



# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw

Written and Performed by Leslie McCurdy

## Study Guide

**Discussion Topics \* Classroom Activities \* Background Information**

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# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## STUDY GUIDE

AS ACCOMPANIMENT TO

### Things My Fore-Sisters Saw

WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY LESLIE McCURDY

## About Leslie McCurdy

Leslie McCurdy has been performing for many years in Southwestern Ontario and the Mid-Western United States as an Actor, Dancer/Choreographer, and Singer. Also a teacher, Leslie has been instrumental in creating programs which provide opportunities for children and youth, particularly from disadvantaged circumstances, to participate in high quality performing arts activities. Her one-woman plays, "The Spirit of Harriet Tubman" and "Things My Fore-Sisters Saw", tour internationally to audiences of all ages.

## About the Fore-Sisters

### About the Fore-Sisters:

"Things my Fore-Sisters Saw" is a one-woman play about Black Canadian History and four women who impacted it in some way. It was created at the request of audiences whose curiosity was piqued after seeing my first play "The Spirit of Harriet Tubman", which portrays the brave heroine of the Underground Railroad. The original concept was to depict four famous African-American women until a cousin of mine suggested that I take a look at four Black women who affected Canadian history. I'm ashamed to say that, despite my family's eight generations here, I didn't know anything about Black Canadian history. I was incensed to find that almost nothing about Black Canadian history was to be found in our history books.

The play features the following women:

- Marie-Joseph Angelique, a slave from Montreal who was convicted of an alleged arson then tortured into a confession. From the court records of her testimony we have the first slave narrative in North America
- Rose Fortune of Nova Scotia who is considered the first police-woman in North America and who "conducted" an East Coast run of the Underground Railroad.
- Mary Ann Shadd, the first North American woman to publish and edit a newspaper
- Viola Desmond who, like the famous Rosa Parks after her, refused to give up a seat to segregation. This in a New Glasgow, Nova Scotia movie theatre.

**Note: For more about the four women who are the subject of the play, see Teacher Resource Section and Bibliography**

**About Slavery in Canada: See Teacher Resource Section**





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## About The Performance

“Things my Fore-Sisters Saw” is a one-woman play about Canadian History and four Black women who impacted it in some way. It was created at the request of audiences whose curiosity was piqued after seeing “The Spirit of Harriet Tubman”, which portrays the brave heroine of the Underground Railroad, written and performed by Leslie McCurdy.

Things My Fore-Sisters Saw is presented as a **one-person show**, in which one actor narrates the story and plays all the characters. It is a story which spans the history of the Blacks in Canada from the 1700’s to 1965 or later.

In order to do this, Leslie McCurdy uses a number of theatrical techniques, including:

- changing her voice for different characters
- using appropriate body language,
- adding costume pieces, and
- using narration to let the audience know where, when, and whom is speaking.

There are very limited set and props, with the actor’s skills and the audience’s imagination filling in the rest.

This play is also a **docu-drama**, in which real historical events collected from primary and secondary sources, are transformed by the playwright and the actors, to portray the people and events in the story.

## About The Study Guide

The following study guide is created to prepare students for the performance of Things My Fore-sisters Saw. It is designed to assist the teacher in giving the students an awareness of the reality of slavery, racism and prejudice throughout our Canadian history. But also to point out the rich contribution of black women to the development of Canada and their part in ending the written and unwritten laws and practices which kept the black community from enjoying the full benefits of Canadian life.

Included in this study guide are discussion questions and activities exploring the following:

Themes and Issues in the Story:

- History and Conditions of Blacks in Canada
- Brief Biographies of each of the Fore-sisters

Contribution of Black women to the development of Canada

The art form:

- a one-person show
- creating a play from historical documents

The discussion topics and activities are organized by grade divisions- Junior/Intermediate and Senior





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Preparing for Things My Fore-Sisters Saw

### Topics for Discussion:

#### Teacher Talk

Students will more thoroughly appreciate and enjoy their visit from The Things My Fore-Sisters saw following the preparation that this study guide provides.

