



LIBERTY MATTERS

REFLECTIONS ON LIBRARIES, LIBERTY, AND BLACK HISTORY

On my office wall there hangs an illustrated quotation from [Frederick Douglass](#): “Once you learn to read you will be forever free.” Libraries--online or off--have always been places where voices have mingled across the lines of centuries, cultures, countries, and races. The interaction of those voices has always, to me, been the sound of freedom.

This month, in lieu of our standard [Liberty Matters](#) format, we present some pieces that use the resources of the Online Library of Liberty to listen to those voices and provoke thought and discussion about Black History and about [Black History Month](#).

We begin by bringing you Jack Russell Weinstein’s fine essay about whether we should read [Adam Smith](#) during Black History Month. Following him will be pieces by Rachel Ferguson on Frederick Douglass and the Black church experience, and by Sabine El-Chidiac and Janet Bufton on Black Canadian women and the fight for civil rights. You’ll also find a list of links to material from the OLL and other Liberty Fund websites that bring other voices to the forefront of this discussion.

Here’s to more reading, and to forever freedom for us all.

SHOULD WE READ ADAM SMITH DURING BLACK HISTORY MONTH?

by Jack Russell Weinstein

[Adam Smith](#) was not black; neither am I. A case can be made that as a philosopher who lived in the eighteenth-century “backwater” of Scotland, he would have experienced some marginalization (“the whole wise English nation...love to mortify a Scotchman,” he once wrote)—just as the rising tide of antisemitism is making my own life progressively harder. But to use these as excuses to slide us both into Black History Month would be disingenuous at best. One does not celebrate a culture by arguing from analogy.

As such, February is a time in which we ought to center black voices and scholars, calling attention to those who emphasize the histories and experiences that have gotten short shrift over and over again. Read them before you

read Smith. Find their scholarly musings before you dive into mine.

“ONE DOES NOT CELEBRATE A CULTURE BY ARGUING FROM ANALOGY.”

Nevertheless, there is a case to be made that Smith is worth reading, even this time of year. His work may be the best example of Enlightenment [abolitionism](#) incorporated into a larger systematic philosophy. He offers more than just political or polemic arguments for black equality, and he follows the same methods for evaluating slavery as he does all other aspects of social and political life. Smith did not own slaves, as [Thomas Jefferson](#) did, and there is no record of him mistreating or even belittling people of color. Whatever he gets right or wrong, there is neither hypocrisy nor ill will.



French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789)

I. More than most of his contemporaries, Smith succeeded in recognizing the equal agency of individuals in the African diaspora. He acknowledged their suffering, identified the perpetrators, and avoided the explicit racism of his friend and admirer [David Hume](#). I wouldn't go so far as to claim Smith was woke, but for an eighteenth-century scholar whose life took him to only three countries—England, Scotland, and France—he did pretty well. He was anti-slavery, anti-racist, and anti-colonialist. As Lynn Hunt records in [Inventing Human Rights](#), Smith's work was essential in developing modern notions of empathy that led directly to the [French Declaration of Human Rights and the Citizen](#), adopted ten months before his death.

Three quotations illustrating Smith's opinion of slavery and Africans are worth noting:

“What a miserable life the slaves must have led; their life and their property intirely at the mercy of another, and their liberty, if they could be said to have any, at his disposall also” (LJ(B) iii.94).

“It is evident that the state of slavery must be very unhappy to the slave himself. This I need hardly to prove” (LJ(b) iii.112).

“Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished” (TMS, V.2.9).

Taken collectively, these remarks contain most of the desired elements of even our contemporary discourse on race: They take the experience of slaves seriously, treating them as objective reporters of their own pain. They assume that Africans are full persons and entitled, by nature, to life, property, liberty, and happiness. They declare that pain experienced by the slave is self-evident, waving away any need to “prove” it to others. They condemn the slave-holders and their enablers, precluding the possibility that they could be considered virtuous, despite their oppression of others. They treat Africans as a conquered people, nations unto themselves (although “nations” here means something different than the modern nation-state). Finally, they imply the existence of structural as well as personal racism, recognizing that slavery is a systemic problem with historical roots, not just an anomaly.

