



Black History Month

Each February we celebrate Black History Month as a time to recognize and honour the achievements, contributions, and cultures of Black Canadians and Black communities.

Due to Canada's history and legacy of colonialism, Black people along with Indigenous and peoples of colour have long been marginalized and overlooked as important contributors to the development of what Canada has become today. There is little mention of the successes and developments of Black individuals in Canadian teachings, and the Black Identity and Diaspora throughout Canada has been largely underrepresented and underserved. For these same reasons, the contributions of Black nurses and health care professionals have also been overshadowed and broadly disregarded. By increasing this visibility, acknowledging and respecting the inherent value of all Black people, and recognizing the ways in which Black people have challenged coloniality throughout historyⁱ, it is our responsibility to correct these omissions for the future.

As such, in celebration of this year's Black History Month, we seek to formally recognize and honour the legacies of just some of the amazing Black nurses in history and their contributions to the nursing profession in Canada.

A Legacy of Black Canadian Nurses, 1940s-1950s

Ruth Bailey and Gwennyth Barton

Until the late 1940s, Black Canadians who wished to practice nursing were not able to pursue a nursing education in Canada. Instead, many were told to go to the United States to pursue a nursing career, where nursing education institutions had started accepting Black students in the 1870s.ⁱⁱ

It was in 1948 when Ruth Bailey and Gwennyth Barton became the first Black nurses to earn their nursing diplomas in Canada, graduating from the Grace Maternity School of Nursing in Halifax.ⁱⁱⁱ This development was significant for Black communities in Canada who had advocated strongly for this change, and represented very early steps toward Black visibility in health care.

Even though some Canadian educational institutions had started to accept Black students at this time, the acceptance rates of Black students were kept very low as the profession would continue to foster the notion of whiteness as central to nursing.^{iv} Ruth Bailey and Gwennyth Barton were among the first in Canada to disrupt this colonial conception, challenging this deep-seated ideology.

Ruth Bailey went on to receive a certificate in public health from the University of Toronto, and practiced nursing in Chatham, where she continued her legacy as a trailblazer for future Black nurses and health professionals.^v

Bernice Carnegie Redmon

In the mid-1940s, Toronto-born Bernice Redmon sought to become a nurse in Canada. However, as she was not able to enter nursing education in her home province, she obtained her nursing education in the US in 1945 before moving back to Canada to become the first Black nurse in public health, which she practiced at the Nova Scotia Department of Health.^{vi} Redmon then went on to become the first Black woman appointed to the Victorian Order of Nurses in Canada.^{vii}

Colleen Campbell and Marian Overton

Also in the 1940s, Black women were prohibited from pursuing nursing education in the province of Ontario, even though institutions were beginning to accept Black students in other provinces by this time. As a result of this ongoing discrimination, community activists took this issue to the Ontario Human Rights Commission and the case was successful. Therefore, in the late 1940s in Ontario, Black women were finally able to pursue nursing education.^{viii} In 1948, Colleen L. Campbell and Marian V. Overton became the first two Black nurses to graduate from Hotel Dieu Hospital, part of St. Joseph's School of Nursing in Windsor.^{ix}

Similar to the legacy of Ruth Bailey and Gwennyth Barton, that of Colleen Campbell and Marian Overton was of great significance to the future of the Black Canadian community. The case brought forth to the Ontario



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Human Rights Commission which condemned anti-black racism and succeeded in the change to Ontario educational institutions was paramount. This activism not only brought about compelling changes required to nursing education systems and education for Black students in Canada, but was another instance in which Black communities ushered in this systemic change and demonstrated the power of Black voices to continuing to lead these transformations.

Frieda Parker Steele and Cecile Wright Lemon

In 1947, Frieda Parker Steele and Cecile Wright Lemon became the third and fourth Black students to commence their nursing students at the Hotel Dieu, St. Joseph School of Nursing, from which they graduated in 1950.^x While many more Black students were also seeking nursing education placements at that time, it was common to find "unofficial policies" whereby many institutions only accepted two Black students at a time.^{xi}

In an interview between Karen Flynn, PhD, associate professor in Gender and Women's Studies and the African-American Studies programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and author of *Moving Beyond Borders: A History of Black Canadian and Caribbean Women in the Diaspora* in addition to many other articles and publications, Steele recounted to Flynn that at the time of her nursing education, she had only heard very little about other Black women pursuing nursing education anywhere in Canada and when she "inquired at the Black museum... no one there at the time knew [on anecdotes of a Black woman rejected from nursing education in Nova Scotia]." Steele's experience in her search for Black history ultimately speaks volumes to the racism of the time and the deletion of historical successes of Black people, particularly Black women.