### Junior/Intermediate

- Ask the students if they know any famous Canadian women. Black women? Black Canadian women?
- Find out what they know about Black settlers in Canada.
- What do the students already know about slavery in the United States and Canada? (where, when, who, when abolished). Are they even aware that there was slavery in Canada?
- Explain that they are going to see a play that tells the story of four Black women who had some impact on the history of Canada. It will also trace the history of the Black community in Canada, citing their accomplishments and contributions as well as the obstacles they had to overcome in the form of discriminatory practices, laws, and systemic racism.
- Complete first two sections of “K W L Chart (see Student Activity Page 1)

### Secondary

- Why do Canadians know so little of their history?
- Why do we know so little about Black history in Canada? Why do we not know about slavery in Canada?

#### Teacher Talk

Giving the students specific elements to watch for during the performance helps them be a focused audience, and gives the teacher a starting point for follow-up discussions and activities.

## What to Watch for During the Performance

- How the actor changes from one character to another, without leaving the stage
- What role each of the women played in the history of Canada
- The main obstacle that each of the women had to overcome





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Post-Show Discussion and Activities

### Exploring the Issues

#### General Topics for Discussion:

#### Intermediate/ Senior

- Ask if they have ever heard of any of the women in the play before seeing this performance.
  - Do they know any other famous Canadian women, specifically African Canadian women?
  - What was the most important information that they learned from the play?
  - Is there a character they would like to learn more about?
- Complete last column of “KWL Chart (see Student Activity Pages)

#### Teacher Talk

While watching a performance, children are engaged physically, emotionally and intellectually. The post-show activities allow them to ask questions, to clarify meaning, to express strong emotions and to create their own art as a response to what they have experienced.

#### Senior

- What were the main obstacles that all of the characters had to overcome? (written laws, unwritten laws, racist attitudes, discriminatory practices etc.)
- Which character do you think had the greatest challenge? What might have happened if each of them had decided to just keep the status quo?

### Activities

#### Intermediate

- On a map, mark the places where the four women, portrayed in the play, lived.
- Research and report on the definition of racism, discrimination and where they were practiced in Canada.
- Many of the accomplishments of African Canadians have been ignored by our history books. Research and report on an African Canadian who made a significant contribution to the early settlement and development of Canada.

#### Senior

- Research and report on an African Canadian who is making a contribution to contemporary life of Canada (economic, defense, culture, scientific, medicine etc.)
- The Fugitive Slave Act established laws that were broken willingly by large numbers of people. Discuss the implications of civil disobedience of laws and their validity under such circumstances and what constitutes "good" laws or "bad" laws.





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## In the Beginning: Marie-Joseph Angelique's Story



### Topics for Discussion

#### Intermediate

- How did Leslie portray Angelique as a slave, right from the beginning of the story? ( body language, she is kneeling, her hands are bound)
- How might Angelique have come to New France?
- Why was Therese angry with Angelique? Who was really at fault?
- Why would the authorities have blamed the fire on Angelique? Did they have any evidence?

#### Senior

- What does this story reveal about the relationship of master/mistress and slave in New France?

### Activities

#### Intermediate

- Trace the development of slavery in New France (later Canada) from the first slaves in the 1600's, to the creation of laws governing treatment, to the abolition of slavery in Canada in 1834.
- Prepare a newspaper article, presenting the argument for better treatment of slaves, using Angelique's story as part of your argument.
- Write in role, Angelique's defense of herself, Therese's accusations, or the police report concerning the fire. Present it as a monologue to the class.
- Write about a time that you or someone you know was unjustly accused. Did anyone speak up for you? What was the outcome?

#### Senior

- Write an opinion paper, supported by examples of why many Canadians are unaware that Canada has a history of slavery? Include the role that our relationship to the United States plays in the perpetuation of this myth?
- Research the rise and decline of slavery under the French and British in New France and Canada, and the American States. Were there differences and similarities?



