

FIGHTING FOR CANADA

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Since 1605, when Mathieu Da Costa set foot on Canadian soil as a translator for Samuel de Champlain (“Timeline 1800-1900”), Black Canadians have played an integral role in shaping contemporary Canadian society (“Timeline 1800-1900”). Over the past 150 years, Black Canadians have battled racial prejudice to fight for a Canada that is independent, internationally recognized, and multicultural.

Throughout history, Black Canadians have heroically sacrificed their lives to defend Canadian soil. During the War of 1812, Richard Pierpoint, a former slave, petitioned the government of Canada to form a Black regiment to help protect Canada from an American invasion (“War of 1812”). His regiment, Captain Runchey’s Corps of Coloured Men, was instrumental in the British victory at the Battle of Queenston Heights (“War of 1812”). Between 1914 and 1918, Black Canadians actively supported Canada in the First World War, raising funds, working in factories, and volunteering in hospitals and as labourers (Carter). On July 5, 1916, the No. 2 Construction Battalion, the first and only all-Black battalion in Canadian history, was formed in Pictou, Nova Scotia to serve with the Canadian Forestry Corps (Ruck). Throughout WWI, members of this battalion supported the front lines, built roads and bridges, and defused land mines, enabling Canadian troops to advance (Ruck). In addition to the members of this battalion, approximately 2,000 Black Canadians, including James Grant, Roy Fells, Seymour Tyler, Jeremiah Jones and Curly Christian, fought for Canada on the front lines (Ruck). Although racial segregation was never officially legislated in Canada, regardless of their bravery during WWI, many Black Canadians were refused permission to enlist in the Canadian army during the Second World War (Ruck). Even though the contributions of Black Canadian veterans, often go unnoticed, they were pivotal in Canada’s long journey to becoming the free and independent nation that myself and fellow Canadians enjoy today.

Despite facing racial discrimination, Black Canadians have fought to represent Canada with pride at international sporting events. At age 18, sprinter Harry Jerome broke the Canadian record for the 220-yard sprint (“Harry Jerome”). At the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo, he was awarded a bronze medal in the 100-metre final, earning the distinction of being among the world’s fastest men (“Harry Jerome”). In 1996, Donovan Bailey won a gold medal at the Summer Olympics in Atlanta and became the first Canadian to break the 10-second barrier in the 100-metre sprint, legally (“Timeline 1800-1900”). Additionally, Bruny Surin captured a gold medal in the 4x100-metre relay at the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta (“Timeline 1800-1900”). The outstanding achievements of these athletes gained Canada international recognition and demonstrated the power of fighting to overcome adversity in order to achieve your goals.

Black Canadians have also fought to ensure that Canadian politics reflects Canada’s cultural mosaic. As an individual interested in pursuing a career in politics, I recognize that diversity within a government is instrumental in elevating the level of political discussions and ensuring that the policies implemented reflect the views of all Canadians. In 1963, Leonard Braithwaite ran for a seat in the Ontario legislature and became the first Black Canadian in a provincial legislature when he was elected as the Liberal member for Etobicoke, Ontario (“Timeline 1800-1900”). While in parliament, he addressed the issue of racism in Canada and combatted racial segregation in Ontario schools (“Timeline 1800-1900”). In 1984, Anne Cools became the first black Senator in Canadian history (“Timeline 1800-1900”). On August 4, 2005, Prime Minister Paul Martin appointed Michaëlle Jean Governor General of Canada (“Timeline 1800-1900”). In 2007, Governor-General Michaëlle Jean addressed the need to recognize the destruction of Africville and combat racism in Nova Scotia in a speech to the Nova Scotia legislature. By fighting to overcome racial prejudice and rising to levels of prominence within Canadian politics, Black Canadians have ensured that Canada’s government reflects the multicultural nature of Canada.

Black Canadians have fought for Canada’s freedom, prominence in international athletics, and to ensure that all Canadians are represented in the Canadian government. Young people of all colours must learn from the struggle of Black Canadians to overcome racial prejudice and recognize that doing the right thing will not always be easy, but individuals who persist will become the true agents of progress.



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