In another interview between Flynn and Steele in Flynn's publication, *Beyond the Glass Wall: Black Canadian Nurses, 1940-1970*, Steele described her experience working alongside white nurses, and how quickly she and her roommate (Wright Lemon) dismantled their classmates' long-held racist stereotyping and created a community of friendship.^{xii}

Marisse Scott

Also in 1947, Marisse Scott from southern Ontario commenced her nursing studies at Guelph's St. Joseph's Hospital after being rejected by the nursing school in her hometown of Owen Sound for being black.^{xiii} Administrators in Owen Sound claimed that it would be "unfair" to admit her to the nursing program as her presence in the health care field as a Black woman would "kill the patients" and she would thus have no career prospects.^{xiv}

As news of Scott's rejection from her hometown nursing school grew in regional media, anti-racial discrimination efforts also grew in communities throughout the area and supported Scott's fight to pursue nursing education. These efforts were ultimately successful, and Marisse Scott went on to graduate as a Registered Nurse from St. Joseph's in 1950.^{xv} Later in her life, Scott moved to St. Lucia with her family, where she continued her nursing career, and served as a nutrition specialist with the St. Lucia Ministry of Health.^{xvi}

Marisse Scott's legacy shows her tenacity and demonstrates the strides she made to transforming the health system and health education in Canada for Black Canadians.

Agnes Clinton

In 1951, Agnes Clinton graduated from the Women's College Hospital School of Nursing in Toronto.^{xvii} Prior to this, Clinton too struggled with repeated rejection from nursing educational institutions because of her skin colour. Clinton reported that various institutions gave different excuses, such as that she was "too tall, too big, [and] would do better somewhere else..."^{xviii} Nevertheless, Clinton persevered in spite of this oppression, and in 1951 she became the first Black nursing student to graduate from the institution.^{xix}

Clinton first worked as a surgical nurse, then pursued additional studies in public health nursing which she practiced for 13 years. Clinton subsequently completed a training program on substance use at Yale University in the United States. With a passion for mental health and providing care to underserved communities, Clinton established a public health program for the homeless in Detroit, Michigan, and worked in community mental health providing care to people living with HIV.^{xx}



Clotilda Douglas-Yakimchuk

In 1954, Clotilda Douglas-Yakimchuk became the first Black woman to graduate from the Nova Scotia Hospital School of Nursing in Halifax.^{xxi} Known for being a social justice advocate, Douglas-Yakimchuk was later appointed as the president of the Registered Nurses' Association of Nova Scotia, the first Black person to hold that role.^{xxii} Also notably, she remains the only elected Black president of the organization in its 100-year history.^{xxiii}

Clotilda was passionate about nursing education, and in addition to her nursing diploma, went on to achieve a post-graduate diploma in midwifery, a post-graduate certificate in psychiatric nursing, and a diploma in adult education. She went on to serve in many leadership roles in health care institutions in Canada as well as in Grenada for several years until she ultimately returned to Canada in 1967.

As an activist for the Black community, Clotilda also became the founding President of the Black Community Development Organization whereby she led movements to create affordable housing low-income communities, and she also continued to demonstrate her passion for education as a fundraiser and mentor for Black youth.^{xxiv} In 2003, Douglas-Yakimchuk received the Order of Canada for her contributions.^{xxv}

Today

There is no question that each of these individuals as well as so many Black Canadians have made profound contributions to the nursing profession and have brought about significant transformation within Canada's health care system and continue to do so today. However, this has never been without difficulty, as Black, Indigenous, and people of colour have faced systemic racism and adversity in this nation throughout history and still do, due to the inequitable, colonial foundation of Canadian systems. This is why we honour the work of all Black nurses and their legacies, as well as the strides and achievements of Black nurses and health care professionals across Canada today who persevere in the dismantling of antiquated structures for the health of all Canadians.