Smith also put his money where his mouth was. He explored the causes of slavery, offered a comparative sociology of slave conditions in different cultures, explained its economic failures, and argued for its immorality. I have more detailed accounts of each of these ([here](#) and [here](#)), so I'll offer just a brief overview of the latter two.

Economics: Smith argues that slavery is always more expensive than free labor, despite what slaveholders might think. This is because the costs that would usually be borne by the worker are passed on to the slave holder, and because slaves have no motivation to do a good and efficient job. For Smith, all people are inspired by “the uniform, constant, and uninterrupted” motivation to better their own conditions, “a desire which, though generally calm and dispassionate, comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave” (WN

II.iii.31, 28). In arguing against slavery, Smith is asserting that slaves have this too, underscoring the humanity and personhood of the enslaved. Since this natural, human, and innate goal can never be fulfilled—since slaves’ lots in life can never be improved—they have no incentive to be good workers. Slavery will never be efficient or profitable enough to be preferable.

Morality: Smith’s moral argument against slavery involves entering into the perspective of the slave. Anyone who does so with any precision will imagine the slaves’ pain and necessarily condemn slavery. This includes the slaveholder who, when experiencing their victims’ pain, will condemn themselves, motivating moral change. For Smith, the experience of the slave is enough, all on its own, to reveal slavery’s improper nature.



Adam Smith

I will return to Smith’s economic argument momentarily, but for now, Smith’s moral argument foreshadows three notions that have had long-standing impact on black history and world culture:

(1) It explains the centrality of racist arts and literature in slave-holding cultures: since slaveholders want to be shielded from this pain, they and their communities develop norms, habits, and texts designed to impair empathy rather than cultivate it.

(2) It excludes the most absurd argument for slavery, providing an implicit condemnation of modern voices that indefensibly claim African-American were “better off” as slaves because they were treated well by plantation owners.

(3) It argues against segregation. Since it presumes that all people share a commonality that can be bridged by the human imagination, there can be no essential impairment to cross-experiential understanding that would impair the mission of multiculturalism. In fact, elsewhere, Smith argues that there is no “original difference” between individuals (LJ(A) vi.47–48). Children are “very much alike, and neither their parents nor play-fellows could perceive any remarkable difference” (WN I.ii.4). Significant change only comes about when children are employed in different occupations, the effect of the division of labor (WN I.ii.4). In other words, segregation creates difference; it’s not a response to it.

II. Up to this point, I have argued that Smith offers an unimpeachable Enlightenment attempt at recognizing the equality, agency, and common humanity of all people, with particular acknowledgment of the African diaspora. However, I have not offered any suggestion as to why someone might want to read his work in February, specifically, as opposed to putting Smith aside for another time.

Again, I want to insist that for anyone who is willing, this is exactly what you should do. Leave Smith on the shelf; his work isn’t going anywhere. However, whether one approves of it or not, there are plenty of people who are not willing to center black voices. Whether out of ignorance, personal interest, an ideological opposition to diversity-based learning, or racism, there are still too many readers who will resist picking up a book by a black author during Black History Month. There are people who argue, for example, that ideas are distinct from their purveyors and that choosing authors because of their skin color promotes racism instead of diminishing it. I personally disagree with this position; I believe it misunderstands what racism is and how it is to be overcome. Nevertheless, my conviction doesn’t change the fact that such opinions are widely held.

I would suggest that the unwillingness to understand the true nature of racism is a failure of American conservatism, but it reveals an analogous failure of American progressivism. All too often, people on the left condemn their opponents as insidious or irredeemable. Events like Black History Month which should be opportunities for joint exploration and discussion, devolve into virtue-signaling competitions for the moral high-ground. The pervasive intolerance found in all points of the American political spectrum has stymied the collective community of inquiry that a liberal democracy is supposed to cultivate.

