

African Heritage Month 2019: Our History is also Your History

submitted by DFA Equity Committee Member, Dr. Ifeyinwa Mbakogu

(this article was first printed in the Dalhousie Faculty Association's February 2019 issue of News You Can Use)

Nova Scotia's theme for the 2019 African Heritage Month is 'our history is your history.' The theme calls for celebrating the history of African Nova Scotians in the past, the present and the future as contributors to Canadian history. In other words, to make meaningful impact in the way people live and function in a society, it is important to relate to the shared history, evident in the way people exchange ideas, and engage in activities that enhance their functioning. Moreover, this year's theme reinforces the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent's goal to support and cooperate with people of African Descent to create meaningful, full inclusion and belonging in Nova Scotia and Canada. I explore the past, in an attempt to understand the beginnings of an annual practice to determine its implications in the present and future.

What we now know as the African Heritage Month in Nova Scotia can be traced to the Negro History Week of 1976. In 1926 Carter G. Woodson, a Harvard-educated, Black Historian and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History sought to acknowledge the achievements of some African Americans. Woodson and others were also motivated by the need to include the study and teaching of Black history in colleges and public schools that enhance the intellectual and physical well-being of persons of African Descent within the larger society. This drive led to what became called Negro History Week and celebrated in February to mark the birth month of such notable contributors to the emancipation of enslaved Blacks as Frederick Douglas and Abraham Lincoln. The initial celebration of Negro History Week was unenthusiastic. However, with support from State Departments of Education, Black students and educators (at Kent State University, especially who proposed Black History Month in February 1969), Churches and ultimately mayors across the United States it was officially recognized as Black History Month by President Gerald Ford in 1976. This annual event is observed in Canada and the United States in February; and Republic of Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom in October.

Though Black History Month is celebrated across Canada, the province of Nova Scotia is particularly vested in promoting its African Canadian heritage in several ways. For instance, the Black History Month was officially opened in 1985 in the Halifax North Branch Library; followed in 1987 by the first meeting of the Black History Month Association; and then in 1988, Nova Scotia celebrated its first Black History Month.

In 1995 a motion was introduced by the first Black Canadian woman, elected to Parliament and representing the riding of Etobicoke—Lakeshore in Ontario, Honorable Jean Augustine, that led to the House of Commons, official recognition of February as Black History Month. However, Nova Scotia made a difference when the Black History Month was given its new and current name African Heritage Month in 1996. And again in 2008, based on a motion introduced by Senator Donald Oliver, the first Black Canadian man appointed to the Senate, the Senate declared February as Black History Month across Canada.

African Heritage Month means so many things to many people. Most of all, it is a time of sharing, telling stories (of sadness, strength, exclusion, inclusion, unity), letting others know about the missing pieces and silences in Canadian history that include the lack of mention of: the enslavement of Black persons in Canada; the sacrifices of Black Canadian soldiers during the War of 1812; and recognition that some Loyalists arriving after the American Revolution and settling in the Maritimes were people of African Descent. The activities across Nova Scotia, in community and educational institutions, try to capture these missing pieces across diverse demographics to provide education on the past and present. Some of these activities include: The Raising of the Pan African Flag organized by the African Nova Scotia Affairs Integration Office (ANSAIO) with special presentation by Dr. Afua Cooper, Halifax's Poet Laureate and performance by 13-year-old, Zoe Tolliver; the Saint Thomas Baptist Ladies Auxiliary 6th Annual African Heritage 'Knowing your History thru Gospel;' the Diversity and Equity Committee of the School of Social Work, Dalhousie University's African Heritage Month: Public viewing of the award-winning 'Journey to Justice,' a celebration of Pioneering Black Cinematography and Struggle for Social Justice, moderated by Isaac Saney; and The Department of Social Justice and Community Studies, Saint Mary's University's month long exhibition of the Racial Apartheid and Black Freedom Struggles in Nova Scotia and South Africa.

Some events projected African scholarship. An example is the first annual Black Research Symposium organized by the Promoting Leadership in Health for African Nova Scotians (PLANS) to showcase Black scholars and encourage Black students to pursue graduate studies. There were also events that promoted racism and difficult conversations. Falling within this are: the African Nova Scotia Panel Event on Race Relations, Black Experience and the Future of Municipal Government; Ingrid Waldron's Book Reading of There's Something in the Water; a Panel Discussion on 'Discomfort in Multiple Spaces and Encounters,' organized by the Diversity and Equity Committee of the School of Social Work, moderated by Dr. Ifeyinwa Mbakogu with Wendie L. Poitras, Dr. Barbara Hamilton-Hinch, Mario Rolle, Aisha Abawajy and Devon Bundy as panellists. Also noteworthy are events that align with the theme of the Government of Canada's Black History Month campaign of Black Canadian Youth: Boundless, Rooted and Proud by serving as motivation for younger generations. Falling into this category is the session organized by Dalhousie's Black Student Advising Centre, moderated by Dr. Chike Jeffers with special guest, Senator Wanda Thomas Bernard sharing challenges and successes as a Black woman in several leadership roles.

As African Heritage Month is celebrated again in February 2019, one wonders if this is the only time to be aware of the culture, history, experiences, struggles and achievements of people of African Descent in Canada and Nova Scotia, especially. The proclamation of the United Nations' International Decade for People of African Descent (2015 – 2024) coupled with the theme 'our history is your history' are indicators to move beyond the celebration of African Heritage Month to look into the educational, health and socio-economic gaps faced by People of African Descent, as a way of addressing structures that both inhibit and advance their true sense of belonging.