The history of blacks, and particularly black women, in Canada is a long and difficult one. There is still much to discover and to recover in what has been erased and ignored. This article goes a long way towards correcting those gaps in our knowledge.

Very little of what one reads about Nova Scotia would reveal the existence of an Afro-Nova Scotian* population that dates back three centuries. Provincial advertising, displays, and brochures reflect people of European ancestry: the Scots, the Celts, the French, and the Irish, among others. There is occasional mention of Nova Scotia's first people, the Micmac. Yet Afro-Nova Scotians live in forty-three communities throughout a province which is populated by over seventy-two different ethnic groups. Tourists and official visitors often express great surprise when they encounter people of African origin who can trace their heritage to the 1700s and 1800s. To understand the lives of Black women in Nova Scotia, one has first to learn something about their people and their environment.

The African presence here began in 1605 when a French colony was established at Port Royal (Annapolis Royal). A Black man, Mathieu da Costa, accompanied Pierre Du Gua, Sieur De Monts, and Samuel de Champlain to the new colony. Da Costa was one of Sieur De Monts' most useful men, as he knew the language of the Micmac and therefore served as interpreter for the French. The existence of Blacks in Nova Scotia remained singular and sporadic until the late 1700s, when three thousand Black Loyalists arrived at the close of the American War of Independence. Though the Black Loyalists were free people, other Blacks who came at the same time with White Loyalists bore the euphemistic title "servant for life." Both groups joined the small population of Black slaves already present in the province. A second major influx of Blacks would occur following the War of 1812; approximately two thousand former slaves, the Black Refugees, arrived in Nova Scotia during the postwar period between 1813 and 1816.

African people have a long tradition of oral history; stories about their heroes and heroines have therefore gone unrecorded. When a people begins the process of creating a written record of

their champions, an initial tendency is to lionize and revere all. Since they will be paraded for all to see, faults and shortcomings are minimized and criticism is not often tolerated. The making of cultural heroes and heroines is an act of unification and empowerment. This process, just beginning among Afro-Nova Scotians, is integral to the survival of a people.

On Saturday next, at twelve o'clock, will be sold on the Beach, two hogshead of rum, three of sugar, and two well-grown negro girls, aged fourteen and twelve, to the highest bidder.

From her first arrival in Nova Scotia, the Black woman has been immersed in a struggle for survival. She has had to battle slavery, servitude, sexual and racial discrimination, and ridicule. Her tenacious spirit has been her strongest and most constant ally; she is surviving with a strong dignity and an admirable lack of self-pity and bitterness. She is surviving, but not without struggle.

During Nova Scotia's period of slavery, Black female slaves were called upon to do more than simple domestic chores for their masters. Sylvia was a servant of Colonel Creighton of Lunenburg. On July 1, 1782, the town was invaded by soldiers from the strife-ridden American Colonies. Sylvia shuttled cartridges hidden in her apron from Creighton's house to the fort where he was doing battle. When the house came under fire, Sylvia threw herself on top of the Colonel's son to protect him. During the battle she also found time to conceal her master's valuables in a bag which she lowered into the well for safekeeping. Typically, it was not Sylvia who was recognized for her efforts, but her master and a militia private to whom the provincial House of Assembly voted payments of money from the county's land taxes.

Another tidy arrangement involved slave-holding ministers. These men of the cloth adjusted their beliefs and principles accordingly when they purchased slaves. Lunenburg's Presbyterian minister John Seccombe kept a journal in which he noted that "Dinah, my negro woman-servant made a profession and confession publicly (*sic*) and was baptized, July 17, 1774." Dinah had a son, Solomon, who was brought to the province as a slave and who died in 1855 at age ninety; no record was found of the date of Dinah's death. In 1788 a mother and daughter were enslaved by Truro's Presbyterian pastor, Reverend Daniel Cock. When the mother became "unruly," he sold her but kept the daughter. In the same year, a Black woman named Mary Postill was sold in Shelburne; her price was one hundred bushels of potatoes.

Many slaves could hold no hope of being set free upon the death of their owners. Annapolis merchant Joseph Totten left his wife Suzannah the use of "slaves, horses, cattle, stock, etc." and "to each of three daughters a negro girl slave ... to her executors, administrators and assigns for ever." Amen. Some who were not given their freedom seized it for themselves. Determined owners placed newspaper ads offering rewards for their return.

