

**BLACK HISTORY MONTH**  
Anti-Black Racism in Canada

As Canadians, we may not be aware that our society has centuries of anti-Black racial division and discrimination. Legislation now prohibits slavery, segregation and hate speech or other actions rooted in hate. That reality was not always the situation as documented by Constance Backhouse *Colour-Coded A Legal History of Racism in Canada 1900-1950*.<sup>1</sup>

**Slavery**

The first Black slave arrived in Quebec in 1628. In 1773, after the British conquest, General Jeffery Amherst declared that all slaves would remain in the possession of their masters. A statute passed in 1793 in Upper Canada prohibited people from bringing slaves into the province. However, the statute confirmed the existing property rights of all slave owners. At that time, children born of enslaved women were to remain the slave owners “property” until the age of twenty five. Various areas of Canada remained slave territory until 1833 when the British Parliament passed the Emancipation Act.<sup>2</sup>

**Black Segregation**

Ontario and Nova Scotia authorized separate schools for Blacks and Whites in the mid 1800. Once separate schools were set up, the courts refused to permit Black children to attend other schools, even when children had to travel long distances. Separate schools existed in Ontario until 1917 and in Nova Scotia until 1965. It was noted that the schools for Black students lacked competent teachers and some only met for three months in the year. Most schools had no library. Racial segregation was practised in many other aspects of society including the military. In 1954, Grantley Adams, the Black Prime Minister of Barbados, was denied a room in a hotel in Montreal because he was Black.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Constance Backhouse, *Colour-Coded A Legal History of Racism in Canada 1900-1950*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press) 1999, Reprinted 2001, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid* Chapter 7 Bitterly Disappointed at the Spread of “Colour-Bar Tactics”: Viola Desmond’s Challenge to Racial Segregation, Nova Scotia, 1946. P31-32

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p30-32

Viola Desmond ,whose photograph graces our ten dollar bill, was denied a seat in the “White” area of a movie theater in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. In 1946. She was convicted of refusal to pay the full tax on the seat and was fined for tax evasion. The Supreme Court of Nova Scotia, on a technicality, did not overturn her conviction when it was appealed in 1947,. Finally, her conviction was overturned posthumously in 2010.<sup>4</sup>

### **Canadian Ku Klux Klan**

The Canadian Ku Klux Klan was established and active in most provinces in the 1920s. By 1925 Toronto had 8,000 registered Klansmen. Although Canadian KKK were not as brutal as their American counterparts, they interfered with employment opportunities, destroyed businesses, burned properties and threaten racialized people with fiery crosses. In Winnipeg ten students at St Boniface, Roman Catholic College burned to death in a fire set by the KKK.<sup>5</sup>

One of their platforms was to prevent “interracial “ marriages. A group of KKK from Hamilton, in February 1930, travelled to Oakville to the home of Ira Johnson, a Black man and removed his fiancée Isabel Jones, a White woman. This case went to the Ontario Court of Appeal and one person was convicted of unlawfully interfering with the rights of Isabel Jones. However, the issue of racial ideology and hate was never addressed.<sup>6</sup>

The couple did marry in March 1930 and at that time the press reported that Ira was of Cherokee descent and not Black!<sup>7</sup>

The events described above are provided as examples of anti-Black racism and are not intended to represent the extent of anti-Black racism in Canada.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/viola-desmond-pardon-apology-darrell-dexter-mayann-francis-1.5936870> Retrieved 2022 02 17

<sup>5</sup> *ibid* Chapter 6 “*It will be Quite an Object Lesson*”: *R. V Phillips and the Klu Klux Klan In Oakville Ontario 1930. P 14-20*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p-2, 49, 52-54,

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* p57