

Notes for an Address  
By  
Honorable Donald H. Oliver, Q.C.  
At the  
80th Anniversary Dinner  
Rotary Club of Amherst

Saturday, February 28, 2015

Wandlyn Inn

Amherst, Nova Scotia

Good evening ... I'm honoured and delighted to join you tonight to help celebrate the 80th Anniversary of the Rotary Club of Amherst. And I want to thank Morris Haugg for extending this kind invitation to me and for making all the arrangements.

I am doubly honoured to be here tonight it being Saturday the 28th of February, the last day of black history month in 2015. It's a special day that provides me an opportunity to pay tribute to Theresa Halfkenny, this years recipient of the community Paul Harris fellowship. There could be no more fitting tribute for this significant day in the lives of African-Canadians. Theresa is truly someone who has , for a number of years, provided service and leadership to the community.

Tonight , in celebration of her great honor, I wish to take you back in History and remind you of the struggles, the contributions and the background of, as we have been variously called, African Nova Scotians, Visible Minorities , Blacks, Negroes, Coloreds, former slaves, etc.

To begin, let me ask you a question. How many of you had an opportunity to view the Book of Negroes six-part mini-series on the CBC recently? (Show of hands). For those of you who haven't yet

experienced this remarkable series, let me give you a thumbnail sketch of what it's about.

It opens with Aminata Diallo, an elderly black woman, as she begins to share her "slave narrative" with a group of white men. She describes her life as an 11-year-old child in West Africa. Then we witness the murders of her parents and her crossing in a ship over what she calls the "great river". In Charlestown, South Carolina, she is sold into slavery to a plantation owner, who brutally tries to break her spirit.

He fails and Aminata is sold to a second owner, but she escapes from him while on a trip to New York. She then helps the British during the America Revolutionary War. In return for her loyalty to the British Crown, she is given her freedom and travels to Nova Scotia, where she helps to settle the Black community of Birchtown.

While free, however, she and other Blacks continue to face sickening discrimination and hardship. So when settlement in Sierra Leone is offered to "free Blacks", she fulfills her dream of returning home along with 1200 other former slaves. Despite that, however, she's remains driven to help free her fellow Africans and travels to England. There, her "slave narrative" serves to

galvanize the white-led Abolitionist movement. Like Rotarians, Aminata's motto is clearly "service above self."

I am a decedent of those 3,000 slaves who like Aminata, came to Nova Scotia as United Empire Loyalists. But while Aminata's narrative is fiction, it's rooted in fact.

Since February is Black History Month here in Canada, I'd like to share with you some of the stories about Blacks in Nova Scotia. I'll tell you about the struggles they overcame, the impact they made on our history, and the proud legacy they left us that still lingers today.

Let me begin with more about the Black United Empire Loyalists, who came to Atlantic Canada after the War of American Independence. They were enticed to come north with the promise of owning land, a chance to build their own fortunes, and lives as free people.

However, history tells us that most of them never received the land and provisions promised to them. They were cheated, left to fend for themselves or forced to work on public projects such as road building. Others were taken from the rebels as spoils of war and were not freed like the Black Loyalists who fought on the side of the British. They simply changed owners.

The tragic story of Mary Postell was typical of the many Blacks who sided with the British at the time. Mary Postell was the slave of a wealthy South Carolina plantation owner when the War of Independence began. But she managed to escape with her children to claim freedom behind British lines.

Then under the pretense of verifying her papers, a white man confiscated her certificate of freedom. So she went to St. Augustine in Florida with her husband and children to work as servants to Jesse Gray. Gray claimed that legally Mary was his slave. And when he immigrated to Nova Scotia, he took Mary and her daughters along.

Afraid that Jesse Gray would sell her away from her children, Mary fled with her children. Gray went to court to prove he owned her and apparently he won his case. To punish Mary, he took her down the coast to Argyle, where he sold her for one hundred bushels of potatoes. Ignoring her heartbreak, he also sold her daughter Flora to another man. And Gray kept Mary's daughter Nell as his own property.

In 1793, the *Abolition Act* was passed in Upper Canada. This law freed slaves aged 25 and over and made it illegal to bring slaves

into Upper Canada. Consequently, Upper Canada became a safe haven for runaway slaves.

The *Abolition Act* also made Canada the first jurisdiction in the British Empire to move toward the abolition of slavery. Forty years later, in 1833, the *British Imperial Act* abolished slavery throughout the Empire, including Canada.

By the 1860s, there were 40,000 Blacks in Canada — the descendants of Black slaves in New France, Black Loyalists, Jamaican Maroons, Black refugees from the War of 1812, and the Black fugitives who came to Upper Canada to escape slavery.

Many white Canadians had opposed slavery and helped Black refugees, but many others “feared the influx of Black settlers, seeing them as backward, ignorant, immoral, criminal and an economic threat.” Blacks faced widespread discrimination in housing, immigration and access to public services well into the 20th century.

What is more, there were segregation laws enacted in Canada more than 50 years before the first Jim Crow laws came into effect in the American South (1890). From 1833 in Nova Scotia, and from 1850 in Upper Canada, it was law to have separate schools

for "Blacks or People of Colour".