While Black women slaves were being sold, left in wills, traded, and otherwise used, Black Loyalist women, ostensibly free, endeavoured to provide a livelihood for themselves and their families while at the same time labouring to establish communities. In 1787 Catherine Abernathy, a Black Loyalist teacher, instructed children in Preston, near Halifax. She taught a class of twenty children in a log schoolhouse built by the people of the community. Abernathy established a tradition of Black women teachers which would be strongly upheld by her sisters in years to come. Similarly, her contemporaries Violet King and Phillis George, the wives of ministers, carved another distinct path: Black women supporting their men and at the same time providing a stable base for their families. Even though history has documented the lives of Boston King and David George, it has remained silent on the experiences of Violet and Phillis.

What must it have been like for Phillis George in Shelburne in the late 1780s? Her husband traveled extensively, setting up Baptist churches in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. He preached to and baptized Blacks and Whites alike, not a popular undertaking at that time. The Georges had three children; money and food were scarce. On one occasion, a gang of fifty former soldiers armed with a ship's tackle surrounded their household, overturning it and what contents it had. Some weeks later, on a Sunday, a mob arrived at George's church; they whipped and beat him, driving the Baptist minister into the swamps of Shelburne. Under the cover of darkness, David George made his way back to town, collected Phillis and the children, and fled to neighbouring Birchtown.

What of Phillis George and other Black Loyalist women: unnamed women who were weavers, seamstresses, servants,

bakers, and hat makers? We can in some measure recreate the society they lived in; we can even speculate on what they looked like. But except for isolated cases, their memories and experiences are their own and will remain with them, fixed in time.

One of those rare, isolated instances is that of Rose Fortune. A descendant of the Black Loyalists, Rose lived in Annapolis Royal in the mid-1880s. She distinguished herself by establishing a baggage service for travelers arriving by boat at Annapolis from Saint John and Boston. A modest

...the black woman... is surviving with a strong dignity and an admirable lack of self-pity and bitterness.

wheelbarrow and her strong arms were her two biggest assets. Rose's noteworthy activities were not only commercial. She concerned herself with the well-being of the young and old alike. Rose Fortune declared herself policewoman of the town and as such took upon herself the responsibility of making sure young children were safely off the streets at night. Her memory is kept alive by her descendants, the Lewis family of Annapolis Royal. Daurene Lewis is an accomplished weaver whose work is well known in Nova Scotia. She also holds the distinction of being the first Black woman elected to a town council in the province.

Black Loyalists had been promised land sufficient to start new lives in Nova Scotia. However, when the grants of land were allocated, the Black Loyalists received much less than their White counterparts. Dissatisfaction with this inequity coupled with an unyielding desire to build a better future for their families provided the impetus for an exodus to Sierra Leone, West Africa, where the Black Loyalists hoped life would be different. In 1792 Phillis and David George, along with twelve hundred Black Loyalists, sailed from Nova Scotia to Sierra Leone.

Four years later five hundred Jamaican Maroons were sent in exile to Nova Scotia. A proud people, the Maroons were descendants of runaway slaves who for over one hundred fifty years waged war

against the British colonists in Jamaica. Upon their arrival the men were put to work on reconstruction of Citadel Hill. Of the Maroon women very little is recorded. We do know they were used for the entertainment of some of the province's esteemed leaders: Governor John Wentworth is believed to have taken a Maroon woman as his mistress, while Alexander Ochterloney, a commissioner placed in charge of the Maroons, "took five or six of the most attractive Maroon girls to his bed, keeping what the surveyor of Maroons, Theophilus Chamberlain, called a 'seraglio for his friends.'" The Maroon interlude ended in 1800 when they too set sail for Sierra Leone.

Between 1813 and 1816 the Black Refugees made their way to the province. It is this group whose memory is strongest in Nova Scotia, for their descendants may be found in communities such as Hammonds Plains, Preston, Beechville, Conway, Cobequid Road, and Three Mile Plains. Some of the earliest sketches and photographs of the Halifax city market show Black women selling baskets overflowing with mayflowers. Basketweaving for them was not an activity used to fill idle time: it was work aimed at bringing in money vital to the survival of the family. This century-old tradition has endured because there are women who learned the craft from their mothers, who in turn learned it from their mothers. Edith Clayton of East Preston has been weaving maple market baskets since she was eight years old; it is a tradition which reaches back to touch six generations of her family. Not only does Edith Clayton continue to make and sell baskets, she also teaches classes in basketweaving throughout Nova Scotia as a means of preserving and passing on a significant and uniquely Afro-Nova Scotian aspect of the culture and heritage of the province.