This, I would argue, is where Smith can excel. His work can serve as the next step for those who, for whatever reason, are not ready or willing to consider the revisionist texts that present counter-narratives to Eurocentric histories, American exceptionalism, and communal self-descriptions that systematically exclude native-born Africans and Afro-Caribbeans, and African-Americans, the three demographics we now refer to collectively as black.

Why? First, Smith's defense of commercial society allows for a thoughtful discussion of the ways in which the free market both helps and hinders progress towards true equality. Since he argues that slavery does not make economic sense, readers can explore the idea that freeing slaves was a win-win scenario in everyone's self-interest, and the reasons why so many were unable to see so.



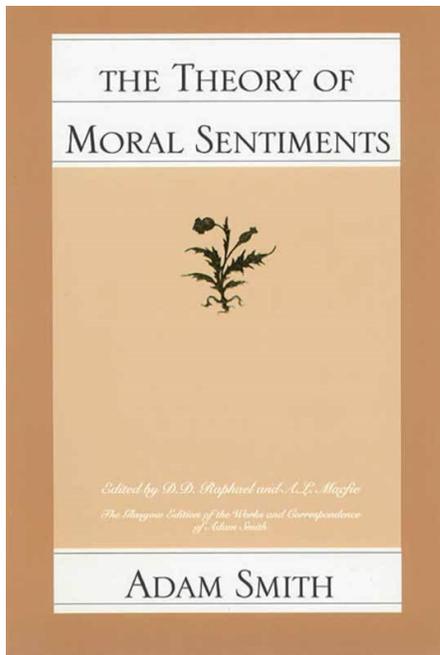
The Afro-American, No. 20, December 17, 1955

This is not a moral argument against slavery, and it is likely to be unsatisfying for someone who wants to underscore that slavery would be impermissible even if it were profitable. It is still an important strategic argument worth celebrating. The oft-celebrated Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott of 1955 only made sense on the supposition that every passenger's dollar was of equal value; the black riders knew that economics was on their side. Smith argues that the progress of free markets is the progress of political liberty. Is this true? It is a question worth discussing on his terms, separate from the current debate about the viability of "capitalism."

A second reason to read Smith in February is his complex treatment of identity. Classical liberals tend to treat individuals as purely free agents, reducing culture, social pressures, and even personal prejudices to considerations that are secondary to people's preferences—forces acting on one's identity rather than elements of it. This approach runs counter to contemporary research on identity formation and misrepresents how difficult it actually is to transgress social norms. It also makes invisible the ways in which societies promote self-hatred among the marginalized, categorizing cultural

stereotyping as mere obstructions to be overcome through sheer will. This often (but not always) leads to a victim-blaming mentality that puts the responsibility for inequality on the least-well off, rather than the forces that rig the system in advance. Smith does not do this.

His *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in particular, is an attempt to systematize the many forces that construct one's identity. He is clear that one's individuality is ultimately defined by physical separateness, but recognizes that this material reality is subordinate to the ways in which people are taught to see themselves, how they communicate with others, and what they aspire to. As a simple but relevant example, Smith argues that necessities are not just limited to the basic needs of food, shelter, and safety, as is often presumed. Instead, "necessaries" include the style of clothes that are prerequisites to employment and social recognition. He uses leather shoes and linen shirts as examples (WN V.ii.k.3).



This reconsideration of social norms opens the door to discussion about the ways in which white employers judge black applicants on how they dress and speak, and what standards one should use to evaluate competence and potential. It can also lead to discussions about whether or not schools ought to teach “code-switching”—the ability to speak, act, and dress differently,

depending on the makeup of the group the marginalized find themselves in.

A third reason to read Smith in February is that he puts on the table the idea of progress itself. His [famous stage theory](#) argues that the structure of government changes as the means of subsistence and production do, and that societies become more advanced as they move towards commercialism.

