

THE CANADIAN COWBOY

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Although Canada may have been less cruel than our neighbours to the south, we were not innocent in the treatment of Africans throughout history. We have enslaved and tormented black people for much of Canada’s past. Despite the challenges all black people faced, they have contributed much to Canada that has formed what it is today. One such person is John Ware, a legendary cowboy from South Carolina who helped pioneer the Canadian cattle trade.

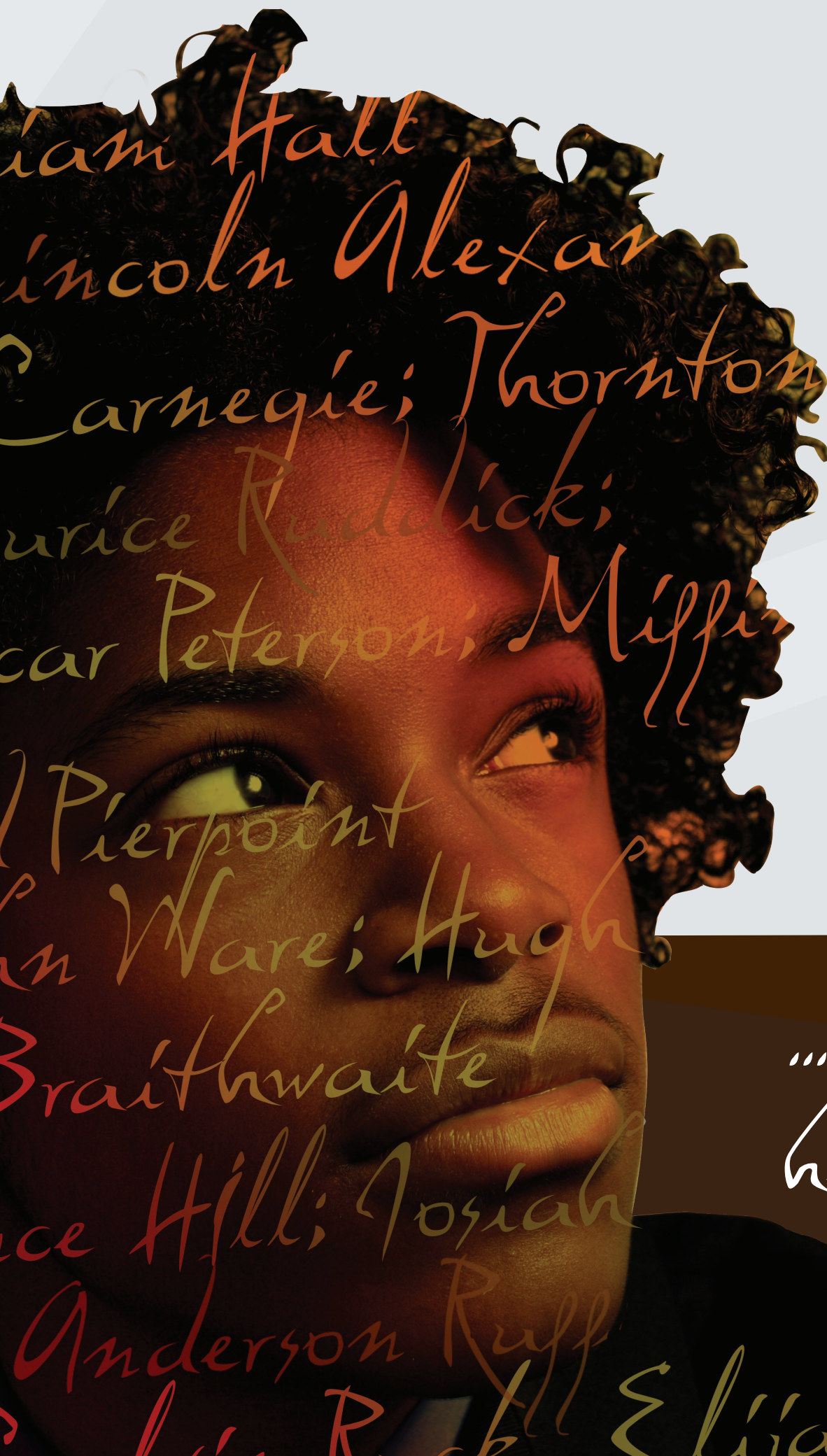
Ware was born into slavery in 1845, but he didn’t stay a slave for long—he gained freedom after the American Civil War in 1865, then drifted to the western plains of Texas. There he learned the basic skills to ranching, and it became obvious how suited John was to the trade. John was a hard worker, and he had to work doubly hard because of his race. By the 1870’s he was skilled enough to be employed as a cowhand driving cattle along the Great Western Cattle Trail. 3000 cattle were being led to the Bar U ranch near Calgary, and John was hired as one of many to help with the large load. This transport of cattle kickstarted the cattle industry in Canada.

Once in Canada, John Ware never left. He settled close to Calgary where his fame as a cowboy—especially as a steer wrestler—grew. The Bar U ranch hired him and, with that same dedication that got him there in the first place, was put in charge of the ranch’s herd of horses. The Macleod Gazette commented that “John is not only one of the best natured and most obliging fellows in the country, but he is one of the shrewdest cow men, and the man is considered pretty lucky who has him to look after his interest.”.

Despite being respected by the community at large for his strength and kindness, John still had to deal with the racism of his time. Shortly before he arrived in Calgary there had been a murder committed by a black man, which created further stigma for Africans, including John. N—er John was a popular nickname for Ware, a nickname that would be considered insulting today that was normal then.

Eventually, after having worked for various large ranches, Ware started his own in 1890, but relocated to a new location near Red Deer river in 1900. The ranch and cabin were both constructed by John himself. Unfortunately, the cabin was demolished by a spring flood in 1902, but even that didn’t deter John Ware—he rebuilt the cabin immediately. John’s family didn’t get to enjoy it for long, however; wife died from typhoid shortly after that, and John himself a few months after that when his horse stumbled and fell, killing him.

His funeral—the biggest in Calgary at that point—was attended by many in the ranching community. John Ware’s life teaches us that determination can get you far in life, no matter what prejudices are set against you. The funeral’s minister commended Ware highly, saying “John Ware was a man with a beautiful skin. Every human skin is as beautiful as the person who wears it. To know John Ware was to know a gentleman — one of God’s gentlemen.”



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