Many and varied are the roles Black women have played and continue to play within their own and the broader community. It has often been said they are the backbone of the Black community: organizers, fund-raisers, nurturers, caregivers, mourners. When an attempt was made in 1836 by the provincial government to send the people of Preston to Trinidad, it was the women who objected:

They all appear fearful of embarking on the water — many of them are old and

have large families, and if a few of the men should be willing to go, the Women would not. It is objected among them that they have never heard any report of those who were sent away a few years ago to the same place, and think that if they were doing well some report of it would have reached them. They seem to have some attachment to the soil they have cultivated, poor and barren as it is....

Nowhere has their involvement been more pronounced than in the social, educational, and religious life of the Black community. In 1917 the women of the African Baptist churches in the province gathered together to establish a Ladies' Auxiliary, which would take responsibility for the "stimulation of the spiritual, moral, social, educational, charitable and financial work of all the local churches of the African Baptist Association." These women gathered outside around a well in the community of East Preston since the church had no space for them to use; this gathering became known as the "Women at the Well." Some of these same women later organized an auxiliary to provide support for the Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children. In 1920, for the first time in Canadian history, a Convention of Coloured Women was held in Halifax.

A woman well-respected throughout Nova Scotia's Black communities is ninety-four-year-old Muriel V. States. She was present that day the women gathered at the well to establish the Ladies' Auxiliary. She was present as well at another historic event: the 1956 creation of the Women's Institute of

the Ladies' Auxiliary she had helped to organize thirty-nine years before.

One hundred five delegates were registered for a meeting whose theme was "Building Better Communities." Among the issues discussed were community health and educational standards and family relations. Muriel States, who was the Auxiliary's Official Organizer at the time, told her sisters their activities would not go unnoticed:

Today, we women of the African Baptist Association have taken another step which will go down in history as the first Women's Institute held this day at this church. We feel that we as women have accomplished much and are aiming to do great things in the future. We are already reaping the reward of untiring and united effort in all that tends

to the promotion of the church and community welfare.

Since 1956 the meeting of the Women's Institute has been an annual event. In October, 1981, the Institute celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. Its history tells of the dedicated work of many women: Gertrude Smith, Margaret Upshaw, Pearlleen Oliver, Selina David, Catherine Clarke and many others. Today the Institute undoubtedly records the largest gatherings of Black women in the province; annual conventions draw several hundred Black women.

In 1937 the Nova Scotia teacher's college in Truro had a student population of over one hundred students. My mother Marie remembers being one of the college's two Black students; her companion was Ada Symonds. Teaching was my mother's second choice for a career;

nursing, her first choice, was not open to Blacks. The bar remained solidly across this door until 1945, when pressure from the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People and from Reverend William and Pearlleen Oliver forced its removal. Two Black women were admitted as trainees in nursing.

Teaching became the selected profession for many Black women. Some chose it because they wanted to teach, others because there were no other options open. These women are especially remembered for their diligent work and commitment in the face of the hardship and adversity of a society that has tried unceasingly to deny their existence. They



"Portia White, an international opera star, was born in Truro in 1910. In 1944 the Portia White Trust Fund was set up to help her train. She performed in New York, Latin America and Europe and later became a gifted teacher. It was her donation that set up the music library in the Halifax Regional Library."

had to put up with one-room segregated schools, few resources and little money. They stayed late to devote extra time to those students who had to stay home to help pick blueberries and mayflowers or to help garden. When the school day was over, another day began for them: seeing to their own children, cooking supper, ironing the children's clothes for school, preparing lessons and attending a meeting at the church.

As they laboured at teaching, nursing, housekeeping, typing and other jobs, Black women have not led easy lives. Nova Scotian Black women, like their counterparts elsewhere, have always known a double day. Some say the Black woman invented it. Work was and continues to be an integral part of her life. She has not had the luxury of deciding to stay home; with the current state of both our provincial and national economies, it is unlikely she will be afforded that choice in the near future.

Public attention in Canada has been increasingly riveted upon incidents of racially motivated attacks on individuals and groups in some of our major urban centres. The manner in which these cases have been described would lead one to believe such occurrences are relatively new phenomena in this country. Even the most cursory examination of the experiences of Afro-Nova Scotians will clearly demonstrate that, indeed, such is not the case.

