

## A Great Many Firsts

Shiren Van Cooten

Many of the early Black settlers to BC were key figures in Canadian history. It is common knowledge that Sir James Douglas was British Columbia's first governor of the colonies of British Columbia and Vancouver Island and is known as the "Father of British Columbia." What is less known is that he was of Black African descent on his mother's side and born in the British colony now known as Guyana (formerly British Guiana).

On his invitation, in the spring of 1858, individuals and families arrived from what were at the time free states: California, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon and Pennsylvania. Some had been born in what were still slave states: District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Virginia. Many were from the Caribbean: Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Barbados, Bahamas; as well as from eastern Canada.

Most settled on Vancouver Island and Salt Spring Island. Men and women; as teachers, artisans, entrepreneurs, and merchants, played an important role in the emerging province. John Craven Jones, a graduate of Oberlin College became the first teacher on Salt Spring Island.

Men from the Caribbean and several US states formed The Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps, an all-Black volunteer unit, the first British or Canadian military unit formed west of Ontario.

Abolitionists and business partners, Mifflin Gibbs and Peter Lester, originally from Philadelphia, opened and operated one of the most successful miners outfitting and provisions businesses. Gibbs became the de facto leader of these incomers and in 1866 was the first Black person to be elected and serve as a Victoria city councillor.

Rebecca Gibbs, Mifflin Gibbs' sister-in-law, settled in Barkerville, and is considered one of Canada's first Black female poets. Her poems were published in the local Cariboo newspaper, the San Francisco newspaper *The Elevator*, and her poem "The Old Red



Seraphim Joseph Fortes, born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, arrived in Vancouver in September 1885. He worked as a bartender, but it was because of his swimming prowess and the lives he saved at English Bay that in 1910 the City of Vancouver hired Joe as an official lifeguard. In 1986, he was named "Vancouver Citizen of the Century." BC Archives H-06150

Shirt” was published in 1869 in *Sawney’s Letters and Cariboo Rhymes*.

Descendants and later incomers continued to make important contributions as “firsts.”

Emma Stark arrived as a child in 1860 with her parents Sylvia and Louis Stark, and was one of John Jones’ students. She was appointed the first teacher in the new North Cedar School in 1874, and is the first Black teacher on Vancouver Island.

John Sullivan Deas, after the death of his employer, Edward Stamp, took over the salmon cannery and was running one of the leading salmon canneries on the Fraser River by 1877.

Grafton Tyler Brown also came to British Columbia from San Francisco. He was working in San Francisco as a lithographer and came as part of a geological survey in 1882, exploring places like the Fraser River, Kamloops and the Okanagan. As a lithographer, he became successful creating logos for brands like Wells Fargo, Ghirardelli (fine chocolates) and Levi Strauss (the jeans company). While here, he painted many BC landscapes and became the province’s first professional landscape artist, also holding the first art exhibition in Victoria.

William Allen Jones, a graduate of Oberlin College and a brother of John Jones, was the first person to be granted a licence to practice dentistry under the British Columbia Dental Act on June 26, 1886. His practice was in Barkerville. Jones spent the rest of his life there and is buried in the Williams Creek Cemetery. The reconstruction of the building in the Barkerville Historic Site that housed Dr Jones’ dentist office, and a replica of his office was completed in 1961 with the assistance of the British Columbia Dental Association.

John Freemont Smith was the first postmaster (head of a post office) in Louis Creek, the first Black city councillor in Kamloops, elected in 1902, and the first non-white Indian Agent.

Learn more about these individuals in other articles in the [Read](#) section of this pathway.

Recent “[firsts](#)” and key figures in Canadian history include Rosemary Brown, born in Jamaica, first Black woman elected to a Canadian Provincial legislature (1972), Therese Alexander, a descendant of Charles and Nancy Alexander is the first Black woman judge in BC (1984); Emery Barnes, from Louisiana, first Black person in Canada to hold the office of Speaker of a provincial legislature (1986), and Toni Boot, who grew up in BC and first served as a councillor in Summerland (2014-2018) and was elected mayor for Summerland in 2018, serving for four years. She was the first Black mayor in BC.