

HERE ALL ALONG

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When my family settled for good in Canada I encountered subtle racism which promoted self-doubt until I began to understand that Canada's history is in many ways the history of the entire world, and certainly did not begin with the confederation in 1867. Before confederation Africans were sacrificing, learning, prospering and using their skills and talents to give Canada the pride of place it has among nations today. Throughout the 1780's large numbers of black loyalists arrived in Canada, these escapees (and some slaves) contributed to their new society economically, and militarily. For instance Richard Pierpoint joined Butler's Rangers to defend the loyal territories, and fight the traitors. He remained free after the war, receiving land in Niagara. Although born in Senegal, Pierpoint contributed to Canada's ability to welcome settlers of all races.

In 1812 Richard Pierpoint petitioned for an all-black unit, because they suffered low recruitment in Caucasian circles, but General Isaac Brock told the 68 year-old they would not be necessary. Pierpoint did not give up and eventually Captain Runchey's Corps of Coloured Men was formed and they fought in several battles, including Queenston Heights. After the war, Pierpoint became involved in the underground railway, assisting newcomers to settle near current-day Fergus, Ontario and contributing to bringing skilled people some of whom were black free citizens to enrich their new county. However, Pierpoint did not limit his efforts to "black" people as some of the early people he aided were Scottish settlers.

Space would fail me to tell of all the Black people who contributed with passion and purpose to build our great country, but I would be remiss to omit Alfred Schmitz Shadd who himself benefited from the effort of people like Richard Pierpoint. Shadd, who was born and raised in Toronto, descended from black equality activists, (including Mary Ann Camberton Shadd) and rose to become a teacher. Leaving his teaching occupation at Chatham, he studied for a life defining medical degree at the University of Toronto and in 1898 settled in Kinistino (near Saskatoon). There, 'Doc Shadd' the country doctor became famous for rushing through the wildernesses to treat patients. He was a well-respected and beloved figure among the urban, rural, white, and first nation communities in the Carrot River area. After his death it was recorded in newspapers that he was "universally liked by all who knew him, especially those who had received medical treatment of him, it being as good as medicine to hear his hearty laughter when he was cheering up a patient". Alfred Shadd was extraordinary: graduating from European Medical schools, founding a hospital in nearby Melfort (where he met his wife), and an Agricultural Society, participating in the All Saints Anglican Church, the Town council, the School Board, the Red Cross Society, and fraternal benefit societies including the Melfort Masonic Lodge, the Order of Foresters, and the Orange order. He farmed, bred animals, ran a drugstore and was involved in politics.

Shadd ran in the 1902 territorial assembly election and in Saskatchewan's first legislature election in 1905 but despite immense media popularity, he lost by 52 votes. To put it simply, Shadd was an indefatigable man who became the co-owner and co-editor of the 'Carrot River Journal', in 1908 and continued until his 1912 death from appendicitis at 45. The entire region mourned the death of this great Black man whose flurry of activity improved the standard of life from Toronto, to Saskatoon. Reflecting upon these men's lives, I see extraordinary leaders who made a difference, utilized their human capital, promoted diversification, and encouraged the potential of others. Shadd was able to exist because Pierpoint and others had blazed the trail in the area of defence and settlement. They succeeded, in harshly bigoted societies (western Canada would embrace the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's) through determination and courage.

To conclude, Albert Shadd treated people of various backgrounds just as Pierpoint aided black and Scottish settlers. Their stories counteract the notion that Black men are inherently dangerous, dumb and deviant. Sadly, the rich contributions of these and numerous Black men and women are obscured while racism persists, disseminating this history can ensure Canadians re-imagine the Canadian nation state. Thank you for initiating this scholarship and promoting learning of Black Canadian history. As Canada approaches its 150th birthday, I am inspired by the gigantic possibilities I could give Canada and the world as a biracial academically-aspiring teenager, knowing that Pierpoint and Shadd were here all along.

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