Notice of Slave Auction





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## **Black Loyalists: Rose Fortune's Story**

### **Topics for Discussion**

#### **Intermediate/Senior**

- Black Loyalist in Canada, why they came, what they were promised and what happened to them when they arrived
- The Back to Africa Movement and its result
- Events that led to Canada becoming the destination of those on the Underground Railroad
- Rose Fortune as a business woman and what she was able to do for her Community. How she became know as the first Police Woman in New France
- How and why Rose started working for the Underground Railroad. How she communicated with her stick, sending messages, drawing maps etc.





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## The Underground Railroad's End: Mary Shadd's Story



### Topics for Discussion

#### Intermediate

- What were the factors that brought about the abolition of slavery in Canada?
- The U.S passed the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850. How might this have impacted on the numbers of black people coming to Canada?
- Where did the black slaves settle in Canada? Show on a map.
- What might have motivated Mary Shadd to become a teacher?
- Why did Mary publish her own newspaper, the Provincial Freeman? How was it different from The Voice of the Fugitive, published by Henry Bibb?

#### Senior

- There was a debate about the best response of black Americans to the Fugitive Slave laws. Find out the arguments on both sides and present both sides of the argument in a debate.
- What were the main points of difference between Mary's approach to developing the black community and that of Henry Bibb?

### Activities

Mary Ann Shadd started her own newspaper because she understood the power of the press. From politics to the arts, the press helps shape our opinions. Using your local newspaper:

- a. Find three articles or columns that seem "one-sided"
- b. Try to find articles or columns offering an opposing view
- c. Notice any differences in the length, prominence (front page/back page), surrounding articles. How does the placement of the articles/columns affect what you think of them?

#### Senior

- a. Write an opinion editorial (op.ed.) for or against the position taken in one of the articles/columns you have chosen.





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Assimilation and Civil Rights: Viola Desmond's Story

### Topics for Discussion

#### Intermediate

- Gains made by Blacks up to late 19<sup>th</sup> century (business owners, professions etc.)
- Attempts to limit Black migration to Canada from the U.S.
- Rationalization and denial of racism and discrimination in Canada

#### Senior

- The concept of systemic racism and how government policies can support discrimination. Find examples in immigration policies, business practices and common schools act.
- How stereotyping and prejudice contribute to keeping certain groups out of the mainstream of a community



Carrie Best: Newspaper Publisher 1946





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Exploring the Art Form

### Topics for Discussion

#### Junior

- How did the actor change from one character to another (voice, body language, costume) *see Student Activity Page 2: Creating a Character*
- What role did the Narrator play in telling the story?
- What do you think is most difficult about doing a one-person show?
- Where did Leslie get the stories that she told in the play? ( from historical documents, from the characters' own words)
- What might change if you were going to present a play about the lives of these women? (set, costumes, more actors, )

#### Senior

- Which specific acting techniques did Leslie use to change from one character to another?
- What challenges would an actor meet in performing a one-person show?
- What was the role of the narrator's voice in the play?
- How did using the characters' own words help to make the play more authentic?
- Which character do you think was the easiest to play? Which the most difficult? How would you change this play from a one-person play to a fully cast show?





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Exploring the Art Form

### Activities

#### Intermediate

- **Changing Characters:** (Whole Group)
  - Have all the students move around the room, while following these various instructions: move as a small child, move as an adult, move as an elderly person, and move as if happy/sad/afraid/angry.
  - Combine two of the ideas to make more complete character. (e.g. a happy child, an angry adult)
  - Have half the group move while the other watches, and comments on what characters they see, and how they recognize them.( body language, gesture, facial expression etc.)
- **Writing-in-Role** (Individually)
  - Write in role as one of the characters (Journal, Letter,) Write an article that might have appeared in Mary Ann Shadd's newspaper on the topic of education or some other topic of concern to Mary Ann and her supporters.
- **Acting out:** Small Groups
  - Have students work out a system of signs and messages using a stick. Act out a scene between Rose Fortune and her supporters. Add some tension by having a police officer or slave catcher watching the action.
  - Create a movement piece depicting the story of Angelique until her capture and execution.
  - Act out the scene between Violet, the ticket seller, and the manager of the theatre. Imagine and act out a better ending to the conflict.
  - Small Group: Hold your own press conference with Violet Desmond, and develop the questions you would ask. Take the parts of Violet and the reporters.
- **Individually: Set design:** Pretend that you have to design a set for one of the scenes in the play. Draw or make a model of what it would look like. Design costume for some of the characters in the stories. (e.g. Therese in Angelique; Henry Bibb in Mary Shadd)
- **Music:** (Individually or Small Groups): Choose a dramatic scene in one of the stories and choose some music to accompany the scene.





