**Pathways to Human Rights and Social Justice:**

**How Four Women of African Descent Shaped Canada**

African Heritage Month Events, February 24-27, 2020

Teacher’s Guide

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**Historical Background: Angelique, Rose Fortune, Mary Ann Shadd and Viola Desmond**

Leslie McCurdy’s one person play, *Things My Fore-Sisters Saw,* dramatizes the life of four women of African descent who had an important influence on Canadian history: the young slave girl Angelique; the Black Loyalist, Rose Fortune; the abolitionist and publisher, Marie Ann Shadd and Viola Desmond, Canada’s Rosa Parks. (<https://lesliemccurdy.ca/things-my-foresisters-saw/>)

Although we traditionally identify Canada’s nation builders with powerful men of status and influence such as former prime ministers, we should keep in mind that history also flows from the bottom up and individuals and groups who have previously been marginalized or altogether forgotten have played a major role in making Canada the nation it is today. The four women of African descent who are the subject of Leslie McCurdy’s play are inspirational role models of courage and independence. Their individual actions and life stories are not only an important part of African Canadian heritage but they helped create significant pathways toward making Canada a more just and racially diverse society.

The life of Angelique is a tragic tale of a young slave women who sought her freedom from her slave mistress in eighteenth century Montreal. In the evening of April 10, 1734, she ran away but was soon captured and accused of starting a fire that burned down much of old Montreal. Although she maintained her innocence, she was tried, tortured and executed for her accused crime. For over two and a half centuries, her story, like the practice of slavery in Canada, remained a forgotten chapter in our nation’s history.

In 2006, the story of Angelique came to life again through the publication of the prize winning book, *The Hanging of Angelique: the Untold Story of Slavery in Canada and the Burning of Old Montreal* by Afua Cooper. Since its publication, the subject of slavery has reemerged as an important aspect in Canadian history. Today, we know that slavery existed in Canada under both French and British rule and although the institution was gradually abolished in Upper Canada beginning with the Act of 1793, human bondage under slavery persisted well into the nineteenth century. The recent work of the historian Harvey Whitfield documents the practice of slavery in the Maritimes and it shows that for those of African descent, there was often no clear line separating their status as being either a slave or a servant. This was the condition many blacks found themselves in during the period of large-scale migration of Loyalists, which occurred at the end of the American Revolutionary War. This migration brought over 30,000 refugees to the Maritime provinces during 1783-1784, including white Loyalists and their slaves as well as over 3,000 free Black Loyalists.

Life in Canada for the Black Loyalists was extremely difficult. After successfully escaping the cruelties of slavery in order to support the British, they were transported by ship from New York to Nova Scotia where they faced discrimination, broken promises, as well as a series of unusually harsh Nova Scotia winters. As supporters of the British cause, the Black Loyalists were promised land with the expectation that they would be able to sustain themselves through farming. However, this promise was not forthcoming and what land most Black Loyalists finally received was not sufficient in size and quality for successful farming. As a result of these hardships, over one third of the Black Loyalists left Nova Scotia in 1791 on a flotilla of ships bound for Sierra Leone where they sought permanent settlement.

Rose Fortune was among the large population of Blacks who remained in Nova Scotia. Her life and achievements represent the continuing struggle of Black Loyalists in Canada and in 2018, she was recognized by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada as a national historic person.

Rose Fortune was born in Philadelphia (c.1774) to parents who were run-away slaves. When she was nine years old, the British relocated her and her parents to the port city of Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia. Rose successfully overcame the challenges of prejudice and discrimination that Black women faced in late eighteenth and nineteenth century Nova Scotia. As young women, she started her own business of carrying luggage for local residents and visitors to the city. She also became an unofficial police officer along Annapolis Royal’s rough and rowdy waterfront. She was commonly seen making her way through the town with her signature walking stick, which became her hallmark of self-protection and for keeping the peace.