Here again, Smith's argument is purely economic. He doesn't suggest that earlier stages are morally inferior, nor does he claim that people in those stages are less worthy of political liberties. Nevertheless, progressive history has often been interpreted this way, in part because Smith utilizes problematic eighteenth-century terms like “savages” that now have racist connotations they did not have originally.

This is a conversation we must cultivate, especially since language has become so central to issues of recognition. It is this progressivist view of history that is most often associated with Eurocentric racism. Figuring out if the Enlightenment notion of progress is inherently racist is, it seems to me, an excellent topic to lead people from Smith to the counternarratives I mentioned above.

III. To conclude: everything I wrote in this essay is controversial. There are those who will take issue with my interpretation of Smith, as well as those who will challenge my depictions of the political left and right. Some readers might object to the “paternalism” of using Smith to teach people to think differently, just as others will object to me engaging with those who “should know better” than to dismiss black voices. Such is the culture of conflict we live in.

My ultimate point is that all of these objections can come out of a discussion of Adam Smith, making him an excellent source to explore the themes, goals, and narratives that Black History Month aims to emphasize. For a third time, I will affirm that in my mind, Smith should be a second choice. February is the time to prioritize black voices, albeit not the only time. Nevertheless, I would also suggest that Smith be part of the discussion for the other eleven months as well. Those

who falsely dismiss him as a racist capitalist providing the imperialist foundation of the untenable racism that we all face today misrepresent him and reject a powerful ally. Adam Smith has a lot to teach all of us about what it means to live in a diverse and empathetic world.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE BLACK CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

by Rachel Ferguson

[Frederick Douglass](#) is most well-known for [the autobiography](#) in which he describes his escape from slavery, and for his lifetime of abolitionist efforts. His scathing account of hypocritical and cruel white Christian slaveholders led many of his readers to assume that his experiences had soured him on the faith. To correct these misconceptions, Douglass published an appendix that has now become famous, distinguishing between “*the slaveholding religion*” and “Christianity proper.” He refused to call “the religion of this land Christianity” but rather saw the application of that title to the white Christians he had met as “the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.”

Ten years later, Douglass published a second autobiography in which he chronicled his conversion as a teenage boy and his discipleship under his beloved friend and fellow slave, Mr. Lawson. He contrasts the teachings of Mr. Lawson, who prayed with confidence for Frederick’s liberty, and the religion of the white pastor who often came to instruct his mistress. His master threatened violence to keep Frederick away from Lawson.

Douglass’s account is notable partially for being quite typical of the Black Christian experience under slavery as described in the classic [Slave Religion by Albert Raboteau](#): 1) an intense conversion experience through interaction with other enslaved Christians, 2) formation in the faith in secret meetings separate from whites, 3) theology with a heavy emphasis on the doctrine of creation in the image of God, the Exodus story, and

prophetic calls to cease oppression throughout the Hebrew scriptures, and 4) persecution by slave-holders for religious activity such as prayer and meeting attendance. In fact, Black Christianity in America only began developing in earnest after the Great Awakenings because white slaveholders purposefully avoided sharing the faith with slaves. They feared that the unavoidable scriptural doctrine of the equality of believers would necessitate legal freedom for slaves.

“HE REFUSED TO CALL “THE
RELIGION OF THIS LAND
CHRISTIANITY”...”

A Kingdom that Comes Not by Power, but Love

The Black American experience of faith can seem odd if we think of the formerly enslaved as embracing the ‘white man’s religion’ of their masters. This becomes particularly poignant when Black Americans embrace the love of enemies and the way of non-violence laid out in the [Sermon on the Mount](#). Thus, the legacy of serious Christians whose faith informed their fight for civil rights – people like Fannie Lou Hamer and Martin Luther King, Jr. – has been labeled by some as ‘accommodationism’ and a sell-out to white respectability politics.