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## In The Beginning



Many European countries had used white slave labour since ancient times, despite the Vatican's attempts to discourage the slave trade by stating that it was illegal for Christians to enslave other Christians. Portugal was the first European country to engage in the slave trade in Africa that eventually led to the death of the white slave trade. Some enslaved Africans, many of whom were Muslims originally, were absorbed by the Portuguese economy but most were re-sold in the European and Mediterranean mar-

kets. Portugal had taken the lead in the slave business but other European nations soon began taking advantage of the cheap labour and huge profits that the slave trade provided. Between 1444 when the slave trade began and the 1860's when it ended, conservative estimates indicate nearly 60 million people from Africa were sold into slavery, or died in slave wars, slave caravans, slave ships or stinking coastal factories where they were held and "processed. The "discovery" of the New World increased the demand for slave labour and the slave trade flourished in North and South America and the Caribbean Islands. Large-scale genocide of indigenous peoples was carried out as Portugal, Spain, England, France, Germany and the Netherlands all claimed a piece of the pie.

Canada was a piece of that pie and slavery is a part of Canada's history, though it is a part of our history that seems to be ignored at best, often denied. From 1628 to 1833, slavery was a legal and acceptable institution in both French and English Canada. As the New world was developed, slaves were needed to fill the labour shortage. The first recorded slave in Canada was a nameless nine-year old boy who was brought from Madagascar Africa to New France in 1628, and who was later baptized in 1633 as Olivier Lejeune. From 1628-1783 almost all blacks in Canada were slaves, as French colonists demanded the importation of African slaves to fulfill their labour requirements. Though it was never actually made into a law in Canada, French settlers practiced the Code Noir, which was officially applied in the French West Indies in 1685 and legalized slavery, spelling out the terms of ownership including how slaves were to be treated in cases of theft and attempted escape and allowed whites to take ownership of slave offspring. In 1701, King Louis XIV gave his full authorization to the right of the colonists of New France to own slaves. Native peoples, called "Panis" by the French, were also enslaved but their numbers declined drastically under enslavement and African slaves were preferred as they were heartier, lived longer, and had nowhere to run. After winning the Seven Years War, the British became the dominant colonizers and slave owners and, whereas under French law the slaves were at least considered people, under British law they were merely chattel, to be bought and sold like one would with a horse or chair. Both men and women performed heavy labour with women having the additional task of taking on domestic and "wifely" duties.





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Marie-Joseph Angelique

Angelique's story is part of the story of Portuguese trade in human flesh and the North American need for slave labour. A native of Portugal, born in 1705, not much is known about the first 20 years of her life. Sometime before 1725 Angelique appeared in the New World, likely in the Hudson Valley or the New England colonies. By the time she came to Montreal into the possession of Francois Poulin de Francheville in 1725 she had been bought and sold at least twice. We know that she was baptized, in accordance with the Code Noir and that her baptismal name, Marie-Joseph Angelique, was a common female slave name. We don't know her name before that. What we know about her life from 1730 until she was hanged in 1734 is primarily learned from the transcripts of her trial. As a domestic, Angelique's duties included cooking, including stoking the fires acquiring and preparing food, cleaning, serving, washing (laundry) and other household chores. She also worked on the Francheville's farm planting and attending to crops such as barley, wheat, carrots, onions, squash, beans and a variety of fruits that had to be preserved for the winter months. Even with all of this work, Angelique would find time to take long walks along the river and outside of the walls of the city. She spoke with neighbours, drank with soldiers, visited the sick in hospital and had at least two love affairs. We have no physical description of her except that she was an "esclave de la nation negresse" or Black slave woman. Angelique gave birth twice, first to a boy named Eustache, who died after a month, and, a little more than a year later, to twins Louis and Marie-Francois both of whom also died, the girls surviving a few months longer than her brother. Her children, had they lived, would have belonged to her owner, Sieur Francheville. For at least one of her children, the father is listed as "unknown", a term often used to hide the fact that the father was the owner of the mother.