By 1960, there would still be seven formal Black school districts and three exclusively Black schools in Nova Scotia. The Ontario and Nova Scotia laws governing black separate schools were not repealed until the mid-1960s.

Segregation was common practice in other areas too. Blacks were not allowed to eat in the same restaurants or stay in the same hotels as whites. And during the First World War, black men were denied the opportunity of serving their country in the regular army. They were instead relegated to the No. 2 Construction Battalion.

This Battalion was comprised of 600 black soldiers, but all of the unit's 19 officers were white, with one exception — Captain William A. White, the unit's Chaplain, my grandfather and the first Black officer to serve in the British military.

The Battalion's role was to support the front lines — building roads and bridges, stringing barb wire, defusing land mines so advancing troops could move forward, and bringing out the wounded. Conditions were dangerous and horrible. They were last on the supply line and often went weeks without changes in socks or underwear.

Even though they managed to break a number of production records, they were seen as lazy and not fit enough to fight.

In those days, Black women were also not allowed to train as nurses alongside white women. The Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People — or the NSAACP founded by my brother, the Reverend Dr. William P. Oliver and his wife Pearleen Oliver — together with the Toronto Negro Veterans Association put pressure on nursing schools. And in the late 1940s, they won the battle for the acceptance of Black nursing students.

Back then, Blacks could not even sit on the main floor of a movie theatre. If they did, however innocently, they were summarily punished as Canada's own Rosa Parks quickly learned in 1946.

Her name was Viola Desmond, a successful Halifax beautician and businesswoman. She was arrested for choosing to sit downstairs in the Roseland Theatre in New Glasgow, instead of upstairs in the balcony or "nigger's heaven". She was thrown in jail for 12 hours and then finally charged with "attempting to defraud the Federal Government."

The charge was based on her refusal to pay the one-cent

amusement tax difference between the three cents charged to those sitting in the balcony and the two cents charged to those sitting downstairs. Viola would not agree to pay more than the white customers for the same show. After a short trial she was sentenced to a fine of \$20 and 30 days in jail.

Again, the NSAACP took up the fight and helped raise the money to pay the fine. Together with Carrie Best, publisher of The Clarion, the first Black newspaper in Nova Scotia, they also generated considerable publicity about the "Jim Crow" laws that fostered racism and bigotry.

The NSAACP kept the coals of controversy on the segregation issue burning bright for eight years, when finally their efforts led to the repeal of segregation policies in Nova Scotia in 1954.

This is more than a year before Rosa Parks' action in Montgomery, Alabama, helped bring the civil rights movement in the U.S. into sharp media focus.

Throughout these struggles, three generations of my family, on both my father's and my mother's side, have worked to stem the tide of racism for all visible minorities in this country and, in

particular, Blacks in Nova Scotia.

Let me tell you about one of the more pivotal events I remember as a young man. It involved the relocation of the citizens of Africville in the early 1960s. Located close to downtown Halifax and close to the harbour, Blacks had lived in this community for more than 100 years. But the City wanted the land. It was prime real estate.

The Africville relocation was a study in pathos. No attempt was made to save the community as a community. No reasonable compensation was paid to the residents for their property. And as soon as deals for the acquisition of homes were signed, the houses were bulldozed.

Africville galvanized the Halifax Black community into action. Its destruction created a unifying force – a force that encouraged Blacks to stand-up and affirm they would no longer be treated as inferior beings. For example, it inspired my brother the Reverend Dr. William P. Oliver, who took over as pastor of the Street Baptist Church in Halifax when my grandfather passed away.

Rev. Dr. Oliver had a dream to build a Black Cultural Centre to showcase the achievements of Nova Scotia Blacks throughout the

ages. After two years of study and research, I worked closely with the Attorney General's office to draft the "purpose" clauses that were in a Bill for the Protection and Preservation of Black Culture in Nova Scotia.

One of the momentous achievements of this new legislation was the culmination of Rev. Dr. Oliver's dream. A new Centre for Black Culture opened its doors two years later. I was the founding president.

Several other events distinguished these years as turning points in the history of Blacks in Nova Scotia. To coincide with the 20th anniversary of the signing of the U.N.'s Declaration of Human Rights, for instance, a conference dealing with "The Black Man in Nova Scotia" was scheduled for early December in 1968. Then, as the local newspapers reported, "four angry young men came to town" – all Black Panthers.

On November 30, a week before the Human Rights Conference, the fragmented Black groups from Halifax, from the surrounding ghettos, and from across Nova Scotia held the first All Black meeting.

It sparked the creation of the Black United Front, an umbrella organization through which Black Canadians could secure

recognition of their rights and equality.

These events became defining moments for Blacks in Nova Scotia. No longer could anyone sweep the "Black Problem" under the collective rug of white society. Out of these pivotal events came a movement for better jobs, an end to segregation in education and an educational system more reflective of Nova Scotia society.

These events show that Blacks and other visible minorities have come some distance in this country. The blatant disruption of entire Black communities like Africville is not likely to happen in the 21st century. But, our journey is far from over.

