

# QA

with Kierstin Stewart

## Finding Black History in Canadian Archives

In 2020, Know History had the opportunity to work with Overture with the Arts (OWTA), a non-profit organization that provides arts education and programs for youth who might otherwise be unable to afford classes. We conducted research on historical Black communities in Canada as well as prominent Black Canadians. OWTA used the archival documents, oral history interviews, and images that we collected to create a tour, documentary, and colouring book.

Senior Associate Kierstin Stewart led Know History's work on the project. Kierstin has a strong research background in both American Civil Rights and Cold War history, and brought the two together in her master's thesis on the impact of Cold War Subversion on the Civil Rights Movement in America. Working with OWTA, Kierstin was excited to learn more about Black History in Canada and apply her research expertise within Canadian archives. In this article, Kierstin discusses her work with Director of Outreach and Operations Emily Keyes, and speaks about the challenges and importance of conducting archival research about Black History.

**E** Can you share how Know History became involved in the project?

**K** Interestingly, the project came up by chance. I happened to be in Chapters while Akilah [Newton], the founder of Overture with the Arts, was promoting Big Dreamers Volume One. We struck up a conversation about her research for her tour and publication projects for 2020. I mentioned to her that our company would be interested in conducting this research and the collaboration quickly came together after our encounter.

**E** You helped research 43 historical personalities and five communities. Which story was your favourite?

**K** Many touched me personally, but I think the story I was most fascinated by was the history of Hogan's Alley. This Vancouver Black community thrived in the first half of the 20th century as a hub of Black business, culture, and social life. Black migrants from around the world settled in Hogan's Alley in hopes of opportunity, and to escape racial prejudice. However, by the 1960s, the community became ghettoized due to institutionalized racism and neglect from local officials. The city eventually demolished the area to build a viaduct for a freeway project, which resulted in the displacement of many Black residents. The impact of Hogan's Alley is still a significant point of discussion today as descendants of the community seek reconciliation for its erasure.

**E** What parts of this research did you find the most challenging?

**K** Primary source material was the most challenging aspect of our research. Original sources on lesser-known communities like Elm Hill in New Brunswick or official records on African American soldiers in the Northwest Territories during World War Two were not easy to find in national and provincial archives. Local newspapers and oral histories from community descendants were an essential source for the more obscure stories.

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Kierstin Stewart, MA ▶



◀ Emily Keyes, MA

**E** What other kinds of sources were you able to find?

**K** We compiled a substantial list of various historical documents and media from provincial and city archives, universities, and museums. We pulled music recordings, memorabilia, maps, and paintings that all helped demonstrate the undeniable presence of Black people in Canadian society.

Repositories like British Columbia Provincial Archives, City of Toronto Archives, Glenbow Museum, and Concordia University all housed a sizeable selection of historical images featuring Black Canadians in everyday life. For me, the image research was the most impactful as it helped to personalize and contextualize this history. For example, we collected an image of a young Black woman milking a cow on a farm in Amber Valley. The story of Black homesteaders who established historical communities in the Prairie provinces can be witnessed in the photograph. African American immigrants journeyed to rural areas like Amber Valley to escape the dangers of racism and injustices of segregation in the United States at the beginning of the 1900s. Hundreds of families farmed difficult land in harsh conditions, but despite hardships, settlers constructed schools and churches that facilitated a thriving community into the 1950s.



Frank Bernard Jamerson Fonds. City of Edmonton Archives.

**E** Why do you think it is essential for Canadians to engage in this history?

**K** I think the protests against racial discrimination and injustice in the United States and Canada last summer have highlighted the need for Black history to be on full display. Knowing about Black historical communities like The Ward in Toronto or Little Burgundy in Montreal allows us to consider how those communities are recognized and appreciated today. One of the most important observations made in this research is that it spans centuries and locations across the entire country, from Black Loyalists in the Maritimes to the official celebration of Black History Month in Canada in 1996. The resilient stories of the past emphasize that Black stories in the present deserve to be heard.

**E** What are your thoughts on volume two of Big Dreamers?

**K** I love it! I think the Big Dreamers colouring books are a great, interactive way for children to learn about Black history in Canada. It is a tangible approach to history that can be used in classrooms and homes, hopefully ushering in a new generation of Canadians that will grow up with this knowledge.

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