This understanding of the Black Church could not be further from the truth. Not only did both its practices and doctrines develop independently from that of white slaveholders, but whites’ unwillingness to worship together with Blacks created a realm of freedom and empowerment in the Black church that made it the undisputed hub of Black cultural life. Black Christians affirmed the *imago dei* of Genesis 1: the equal and infinite dignity and value of every human being based on their creation by a loving God. They [read Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos](#), and others as making a righteous case against their own nation for mistreating or ignoring the needs of those vulnerable to oppression such as widows, orphans, the poor, and strangers. They embraced Jesus’s upside-down kingdom, which proceeds not on power, but on love.



Martin Luther King, Jr. (1961)

As James [Baldwin observed](#), Martin Luther King, Jr. did not advocate planned non-violent action to appease whites. Rather, King’s “philosophy of love for the oppressor is a genuine aspect of his being.” The Black church is neither progressive nor conservative, politically speaking. It resides in a category of its own, proceeding on the logic of another kingdom altogether.

The Black Struggle and the Black Church

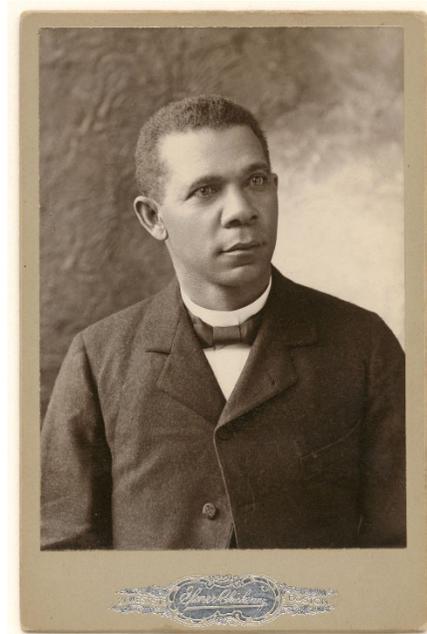
Frederick Douglass went on to become a licensed preacher in the African Methodist Episcopalian Zion church from whose basement he published [The North Star](#). Douglass’s consistent takedowns of Christian practice in white America ought to be read not as an outsider’s condemnations but as the fiery passion of a prophet defending the true faith against heresy. While he was frustrated with the meekness of some Black Christians of his day, his prophetic spirit animated the movements for Black education, economic power, and political freedom that spun out of the Black church.

Douglass didn’t much trust whites to undo past wrongs effectively. Instead, he [insisted](#) that “[a]s colored men, we only ask to be allowed to *do* with ourselves, subject only to the same great laws for the welfare of human society which apply to other men.... Let us stand upon our own legs, work with our own hands, and eat bread in the sweat of our own brows.” Grievously, it would take several more generations for Black Americans to enjoy the benefits of the rule of law. They were falsely convicted of crimes and [leased out](#) to factories; subject

to [terrorism](#) by their own neighbors; excluded from [labor unions](#); their property was taken for [highways](#), and their homes were [declared uninsurable](#) by the government.

Douglass didn’t need to have faith in whites. His faith in God and in the untapped potential of his Black brothers and sisters was proved true through so many efforts that blossomed from the Black church.

[Mary Peake’s educational efforts](#) in Virginia led to the highest levels of Black property-ownership in the country. It was Mary’s deep faith that led her to her clandestine classroom where she taught slaves and free Blacks to read. By the time she died, the American Missionary Association had teamed up with her and would go on to officially found the Hampton Institute.



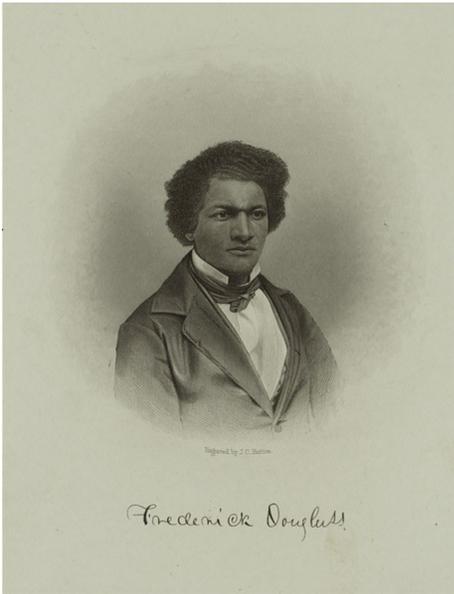
Booker T. Washington (c. 1895)

[Booker T. Washington](#), who recommended reading the Bible every day, attended Hampton and founded Tuskegee. These institutes sent thousands of teachers out to educate young Black minds, and his National Negro Business League created an impressive network of Black entrepreneurs.

