

# LESSONS AND LASTING LEGACIES

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The prominence of black Canadians in our history was instilled into me ever since junior high. I attended John Ware, a school named after one of Alberta’s most famous cowboys and black Canadians. His story was instilled into every single student, and has lingered with me ever since. It is a story of bravery and kindness, one that all young Canadians and future generations should heed.

John Ware was a rancher, famous for both his physical might and strength of character. Born a slave on a southern U.S. plantation, he was no stranger to abuse or adversity. As a child, he once stood up to the plantation owner in defence of his sister, taking the full brunt of the whip onto himself so that she would not have to suffer. However, despite what could be considered a severely traumatic childhood, Ware never enabled it to corrupt his moral integrity. All those that knew him spoke of his gentle heart and warm personality. This was displayed most prominently during a confrontation with his old owner. After the advent of abolition, Ware encountered his previous owner in a small American town. Now a full-grown adult in the midst of his prime, there were all manner of deeds he could have done in order to exact revenge. However, Ware chose to let him go unharmed. Ware forgave the man who had physically abused him and forcibly taken away his childhood. It takes an unimaginable strength of character to behave in such a way. Ware serves as a paragon of kindness to future generations, and reminder of the importance of moral integrity.

Ware was not one of the fortunate slaves that escaped to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Instead, he remained in chains until 1865, where with the abolition of slavery he became a free man. Using his considerable size and strength to his advantage, Ware learned the cowboy trade and became a cattle herder. He worked his way from Texas to Montana, herding cattle as he went. Eventually, he found himself in Alberta, where his dedication and tremendous skill for both horseback riding and ranching made him quickly into a local legend. He became known as the “best rough rider in the North-West;” a testimony to how far he had come. There were numerous legends about the man. They said his skill was so great could break the wildest broncos, and his strength so immense he could lift an 18-month old steer and stop a charging bull dead in its tracks. Ware’s legacy, much like the man himself, was larger than life. However, his greatest achievement was how he tore through the social stigma and race divisions of the Eurocentric society of the time, and established himself as one of the greatest cowboys of the day. Ware died in 1905, with a bit of tragic irony. His horse tripped in a badger hole and fell directly on top of him. The weight of the horse broke Ware’s neck, and he died almost instantly. The best rough rider in the North-West, killed, in a riding accident.

Ware taught Canadians an innumerable number of lessons. He demonstrated how kindness is not a sign of weakness, but rather one of immense strength. It takes extensive courage to forgive, to face the man who oppressed and abused you and your family for decades and walk away. He taught us about determination, and was the exemplar of how with dedication and a little luck, you can succeed in the most unfavourable of situations. And finally, with his death he reminded us that all legends are only human in the end. They may shine brighter than the rest and seem truly extraordinary, but they still have the same limitations as everyone else. They simply had the courage to push those boundaries to the edge, a feat that we are all capable of. These are lessons that is difficult to remember at times. Today, there is still a huge influx of animosity and inequality in the world. However, John Ware, and the many black Canadians both past and present, serve as a reminder to all future generations that kindness and courage are within us all. And that, no matter how bad the situation, you must always have dedication. Move forward; leave the past behind for it cannot be changed, and instead work towards shaping a bright shining future. These are the legacies that black Canadians have left behind. Only time will tell if future generations heed them.



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