

# **Black** **Pioneers** *to Refuge* **Seekers**

Hope and refuge have always been at the core of Black migration to BC. It is what took many free Black sojourners to “California.” Yet their hope was met with consternation by their white neighbors. By 1858, efforts were mounting in California to enact law and legislation focused on enshrining white supremacy and limiting Black civil rights. School segregation, invalidation of marriages between whites and Blacks, jury ineligibility, exclusionary law, and, what seems to have been the final straw for many, the prohibition of Black testimony in civil and criminal actions involving white people, were enacted. Mixed in with news of gold being found along the Fraser River and a warm invitation from a “Vancouver” Island governor of Black ancestry, many were quick to see a light of prosperity glimmering like the Northern Lights.

Some came to “British Columbia” in hopes of earning enough money in the gold mines to purchase freedom from slavery for family members. Some came looking for a home from discrimination, such as abolitionist and teacher assistant Nancy Lester, who wrote, “it seems to be a providential provision for us who are so oppressed . . . that ere long we may find a home for our children in the right place.” And yet, as many were soon to find out, racial prejudice in the colonial context was not unique to the United States. Nancy Lester carried on, “however, our enemies are never willing that we should emigrate to a place where we will be benefitted.”

Black refuge seekers who have migrated since share many of these same motivations and aspirations.

The San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin carried a very touching and fitting editorial comment on the negro exodus:

All this puts one in mind of the Pilgrims, and the address of pastor Robinson, when those adventurers embarked for their new homes across the seas. When the colored people get their "poet", he will no doubt sing of these scenes which are passing around us almost unheeded, and the day when colored people fled persecution in California, may yet be celebrated in story. This is an important epoch for this class of our inhabitants. The sixty-five yesterday went off in the Commodore and are now pushing up towards the north, bearing their lares and penates to found new homes. It is said that if the attempt to make a settlement on Vancouver's Island should prove abortive, a number who favour P. Anderson's proposition for a settlement in Sonora, Mexico, will make an attempt in that direction. Whatever may be their destiny, we hope the colored people may do well.

The colony of "Vancouver" Island and what was to become "British Columbia" was one of the last frontiers of white colonization in North America. As formerly enslaved peoples, Black people found themselves as stolen people on stolen land. The time of Black folks' first arrival in British Columbia was one of great social upheaval. Black people, flushed with great pride and aspirations, pushed the socio-racial limits of their supposed liberation in colonial "Canada" by exercising their new-found freedom.

Black folks looked to Vancouver Island with hope for a refuge from which they could unshackle themselves and build community. Escaped slaves made their scramble to the island shores, such as Charles Mitchell, an enslaved boy living with his master in "Washington" Territory, who heard of a Black colony on Vancouver Island and hid as a stowaway on a mail ship headed there. Once discovered by the ship's captain, he was kept as a prisoner intended to be returned as property to his master. However, "Victoria's" Black community caught wind of the boy's plight and organized in hundreds at Victoria's docks to pressure the various legal apparatuses, reaching up to the Supreme Court to seize and free the boy.



This same quandary of freedom in the form of colonial subservience is embodied by the renowned Sir James Douglas. Many Black British Columbians have struggled to grapple with Douglas, who was born of a Black mother and white father, and his warm invitation and later rejection of his Afro-diasporic kin. A colonial officer himself, being the governor of the western frontier of British North America, he would further British interests at the expense and disenfranchisement of Indigenous populations. Douglas invited these Black Americans to immigrate, and he viewed them as potential members of the community amenable to British rule and loyal to his order.

**Richard Stokes (1878), owner and operator of livery stables.**  
Richard Stokes, originally from Virginia, also served with the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps.  
Royal BC Museum and Archives.

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New Black pioneers and refuge seekers came with aspirations, and they acted to display and establish their capacity in their new-found country. With security concerns reaching the “Vancouver” Island settlement, Black men established the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps, an all-Black militia, in 1860. The corps was made possible by the labour, services and agency of Black Women. Douglas’s support was tentative and perilous. The Rifle Corps lacked proper armament, and as anti-Black racism increased to a boiling point in 1863, their application for further funds was ignored. Douglas’s neglect culminated when the replacement governor was to arrive and the Black Rifle Corps were rejected from taking part in his reception and parade. Though we do not know Douglas’s exact motivations, Black British Columbians have since speculated that Douglas grew weary of his connection to the Black plight. His self-sustaining Black Rifle Corps was a Frankenstein’s Monster of his making, and he now looked to distinguish himself from his Blackness.

This is concurrent with a common theme in colonial frontier towns: as the towns became cities and the rough pioneers turned to “civilized” folk, Black folks were seen as no longer needed. This same dynamic can be seen in the City of Vancouver’s displacement of Strathcona’s Black community in the 1960s and ’70s, and the eventual destruction of the supposed “blight” of Hogan’s Alley for the purposes of urban renewal.

Though Black community and life continued to assert its belonging in “British Columbia,” the demons of prejudice were found to have followed us here. A letter reporting back from Victoria was published in the San Francisco *Daily Morning Chronicle* detailing this white “nativism”: “Some of the colored people who started a negro colony at Vancouver, have come over here disgusted with British Liberty.” Racially oppressive efforts to segregate churches, deny service to Black customers and humiliate Black theatre-goers increased in Victoria as white supremacy increased its grip on the “civilizing” colony. Yet against this backdrop of discrimination, Black British Columbians continued to stake their claim.

**Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps.**  
About 20 members of the Rifle Corps stand in their ranks with the British flag in the background, circa 1860s. Their dress uniforms were blue with white facing and piped clay webbing. The hats were shakos, peaked with a tuft on the front. The drill uniform was green with orange facing. A brass band formed part of the unit. Royal BC Museum and Archives.

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The Hudlin family, Victoria, circa 1947.



As a whole, Black folks and our history were not well documented in the colonial coffers. Yet at the intersection of gender and race, a further erasure occurred: that of Black Women and their contributions. Many have heard of James Douglas, but untold are the stories of Old Teenie—only hinted at in passing by Emily Carr in her *Book of Small*—and of the many Black Women who have always led our progress. Though their presence was invaluable from the early years of “Vancouver” Island, women were classified in the historical record according to their proximity to men as wives, daughters and mothers.

“Old Teenie.”  
Photograph by Mrs. R. Maynard, circa 1880s. Royal BC Museum and Archives.



Some women migrated on their own with female kin, others arrived as domestic workers and some, such as Sylvia Stark (born Sylvia Estes), came with their parents. Born in Missouri an enslaved person, Sylvia taught herself to read as a child by secretly listening in on her master's children's lessons. Her father, Howard Estes, was sent to work in "California," with a promise from his master that he could purchase his freedom. After gathering the funds, Howard's master twice reneged on his promise and attempted to keep the Estes family in bondage. Howard Estes was eventually able to free his family after a court forced his master's hand.

After experiencing racial terrorism at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, the family looked northward towards the frontier for a home to assert their freedom. Silvia married an escaped enslaved man, Louis Stark, migrating along with their Black kin to "Vancouver" Island in 1858, and later was one of the first of many Black settlers on Salt Spring Island. Silvia's daughter Emma Stark became the first Black teacher on Vancouver Island, joining the likes of Maria Gibbs in what has become a legacy of talented Black Women educators in BC. Then, just as now, Black Women were the guiding light in our search for Black liberation.

**Emma and Sylvia Stark.**  
Photograph courtesy of Myrtle Holloman, Salt Spring Island, BC, and Peggy Cartwright.