Parks Canada’s website states that Rose Fortune is only one of a few life stories of Black Loyalists that have survived. The few accounts we have provide only brief glimpses and fragmentary narratives of the lives and achievements of this important group in Canadian history. Rose Fortune’s story is the only known Black Loyalist woman’s account and it tells how, through perseverance and strength, this remarkable woman was able to overcome racial barriers and become a successful businesswoman and a respected member of the community. ([www.pc.gc.ca/en/culture/clmhc-hsmbc/res/doc/information-backgrounder/Rose\_Fortune](http://www.pc.gc.ca/en/culture/clmhc-hsmbc/res/doc/information-backgrounder/Rose_Fortune))

Mary Ann Shadd was the first Black female publisher in Canada and an important figure in the abolitionist movement. She was born in 1823 of free parents in Wilmington, Delaware and educated in a Quaker boarding school. Committed to the abolition of slavery, she moved to Windsor, Ontario in 1851, in order to support the Underground Railroad and make Canada a safe haven for enslaved and former enslaved Americans. In 1853, she founded *The Provincial Freedman*, which gave voice to Black refugees and described their experiences in Canada. As a writer, publisher, abolitionist and community activist, Mary Ann Shadd focused her energies in the fight for racial equality and against the practice of racial segregation. (<http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/shadd_mary_ann_camberton_12E.htm>)

Canadian civil rights icon and pioneer Black businesswoman, Viola Desmond, needs no introduction to most Canadians and we are reminded of her life story every time we see her image on our new Desmond $10 bank note. We should keep in mind, however, that her story was little known in Canada (and Nova Scotia) a decade ago. Her rise from historical obscurity to a person of national importance is largely the result of the efforts of her youngest sister and resident of North Sydney, Wanda Robson. After receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree from Cape Breton University in 2004, Wanda has been active in raising public awareness about her sister and the struggle for racial equality in Canada. She has given numerous media interviews and presentations in schools and at community organizations. She is also author and contributor to several recent books on the life of Viola Desmond.

Viola Desmond’s courageous act of resistance to the practice of racial segregation has resonated throughout Canada (and beyond) and it serves as an inspiration for all Canadians.

**Teaching Resources:**

The life stories of all four of the women of African descent depicted in Leslie McCurdy’s play show how these previously all but forgotten historical figures have helped create pathways to human rights and social justice in Canada. They are important examples that reinforce social studies and Canadian history learning outcomes, especially in relation to the topics of African Canadian heritage, cultural diversity, and the history of human rights and social justice in Canada. The following resources should help guide teachers in incorporating these four figures into the school curriculum.

Books:

Cooper, Afua. 2006. *The Hanging of Angelique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montreal.* Toronto: Harper Perennial.

Reynolds, Graham with Wanda Robson. 2016. *Viola Desmond’s Canada: A History of Blacks and Racial Segregation in the Promised Land.* Winnipeg: Fernwood.

\_\_\_. 2018*. Viola Desmond: Her Life and Times.* Winnipeg: Rosewood

Walker, James W. St. G. 1999. “African Canadians.” In Paul Robert Magocsi (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Canadian Peoples.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

\_\_\_. 1993. *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

\_\_\_. 1985.*The Black Identity in Nova Scotia: Community and Institutions in Historical Perspective.* Dartmouth, NS: Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia.

Harvey Amani Whitefield. 2006*. Blacks on the Border: The Black Refugees in British North America.* Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont Press.

\_\_\_. 2016. *North to Bondage: Loyalist Slavery in the Maritimes* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016).

Online Resources:

Torture and the Truth: Angelique and the Burning of Old Montreal. Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History website: <https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/teachers/guides/angelique/indexen.html>.

*The Long Road to Justice: The Viola Desmond Story* (Video documentary)*.* [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yI00i9BtsQ8*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yI00i9BtsQ8)*.*

Escape from Slavery Online Learning Activity in The Underground Railroad Teacher’s Guide. <https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plans/teaching-content/teacher-activity-guide-underground-railroad/>

Nova Scotia Museum. Remembering the Black Loyalists. <https://novascotia.ca/museum/blackloyalists/teachresources.htm>.

Virtual Museum of Canada. On the Road North: Black Canada and the Road to Freedom. <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/edu/ViewLoitCollection.do;jsessionid=BADC5C4591DB2D86D4D1E2DFF099F2FC?method=preview&lang=EN&id=299>

Cape Breton University. The Viola Desmond Chair in Social Justice Educational Resources. <https://www.cbu.ca/donors/current-campaigns/viola-desmond-chair-in-social-justice/educational-resources/>

Canadian Human Rights Toolkit. Human Rights Resources for Teachers. <http://www.imagine-action.ca/hr-dp/>

Canadian Encyclopedia. Black Education in Canada Educational Guide. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/studyguide/black-history-in-canada-education-guide>.

Teachers Guide to *Viola Desmond: Her Life and Times. <https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/resources/viola-desmond>.*

Anti-Racism Teaching Resources. Safe@School. <https://www.safeatschool.ca/resources/resources-on-equity-and-inclusion/index.php?q=resources/resources-on-equity-and-inclusion/racism/tool-kits-and-activities>.

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