Angelique was always a rebellious slave, a condition that worsened after Sieur Francheville died and his widow refused to grant Angelique the "conge", freedom, she felt was her due. Madame Francheville had trouble controlling her slave who she would whip on a regular basis, perhaps because of the attention her husband gave the slave woman. Angelique would often threaten her mistress with burning either of her person or her home. Angelique and her lover, Claude Thibeault, a contract labourer for les Franchevilles who was also disobedient and insolent, had Therese afraid for her life. She sent the pair to her brother-in-law, Alexis Moniere. Angelique had been sold and would be sent to the West Indies in the spring when the river thawed. Claude and Angelique executed a plan to escape from the home of Sieur Moniere and ran away the day after their bedding and blankets were found burning. They were captured after two weeks but had traveled a good distance considering the winter weather, which only served to make their resolve to escape stronger. Angelique was returned to her mistress and Claude was thrown in jail and, despite having been told to stay away from one another, they continued to meet and plan their second escape attempt. The April 10<sup>th</sup> fire that started in the Francheville house and burned "half of old Montreal" thwarted those plans. Angelique was charged with arson and Claude, who was also a suspect, disappeared. Following a court trial Angelique was found guilty, based largely on circumstantial evidence, and sentenced to having her hands cut off and being burned alive. This was reduced after a routine appeal such that she would only be burned after being tortured into confession and hanged. From the transcripts of that trial we have Angelique's first person account of her life and station as a slave in Canada providing the first slave narrative in North America.





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Rose Fortune: Black Loyalists

In 1763 the Seven Years War ended and the British officially controlled New France. Blacks continued to be non-persons under the law and there was a rapid increase in the number of slaves imported to Canada. It wasn't until the American War of Independence (1775-1783) that Canada began to have a reputation as a safe haven for black slaves. The British promised land, freedom, and equal rights to those slaves or free blacks that joined their cause. In 1783 about 3500 Black Loyalists arrived in Canada and 1500 slaves arrived in the company of White Loyalists. Most settled in the Maritimes and the majority of them settled in Nova Scotia. Only a small percentage of Black Loyalists received any land at all and it was "unfarmable" and located in segregated areas. As the hope of future progress against slavery and racism faded, a "Back to Africa" movement developed. In January of 1792, nearly 1200 Blacks set sail for colonies in Sierra Leone in search of the land, freedom, and equality they couldn't find in Canada. It was at about this time that the abolitionist movement started to take hold internationally. Slavery's gradual decline in Canada resulted. Before it was abolished entirely in the British colonies, legislation was passed limiting its scope and the Underground Railroad slowly started to roll north.

### Rose Fortune

Rose was about 10 when she and her family came to Nova Scotia from Virginia in 1783 as free Black Loyalists. She was raised free and, though she realized early the limitations placed on her by virtue of her race, she tried for the same opportunities as whites. She even broke convention by attending the white Anglican church and thus had many contacts in the white community. Her love of the outdoors led her to work on the docks of Annapolis Royal loading freight with her father rather than as a domestic. Eventually she started her own cartage business. With a wheelbarrow she started "smashing baggage", meeting the passengers off of the boats in from Boston or St. John and carrying their bags to their final destination. Rose was of strong character and her personable nature and frankness won the trust of the people she carted for. She was able to care for her family well as a single mother of two girls. She became a major player in the thriving business community and counted among her friends those of influence such as Judge Thomas Chandler Haliburton who was sympathetic to the plight of blacks.

