



CANADIANS OF AFRICAN DESCENT

People of African descent have a long and honourable connection with Canada, dating back to the days of the first explorers.

Matthew Da Costa, a Black, came to Nova Scotia in 1606 as a member of the Poutrincourt-Champlain expedition. Da Costa was an interpreter of the language spoken by the Mic Mac Indians living in the Atlantic region. It is unknown how he learned Mic Mac, but it seems reasonable that he must have visited these shores before and had learned the language then. The group settled at Port Royal, built the previous summer on the north bank of the Annapolis river just below its mouth. Here Canada's oldest social club, The Order Of Good Cheer, was organized. Da Costa was one of its charter members.

It was at Port Royal itself that Da Costa breathed his last.

Twenty-three years later another Black, a youth from Madagascar, came to Quebec with an invading force led by the Kirke brothers from New England. Samuel De Champlain, founder of the settlement of Port Royal, surrendered his small French colony to the invaders on July 20, 1629. This youth was the slave of David Kirke who sold him to

Olivier Le Tardif, head clerk of the French colony and one of the collaborators of the English. When Quebec was restored to the French in 1632, Le Tardif had to flee the settlement to escape punishment. Before leaving, he gave his slave to the Couillard as a gift. With an Indian student, the boy began to attend a school established by Father Le Jeune, the Jesuit Superior, shortly after his arrival in the colony, becoming one of the first students in Canada's history. At his baptism a year after his registration, he chose the name Olivier Le Jeune in memory of the chief clerk and of his teacher. When he died in his 'thirties, death certificate described him as a domestique.

On May 1, 1689, Louis XIV permitted his subjects in New France, as Canada was called at that time, to import African slaves. The colonists had long agitated for this privilege because they considered slavery the major reason for the economic advantage New England held over them. Various factors, including capital costs, climate and the absence of a suitable staple, combined to prevent slavery from developing in Canada the way it did elsewhere. Nevertheless, it became a

very important institution until it was abolished in 1834 by the Imperial Parliament, 125 years after it had been legalized.

Though the slaves and their descendants made up the vast majority of Canada's first Black residents, it must be stressed that there were always citizens of African descent who never were enslaved. This population base received its first major boost as a result of the American War for Independence which ended in 1783. Colonials who wished to retain their British connection had to leave the emerging nation, the United States of America. Nearly 42,000 of these United Empire Loyalists fled to Canada. Some who were slaveholders in their former homes were allowed to bring their human property along. This helped increase the Black population here. However, an estimated 12% of the Loyalists themselves were of African descent, most of whom went to the Atlantic regions, while others settled in areas of what is now Ontario and Quebec.

Blacks in Canada have many other origins as well: the Maroons, the refuge Blacks, passengers of the Underground Railroad, and immigrants just before and during