Following in the footsteps of Douglass’s passion for the written word, an astonishing explosion of Black literacy may be among the greatest in history in terms of its sheer speed and reach: [in 1870 20% of Black Americans could](#)

[read, but by 1930 85%](#) could. As has been the case for [much of the literacy movement around the world](#), the desire of Black Americans aligned with the radical Reformation idea that everyone should be able to read the Bible.

Douglass once said that America's problem was not the Constitution, which he called "a great liberty document" but whether we would live up to [our Constitution](#). With a like mind, the NAACP, whose leaders [were often ministers and heads of Black denominations](#), fought for decades to make the law acknowledge Black rights. In the same vein, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. called the founding documents of the United States a "blank check" of freedom which Black Americans were finally taking to the bank.



Frederick Douglass

Douglass never lost his faith. Just a few years before his death, he laid his hope for our country on the "broad foundation laid by the Bible itself, that God has made of one blood all nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth." The Black church has remained faithful to this healing vision for the United States for over two centuries, in the face of crushing injustice and discouragement. The Black church is a philosophically rich, culturally anchored, and historically central institution of American civil society that deserves widespread historical and cultural

acknowledgement for its pivotal role in the life of this nation.

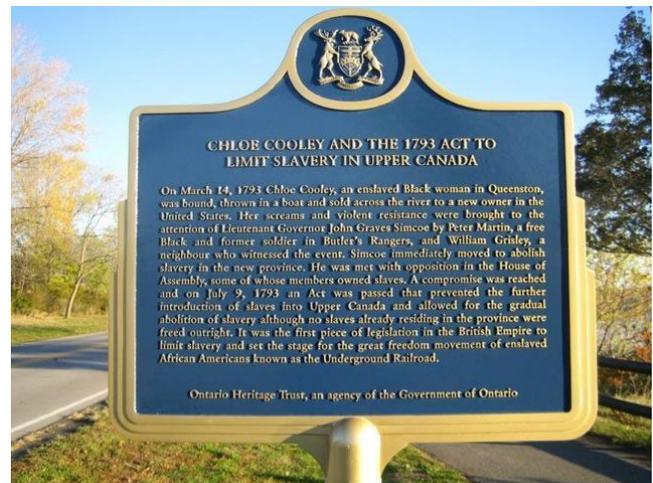
BLACK HISTORY BEYOND BORDERS: HEROINES IN CANADIAN HISTORY

by Janet Bufton and Sabine El-Chidiac

Black History Month inspires us to read about the lives and work of well-known figures in the history of Black liberation. We justifiably turn to the writing of [Frederick Douglass](#), James Baldwin, and Sojourner Truth to better understand being Black in America. We read about how and why [Thomas Clarkson](#), [Adam Smith](#), and William Wilberforce made early, important, and ultimately successful arguments against the African slave trade. But as we all know, Black history extends beyond its best-known figures and beyond the borders of the United States.

In celebration of Black History Month, we'd like to shine a light on three women who played important roles in the end of slavery and the advancement of civil rights in Canada. Their contributions illustrate how the actions of individuals shape history, the parallel experiences of Black Canadians and Black Americans, and the complex problems they both faced following abolition.

Chloe Cooley



[Chloe Cooley](#) was a Black slave from Upper Canada who attempted escape from her American Loyalist enslaver, a white farmer named William Vrooman who fled to Canada following the American Revolution.