Rose was trusted by the townspeople of Annapolis and she protected the town from delinquent boys and the young children from abuse. She was obeyed by the young people and eventually she organized them into a kind of police force. She herself would walk the docks at night with a big stick "policing". But this was all a cover for Underground Railroad activity. After witnessing a woman and her two children being dragged back into slavery in accordance with the American Fugitive Slave Law, she and her "police force" began carrying "human cargo" to safety in trunks or wheelbarrows. The network provided by her "day job" proved to be the perfect cover. She used her trademark stick to send messages, draw maps, signal etc., and signals and escape routes changed often to avoid detection. Rose Fortune, whose fame had her mentioned in newspapers from as far away as London England, lies buried in an unmarked grave in the Annapolis Royal Garrison Graveyard.





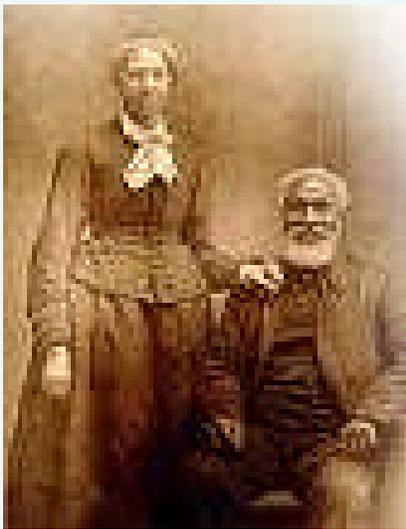
# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## The Underground Railroad's End

Slavery officially ended in Canada August 1, 1834, when Emancipation Day ended slavery in all of the British colonies. It was virtually non-existent in Canada by that time anyway. Various pieces of legislation tabled by then Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe beginning in 1792 had diluted slavery's impact at the end of the previous century. With the abolition of slavery, Canada became a more desirable terminus of the Underground Railroad, especially after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 in the United States. This law left any black person, free or fugitive, subject to return to slavery in the south with no legal recourse. The effect of this was to increase the number of slaves leaving the plantations for Canada even though it was more dangerous to do so.

It is estimated that as many as 30,000 fugitives from slavery landed in Canada. Some fled to Nova Scotia, Montreal in Quebec, and Manitoba, but the majority by far settled in Southwestern Ontario or "Canada West" as it was known then. This prompted a debate among prominent black American abolitionists as to which course should be taken. Some, like Frederick Douglass, the great orator and abolitionist, felt that freed Blacks should remain in the U.S. and fight for freedom and equality from within her borders. Others felt that "the development, education, and progress of Canadian Coloured men" would do more to further the abolitionist cause. To this end black settlements were established: The Dawn Settlement on the Sydenham River north of Chatham; the most famous and successful, the King Settlement in Buxton south of Chatham; the most troubled, the Refugee Home Society in Sandwich about 8 miles west of Windsor. Education and self-sufficiency were emphasized in these settlements, though The Dawn and Refugee Home settlements fell pray to the manipulations of white benefactors. After emancipation was granted in the United States many of the fugitives returned there. Opportunities for blacks were greater in the U.S. than in Canada immediately following the American Civil War. The settlements did not survive this exodus.





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Mary Ann Shadd



Mary Ann Shadd once said that her only desire “...was to get an honest living by teaching persons who have not had opportunities afforded them to learn...” Born free to free parents in Wilmington, Delaware on October 9, 1823, Mary was raised in a family that stressed the importance of education. She attended a private boarding school run by Quakers, and upon completion of her education spent a number of years teaching in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York City before arriving in Windsor, Canada to teach in 1851. Before long she was deeply embroiled in local politics. Her battles against intemperance, “begging”, and especially Black Colonization schemes, placed her in direct conflict with Henry Bibb, publisher of a newspaper called *The Voice of the Fugitive* and head of the Refugee Home Society, a black settlement in nearby Sandwich. Her questioning of the seemingly “selfish and ambitious” schemes of Mr. Bibb and his wife led to opposition to her tenure as teacher and personal attacks on her in the Bibb’s newspaper. She responded to this by publishing and editing her own paper, *The Provincial Freeman*, making her the first woman in

North America to do so. In this paper, first published in March in 1853, she was able to advance her opinion that the Black community would best prosper through education, self-reliance, and hard work rather than by the charity of others. The paper continued to be published first from Toronto, then from Chatham, until 1857. Mary Ann left the paper in the capable hands of her sister and brother in 1855 to tour and lecture on the advantage of black emigration to Canada. Before her death in 1857 she also:

- worked as an abolitionist
- was the only woman commissioned as a recruitment officer in the civil war
- was the first woman to attend Howard University Law School
- began practicing law at the age of sixty
- was the first woman to vote in a federal election in the U.S.
- raised two children on her own after the early death of her husband, Thomas Cary.