More Resources

- [Nursing Declaration Against Anti-Black Racism in Nursing and Health Care](#)
- [Coalition of African, Caribbean and Black Nurses in British Columbia](#)
- [Pan-Canadian Association of Nurses of African Descent](#)
- [Canadian Black Nurses Alliance](#)
- [Black Health Alliance](#)
- [Black Canadian Healthcare Professionals Association](#)
- [Public Health Agency of Canada: Social determinants and inequities in health for Black Canadians: A Snapshot \(2020\)](#)
- [Government of Canada: About Black History Month](#)

ⁱ De Sousa, I, Wytenbroek, L, Boschma, G, and Thorne, S. *Advances in Nursing Science*. 'Reflections on Black Nurses' Invisibility: Exploring the Contribution of Black Nurses to British Columbia (Canada), 1845-1910.' Feb 2023.

ⁱⁱ Flynn, K. Journal of Black Studies, 38(3). '[I'm Glad That Someone is Telling the Nursing Story: Writing Black Canadian Women's History](#).' Jan 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jefferies, K. Dal News. '[Recognizing history of black nurses a first step to addressing racism and discrimination in](#)

nursing.' May 2020.

^{iv} De Sousa, I., Wytenbroek, L, Boschma, G and Thorne, S. Advances in Nursing Science. *Reflections on Black Nurses' Invisibility: Exploring the Contribution of Black Nurses to British Columbia (Canada), 1845-1910*.

^v Flynn, K. *Nursing History Review* 17(1). 'Beyond the Glass Wall: Black Canadian Nurses, 1940-1970.' 2009.

^{vi} Ryan, S. MHC Kingston. 'Black History Month: Bernice Redmon.' Feb 2022.

^{vii} Ryan, S. MHC Kingston. *Black History Month: Bernice Redmon*.

^{viii} Windsor Mosaic. Funded by Government of Canada. 'African Canadian Community: Nurses.' Feb 2023.

^{ix} Ibid

^x Flynn, K. *J Black Studies. I'm Glad That Someone is Telling the Nursing Story: Writing Black Canadian Women's History*.

^{xi} Flynn, K. *Nursing History Review* 17(1). *Beyond the Glass Wall: Black Canadian Nurses, 1940-1970*.

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Gover, D, Wakeman, N, and Khosla, A. The Black Past in Guelph: Remembered and Reclaimed; Untold Stories of Black Life, Culture, and Community in Guelph and Beyond. 'Marisse Scott: A Game Changer in Nursing.' Nov 2018.

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^{xv} Avery, R. *Emancipation*. 'Marisse Louisy.' Aug 2001.

^{xvi} Gover, D, Wakeman, N, and Khosla, A. The Black Past in Guelph; Untold Stories. *Marisse Scott: A Game Changer in Nursing*.

^{xvii} Women's College Hospital Foundation. 'Black History Month: Celebrating Agnes Clinton.' N.d.

^{xviii} Women's College Hospital Foundation. *Black History Month: Celebrating Agnes Clinton*;

The Secret Life of Canada, S3 E5 (text transcript). CBC. 'TRANSCRIPT: The Secret Life of Canada, Season 3, EP 5: Crash Course on Black Nurses.' Aug 2021.

^{xix} The Miss Margaret Robins Archives of Women's College Hospital, Photograph Collection. Digital Museums Canada. [Photograph, L-00558]. 'Community Stories: Memories of the Women's College Hospital School of Nursing; Graduation march to Convocation Hall, June 1951.' Accessed 2023.

^{xx} Women's College Hospital Foundation. *Black History Month: Celebrating Agnes Clinton*.

^{xxi} Sullivan, N. *Saltwire*. 'Black health-care crusaders: African Canadian pioneers in Nova Scotia nursing history.' Feb 2022.

^{xxii} Sullivan, N. *Saltwire*. *Black health-care crusaders: African Canadian pioneers in Nova Scotia nursing history*.

^{xxiii} Cape Breton University. 'Honorary Degree Recipients: Clotilda Adessa Coward Douglas Yakimchuk.' N.d.

^{xxiv} Cape Breton U. *Honorary Degree Recipients: Clotilda Adessa Coward Douglas Yakimchuk*.

^{xxv} Borden Colley, S. CBC. 'One of Nova Scotia's first black nurses recalls struggles and triumphs.' Feb 2018.