That's because very few Canadians know about, yet alone appreciate, the contributions of Black Canadians who have distinguished themselves in every field of human endeavour. They include Nova Scotians like:

- Rose Fortune who settled in Annapolis Royal in 1783 and went on to become North America's first Black policewoman.
- William Hall, who was born in Nova Scotia in 1827. He served with the Royal Navy and became the first Canadian, and the first person of African ancestry, to receive the Victoria Cross, the highest military decoration in the British Empire.

- My aunt Portia White, who broke the colour barrier in Canadian classical music, performing in more than 100 concerts worldwide, including a command performance before Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

In politics, in the arts, in military service and in business, Afro-Canadians have made inestimable contributions to our province and to our country — all during times characterized by pervasive racism. And these great Canadians not only endured, they succeeded.

Black History Month is an important celebration to me. For many years, I have spoken to groups across Canada about the contributions of Black Canadians during Black History Month.

I also believe that Black History Month serves as a string around the fingers of all Canadians. It reminds us to keep up the fight against racism. It compels us to ask ourselves: What can I do to improve the condition of Black people, indeed, all visible minorities, here in Canada and around the world?

Let's face it, many Black Canadians still face challenges in our society. The taint of discrimination continues to impede our progress.

Consider this story which aired last week (February 18) on CBC's The National. It's about Shantelle Browning-Morgan, a high school teacher in Windsor, Ontario. She was alarmed by the "low sense of cultural esteem" among the Black students at her school.

When asked to describe Blacks or the Black experience, her students came up with words like "thug, ghetto, gangs, thief, poor and dropout".

To counteract this, she piloted a new history course five years ago. Working with the Essex County Black Historical Research Society and the Essex County District School Board, she led the research and writing of the course materials that highlight the history of African Canadians in the region. The course also explores the cultural, social, economic, and political contributions from Africa and the African Diaspora in local and global contexts.

From the outset, this course has been a phenomenal success. After taking the course, a young Black student said: "I feel I can be anyone I want because I don't have to follow stereotypes anymore." As Peter Mansbridge observed, these "lost lessons are changing students lives."

But Ms. Browning-Morgan encountered an ugly backlash when she first introduced the new course. Someone left nasty graffiti in the school's washroom about her. Someone painted the "n" word on her van. And someone wrote an anonymous letter to the school threatening that they would kill her Black students.

Naturally, she was frightened for her students. "Am I putting these kids in danger?," she wondered. The school brought in the police to investigate and to protect her and her students. It's a memory that still brings tears to her eyes five years later.

But she can take great pride in earning the Governor General's Award for excellence in teaching history. More importantly, she can take profound satisfaction in the fact that, as she says, "the definition of who my students are has changed because of this course.'

In recent years, Nova Scotians can also take some pride in how communities and our province have acknowledged some of the bleak chapters in our shared history.

In 2010, the City of Halifax apologized for the destruction of Africville and its community. As Mayor Peter Kelly said, "The repercussions of what happened in Africville linger to this day. They haunt in the

form of lost opportunities for young people who were never nurtured in the rich traditions, culture and heritage of Africville."

As part of the negotiated settlement, the city transferred two acres of municipal land and contributed more than \$3 million to build a replica of the Africville Church and an interpretive centre.

In 2010, the province of Nova Scotia also granted an official apology and a free pardon to Viola Desmond. Lieutenant-Governor Maryann Francis, the first Black person to serve as the Queen's representative in our province, presided over the ceremony.

Wanda Robson, Viola's 83 year old sister, was there to accept the apology. Premier Darrell Dexter also apologized to Viola's family and all Black Nova Scotians for the racism she was subjected to in an incident he called unjust.

We can also be proud of the important laws enacted in Canada, both federally and provincially, to protect human rights and prohibit discrimination, such as the 1960 Canadian Bill of Rights, the 1977 Canadian Human Rights Act and the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms that safeguards human rights under our country's Constitution.

But even today, studies continue to show that if you're a Black Canadian, you are more likely than any other ethnic group not to get a job or a promotion. You are also more likely to get pulled over for "driving while Black" or to be discriminated in the courts.

What is more, there are very few Blacks occupying the corner offices of Canadian companies or key political roles. That's because racism still exists – in an undercurrent of apathy and ignorance that continues to impede advancement.

In the wake of several police shootings of unarmed Black Americans, a scorching debate about racism rages south of the border. It's brought massive protests and a level of civic unrest unseen in decades. Yet I suspect that most Canadians take pride in believing that such events would never happen in our tolerant and inclusive society.

But from my perspective — and that of most African Canadians — that society doesn't exist. Racism remains a reality in Canada.

I do hope that the CBC's Book of Negroes mini-series provokes more discussion about the history and reality of the Black

experience in Canada. And I also hope this discussion compels more Canadians to see Black Canadians as we really are.

We are a people who by the force of our character and our sheer determination to succeed, have prospered in an often-hostile environment.

We are a people who through our advocacy have helped to bring in new laws that protect human rights and guarantee the equality of all Canadians.

We are a people who have proved that we are not part of the problem. Rather, we offer positive and enduring solutions. And we remain committed to building a better future for all Canadians.

Thank you.