Although the British Crown under King George III explicitly allowed Loyalists to bring enslaved workers into Canada, it had also granted citizenship and meagre land to Black Loyalists. Vrooman and other slaveholders worried that protection for Black Loyalists signified that the legal environment in Canada would eventually force them to free the people they enslaved. Rather than risk losing his “property,” Vrooman sold Cooley to a man in the United States, where laws were being passed to strengthen the institution of slavery.

Cooley had a history of fighting her bondage. She regularly protested by behaving in an “unruly manner”: stealing property that belonged to Vrooman, resisting her work assignments, and leaving Vrooman’s property until she decided it was time to return.

So when Vrooman tried to sell her back into the United States, Cooley refused to act as complacent property. She boldly resisted: kicking, screaming, and shouting to be let go while many looked on. It took Vrooman and two other men to restrain Cooley. They severely beat her, tied her up, and forced her into a boat before Vrooman could complete the sale. But this time, her resistance drove the first stakes in the Underground Railroad.

“COOLEY HAD A HISTORY OF
FIGHTING HER BONDAGE.”

Cooley’s brutal treatment caught the attention of Peter Martin, a Black Loyalist who witnessed her abduction. He brought a white man who had also witnessed the seizure of Chloe Cooley to the Executive Council of Upper Canada to report what he saw. Among those who heard this report was Upper Canada Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe.

Simcoe’s anger when he heard about this incident inspired him to present a bill that would prohibit slavery outright. Unfortunately, 12 of the 25-person government

owned slaves and the bill was doomed—but it was the catalyst for the *Act Against Slavery*.

In 1793, Simcoe introduced the *Act Against Slavery*, and its declaration that all new slaves who entered Canada would become free paved the way for thousands of American slaves to escape to Canada. This legislation made it illegal for any new slaves to be brought into Canada and freed the children of slaves when they turned 25. However, it did not forbid the sale of enslaved people within Upper Canada or across the border into the United States—passed earlier, it would not have saved Cooley.

Although Chloe Cooley was never heard of again after being sold by Vrooman, her legacy of resistance helped bring about freedom for countless others. As imperfect as the *Act Against Slavery* was, the legal difference it introduced to the border between the United States and Canada would prove to be one of the most important in the history of the two countries.

Mary-Ann Shadd



Mary-Ann Shadd (c. 1850s)

[Mary-Ann Shadd](#) was an American-Canadian activist whose work spanned both sides of the border. Shadd was born free in Delaware, a slave state, to abolitionist parents who ran a station of the [Underground Railroad](#). Shadd’s parents moved her to Pennsylvania so that she and her siblings could be educated. When the second Fugitive Slave Act passed in 1850, even free Black Americans were in danger of being kidnapped and sold

into slavery, so the Shadds moved to Canada where their freedom would be secure.

Shadd, a teacher, moved to Sandwich in Canada West (now part of Windsor, Ontario) and opened an integrated school to meet the need for education of emancipated Black children from the United States. From there, her abolitionist activism only grew. In 1852 she published [*A Plea for Emigration; or Notes of Canada West*](#), a pamphlet urging Black Americans to move to Canada where they could be free.

In 1853, Shadd began publication of *The Provincial Freeman*, Canada's first antislavery newspaper, which also made her the first Black woman in North America to establish and edit a newspaper and one of the earliest women to start a newspaper in Canada. Her newspaper fought against the popular presentation of Black people as poor and downtrodden, in need of charity. *The Provincial Freeman* also provided an important platform for Black Canadian activists.



The Provincial Freeman (c. 1850s)

Shadd believed what Black people on both sides of the border needed was freedom. Most refugees from American slavery were, after all, able to quickly establish themselves and become self-sufficient after reaching Canada. She believed self-reliance was key, and encouraged Black Canadians to insist on equal treatment and even to take legal action to obtain it if required. Shadd was also instrumental in forming the abolitionist group The Provincial Union, which was run for and by the Black community.

In spite of the dangerous legal environment for free Black people, Shadd continued to return to the United States to promote *The Provincial Freeman* and to work as a speaker and activist. She sat as a delegate at the 1855 Philadelphia Colored Convention. As a woman, she had to fight for her spot, never having been allowed to attend before. Her advocacy for emigration also made her a controversial figure with other delegates.