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw

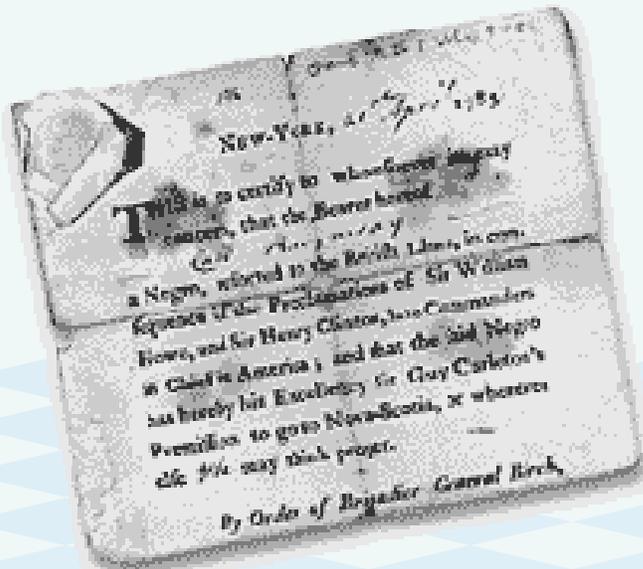


## Assimilation and Civil Rights

The black settlers who remained in Canada did what they could to fit into Canadian Society. Early black settlers worked primarily as farmers and labourers. As settlements grew, Blacks filled the demand for skilled labour and tradesmen. Some set up their own businesses and by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century some had entered the professions of law, medicine and teaching. The common schools act of 1850 legalized separate schools for blacks in Ontario but by the early 1900's most schools were integrated. The churches became the focus of community life, with benevolent societies that fostered a sense of pride and community. Yet in the press and professional journals Blacks were consistently portrayed as pleasure-seeking sexual beasts, lazy, smelly, and incapable of assimilation. The black population, young, marginalized, segregated in "peculiar settlements" and cast in the light of gross inferiority, was considered a threat. Canadian history books denied the existence of slavery as Canada began denying its legacy of mistreatment. Opinion held that the best way to avoid the American "black problem" was to restrict entry. Canada set up immigration offices in over twenty American cities in 1897 and placed ads in American newspapers to attract American farmers to the prairies. White American settlers were welcomed, but Blacks were not and many were turned away at the border. In 1911, the government of Canada created an Order-in-Council which stated in part, "...the same is prohibited of any immigrant belonging to the Negro race, which race is deemed unsuitable to the climate and requirements of Canada." The Edmonton Board of Trade, perhaps the single most influential group in closing the door to black immigrants stated:

We cannot admit as a factor the argument that these people may be good farmers or good citizens. It is a matter of common knowledge that Negroes and whites cannot live in close proximity without the occurrence of revolting lawlessness, and the development of bitter race hatred. We are anxious that such a problem should not be introduced into this fair land at present enjoying a reputation of freedom from such lawlessness as has developed in all sections of the United States where there is any considerable Negro element. There is no reason to believe that we have here a higher order of civilization, or that the introduction of a Negro problem here would have different results.

Canada saw no need for discriminatory legislation, though racial discrimination was evident in all walks of life. Jim Crow laws legislated the divide in the U. S. In Canada, a policy of "freedom of commerce" said that a business owner had the right to do or not to do business with anyone he or she chose as long as it wasn't contrary to good morals or public order. Though discrimination wasn't enshrined in law (except in immigration and education), it was permitted in practice.



Certificate of Freedom 1783





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Viola Desmond

Canada saw no need for discriminatory legislation, though racial discrimination was evident in all walks of life. Jim Crow laws legislated the divide in the U. S. In Canada, a policy of "freedom of commerce" said that a business owner had the right to do or not to do business with anyone he or she chose as long as it wasn't contrary to good morals or public order. Though discrimination wasn't enshrined in law (except in immigration and education), it was permitted in practice.