In 1946 New Glasgow theatres were segregated; Blacks sat upstairs, Whites occupied the downstairs seats. While in New Glasgow, Viola Desmond of Halifax decided to go to the theatre. She bought a ticket (balcony seat) but decided to sit downstairs. Though she was ordered to move, Viola refused, offering instead to pay the difference in price. The theatre manager declined the offer and called the police. Viola Desmond was carried away by the officer and held in jail overnight. The next day she was fined twenty dollars and costs. She was charged with having avoided paying the one-cent entertainment tax. A year later, Selma Burke, a Black woman from the United States, was refused service in Halifax. It is not difficult to see that this environment had the power to dampen spirits, damage identities and lessen the desire for change. But there were Black women who felt equal to the challenge.

A New Glasgow publishing venture

which began as an eight-by-ten broadside in 1945 soon blossomed into a full-fledged newspaper. This was *The Clarion*, edited and published by Dr. Carrie Best. Published twice monthly, *The Clarion* called itself the voice of "coloured Nova Scotians." Dr. Best published timely articles on civil-rights issues in Nova Scotia and elsewhere; the paper featured a women's page and carried sports and social news. In 1949 *The Clarion* gave birth to *The Negro Citizen*, which achieved nationwide circulation. But Dr. Best was not moving down a totally untraveled path; one century before, in 1853, Mary Shadd Cary launched *The Provincial Freeman* from Windsor, Ontario. In so doing, she became the first Black woman in North America to found and edit a weekly newspaper. Dr. Best has been awarded the Order of Canada; in 1977 she published her autobiography, *That Lonesome Road*.

Other Black flowers were blossoming as well in the 1940s. When Portia White was seventeen she was teaching school and taking singing lessons. Winning the Silver Cup at the Nova Scotia Music Festival paved the way for her to receive a scholarship from the Halifax Ladies' Musical Club to study at the Halifax Conservatory of Music. By the time she was thirty-one Portia White had made her musical debut in Toronto. Four years later, in 1945, she made her debut at New York's famed Town Hall and later toured the United States and Europe. Of the "young Canadian contralto's" debut, one New York critic wrote:

as soon as she stepped on to the stage and began to sing it was obvious that here was a young musician of remarkable talents. Miss White has a fine, rich voice which she uses both expressively and intelligently ... The artist has an excellent stage presence ... she was greeted with enthusiastic applause at each entrance. Miss White is a singer to watch, a singer with a bright future.

In 1969, Portia White's estate donated a gift of one thousand dollars to the Halifax City Regional Library to assist in setting up a music library in the city. The record collection which was subsequently installed is large and varied; few members of the borrowing public, however, know how the collection they so enjoy was originally established.

Recently Black women in Nova Scotia

have begun to enter areas where their absence has heretofore been conspicuous: government, law, journalism, business, and medicine. This is not to say the struggle has ended or that we have arrived. While the attitude of the Black woman toward herself has been undergoing changes, the perceptions and attitudes of others both within her own community and beyond it require continual challenges to bring about any significant changes in how she is regarded and treated by others. As Black women begin paying tribute to themselves and their own work, others will pay tribute also. This year (1982) the family of Joyce Ross, a daycare director and long-standing community worker in East Preston, held a recognition dinner in her honour. Pearleen Oliver, author, historian, and educator, was one of three women selected to receive the YWCA Recognition of Women Award initiated in 1981. She was the first woman to serve as moderator of the African United Baptist Association and is the author of *Brief History of Colored Baptists of Nova Scotia 1782-1953* (1953) and *A Root and a Name* (1977). When the Recognition of Women Award was announced for 1982, Doris Evans, an educator and community worker, was among the three women honoured. And there are still many others who have experiences that need to be examined and stories that need to be told – women such as Ada Fells of Yarmouth, Edith Cromwell of Bridgetown, Clotilda Douglas of Sydney, Elsie Elms of Guysborough, Ruth Johnson of Cobequid Road. And there are others ...

Writer Mary Helen Washington, in the introduction to her book *Midnight Birds*, speaks of the process whereby Black women recover and rename their past. She talks about the monuments and statues erected by White men to celebrate their achievements, "to remake history, and to cast themselves eternally in heroic form." She says, "we have been erased from history." As research and exploration into the lives of Black women in Nova Scotia continues, a fuller view, one with dimension and perspective, will emerge. We will know then where to erect our monument. Now there are only signposts pointing the way.

** While the term Black is most commonly used to identify people of African origin, Afro-Nova Scotian has come into contemporary use to identify people of African descent who live in Nova Scotia.*