After the death of her husband and during the U.S. Civil War, Shadd left her job as a teacher in Chatham, Ontario, to return to the United States and work as a recruiter for the Union Army in Indiana. After the Union victory, Shadd moved to Washington D.C. to work as a teacher and to attend Howard University, becoming one of the first Black women to attain a law degree in the United States.

Shadd's activism helped to support the efforts that both immigration and the insistence on equal rights would play in the history of Black Canadians. Her work was important on both sides of the border, and illustrates the role that different legal environments and immigration can play in the fight for equal rights.

Viola Desmond



Viola Desmond

[Viola Desmond](#) has finally gained prominence as the first Canadian woman to appear on a bank note, but when she

was chosen many were left wondering who she was. Although she's sometimes called "Canada's Rosa Parks", Viola Desmond refused to give up her seat in the white section of a movie theatre in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia nine years before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the white section of an Alabama bus.

Desmond was a businesswoman who took advantage of the fact that many beauty schools in the early 20th century refused to take Black students. After receiving her education in Montréal, Atlantic City, and New York, she returned to Nova Scotia to open a beauty salon that could cater to Black clients in Halifax. She also opened the Desmond School of Beauty Culture to educate other Black beauticians, providing them with the skills to open their own businesses and employ other Black women in their communities. She also established a line of beauty products.

Although her business carved out a place for entrepreneurial and independent Black women in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Québec when discrimination and segregation were still rampant, Viola Desmond is most often remembered for her legal battle over a movie ticket. Stuck in New Glasgow on a business trip, she decided to go to the movies. She tried to buy a more expensive main floor seat, but the theatre refused to sell her anything but a ticket for the cheaper balcony seats because she was Black. Desmond persisted, taking a seat on the main level, where the manager first told her to leave and then dragged her from the theatre when she refused. The manager had her arrested and charged with tax evasion for failing to pay the one-cent difference in tax between the floor and balcony tickets—a reminder that although Canada did not have legal segregation or explicitly racist laws, the government continued to find ways to participate in and enable discrimination against people of colour.

Although Viola Desmond was convicted and fined and her legal fight did not result in a change in the law, her aggressive defence of her dignity was an example to the Black community in Nova Scotia in the fight for equal rights. Equally aggressive was Nova Scotia's pushback. Desmond's appeal went all the way to the provincial

Supreme Court. This fight, which she ultimately lost, led to her leaving Nova Scotia for Montréal and eventually New York City, where she died in 1965.



Canadian \$10 bill with Viola Desmond

Like Chloe Cooley, it was not dedication to activism nor some ultimate heroic victory that made Viola Desmond an inspiration for future change. It was her willingness to push back when she was treated as less than a person of equal worth. Comparing Desmond's case to Cooley's illustrates both how far Canadians had come in 150 years and how far they still had to go. It wasn't until 2010 that Desmond was posthumously pardoned by the Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia. Her story spread more rapidly, along with a more frank discussion of Canada's history of segregation and racism, when she was selected to appear on the \$10 note beginning in 2018.

The struggles and achievements of exceptional Black Canadian women like Chloe Cooley, Mary Ann Shadd, and Viola Desmond, who fought for emancipation, equal rights, and equal dignity, should continue to inspire those still fighting for equality and rights for Black people.

While the stories of Cooley, Shadd, and Desmond are exceptional, they also illustrate the role that individuals willing to take a stand for their personhood, their dignity, and the dignity of others play in shaping the overall history of any group. Black History Month gives us an

opportunity to reflect on the incredible work of Black women in the struggle for the equal recognition of human liberty. They are a testament to the importance of ensuring that all people are free to contribute to our society and our world.

issues relating to citizenship and immigration for over four years and continues to write and speak about civil society and immigration policy. She is the producer of [The Curious Task](#) podcast, a project of the [Institute for Liberal Studies](#).

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