### Viola Desmond

Viola Desmond was born in Halifax on July 6, 1914. Upon graduation from Halifax High School, Viola taught for a brief period at both Preston and Hammond Plains, two racially segregated schools for black students. After meeting and marrying Jack Desmond, himself a barber, Viola studied black hair care and cosmetics and opened "Vi's Studio of Beauty and Culture" next to her husband's barber shop. Eventually she started the "Desmond School of Beauty" and her reputation as an astute and successful business woman was widespread and well founded. Petite, polite and unassuming, Viola wasn't a radical or revolutionary and preferred to let her success as an individual speak against the ignorance of racism. Yet she was labeled an agitator for her attempts to secure justice for herself.

In November of 1946 Viola Desmond purchased a ticket for a movie theatre. When she went to seat herself on the main floor she was told her ticket was for the balcony. Thinking an error had been made went back to the cashier to exchange for a main floor ticket only to be told by the salesperson that she was, "not permitted to sell downstairs tickets to you people". Viola defiantly returned to a seat on the main floor, an act which saw her physically removed from the theatre and jailed for the night. The next day she was tried and convicted of tax evasion. She had purchased a balcony ticket and sat on the main floor nonetheless and was short of one penny of tax as it would have applied to the more expensive downstairs ticket. She had even offered to pay the difference in price. She was tried without council and had not been informed of her rights. The outcome of her case galvanized the black community in Nova Scotia and the rest of Canada to fight the Jim Crow like practices that still existed. Viola lost faith in her native country. Her disappointment with the outcome of her case caused her to move to New York City where she died suddenly at the age of 51 in February of 1965.





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Glossary

(from the play and/or study guide)

**Abolitionist** - One who believed in and fought for the end of slavery

**Assimilation** - The cultural absorption of a minority group into the main cultural body

**Black Loyalists** - Free blacks and slaves who remained loyal to the British during the American Revolution. The promise of freedom often engendered this loyalty

**Cartage** - The act or work of carting as in a wheelbarrow

**Code Noir** - A set of guidelines legalizing slavery and spelling out the terms of ownership of black slaves. Adopted by France in 1685 and in New France (modern day Quebec) in 1705

**Discrimination** - A showing of partiality or prejudice in treatment especially action or policies directed against the welfare of minorities

**“Freedom of Commerce”** - A doctrine which held that a business owner could do or not do business with anyone he or she chose, often used as justification to refuse to serve black people

**Jim Crow** - Discrimination against and segregation of those of African descent

**Martyr** - A person who chooses to suffer or die rather than give up her faith principles





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



## Glossary

**Panis** - Indian (native) slaves

**Prejudice** - A judgement or opinion formed before the facts are known; suspicion, intolerance, or irrational hatred of other races, creeds, regions, occupations, etc.

**Prototype** - The first thing or being of its kind, serves as a model for one at a later time

**Racism** - A doctrine or teaching, without scientific basis, that claims to find racial differences in character, intelligence, etc., that asserts the superiority of one race over another or others; any program or practice of racial discrimination, segregation, persecution, and domination based on such

**Segregation** - The policy or practice of compelling racial groups to live apart from each other, go to separate schools, use separate social facilities, etc.

**Writ of Certiorari** - (Pronounced sir-shor-y) A higher court's overturning of a lower court's ruling where a fundamental denial of justice has been proven



**Peel Township Church**





# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw



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# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw

## Student Activity Page 1

Fill in the column under the “K” with everything you know about Black women in Canada from the 1700s to 1965.

Fill in the column under the “W” write what you want to know (any questions that you have)

After you have viewed the play and completed the activities, fill in the column under the “L” with what you have learned.

K	W	L

# Things My Fore-Sisters Saw

## Student Activity Page 2

### Creating a Character

In each box, list the ways in which the actor changes from one character to another using different characteristics.

**Costume**

**Voice**

**Body Language**

**Facial Expression**

**Gesture**