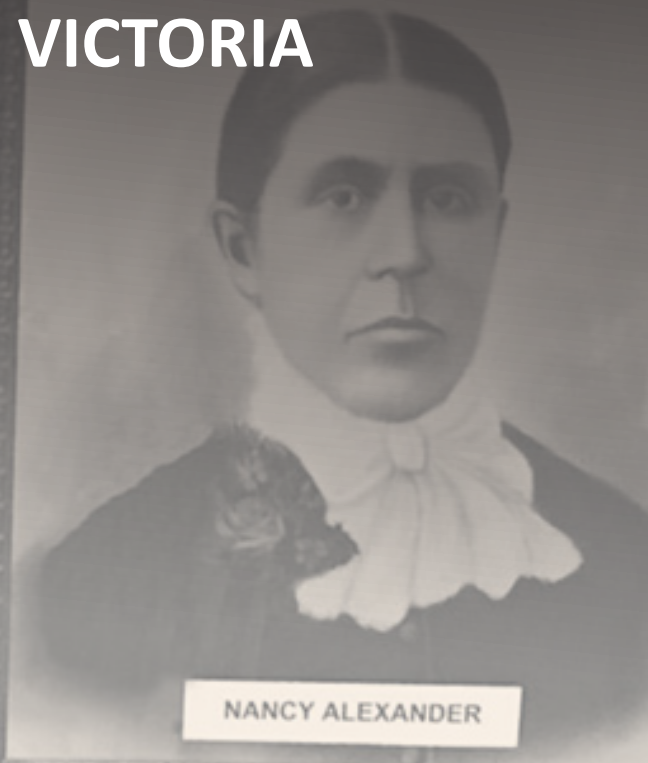


# A BLACK HISTORY OF VICTORIA



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## **SITUATION BRIEF # 9**

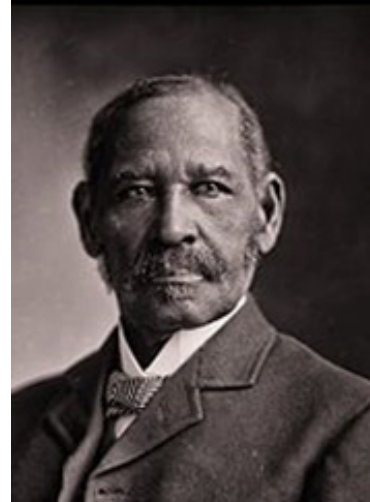
**Contributors: M. Segger, P. Sachter, M. Q. Wong**

### **BLACK PIONEERS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA**

*In 1858, nearly 800 free Blacks left the oppressive racial conditions of San Francisco for a new life on Vancouver Island. Governor James Douglas had invited them here as promising settlers. Though still faced with intense discrimination, these pioneers enriched the political, religious and economic life of the colony. For example, Mifflin Gibbs became a prominent politician; Charles and Nancy Alexander initiated the Shady Creek Methodist Church; John Deas established a salmon cannery; and the group formed one of the earliest colonial militia units, the Victoria Pioneer Rifle Corps.*

This is the text of a plaque was commissioned by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada. It was unveiled on February 20, 2000 at the Shady Creek United Church (now Central Saanich United Church) at 7180 East Saanich Road, Victoria, B.C. Several Black families were instrumental in erecting the original church and were active members.

A profile of Mifflin Gibbs, commemorated with a HSMBC plaque at Irving Park in James Bay is illustrative of this first wave of black immigrants. Gibbs was one of 800 San Francisco black émigrés fleeing California in 1858. He was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1823. He moved to B.C. in the 1850s and became the first black person to hold public office in British Columbia, serving as a Victoria City councillor from 1866 to 1869. He also helped push for British Columbia's confederation with Canada.



This arrival of the black immigrants was significant as the permanent non-indigenous settler population of the colony at that time was about 800 people. The arrival of the Black contingent almost doubled the resident population, although later that year Victoria witnessed the first of a deluge of over 30,000 itinerant gold miners heading for the Fraser goldfields. The arrival of the Black settlers was no accident however. They came at the expressed invitation of Governor James Douglas who traced direct black parentage through his Guyanese mother.

A carpenter by trade, Gibbs found success as a merchant in San Francisco during the Gold Rush of 1849. Upon hearing of reports of gold found on the Fraser River, he decided to move north in 1858. For Gibbs, Victoria represented a chance to escape some of the racism he endured in California, and he became the recognized leader of the black community on Vancouver Island. He prospered as a merchant, purchasing a one-storey building near today's corner of Government and Yates streets. In 1870, Gibbs returned to the United States. When he returned for a visit in 1907, he was received as a distinguished former resident. He died July 11, 1915, in Little Rock, Arkansas, at the age of 92.

These African-American settlers provided a critical population lift as official policy was to dissuade American expansionists from coming farther north

after annexing the Oregon territory. Black immigrants were given the rights of British citizens by Governor Douglas, whose mother was black. Many were skilled tradesmen, others pioneered farming on the Saanich Peninsular. About half the first settlers on Salt Spring Island were Black farmers.

Another noted early Black settler was Victoria's first resident professional artist, Grafton Tylor Brown. His residence in Victoria, though brief (1882-1884), left an important legacy of works which document the landscape of both the Victoria region and mainland British Columbia during those years.



Entrance to the Harbour Grafton Tylor Brown. Collection of the Royal British Columbia Museum

A plaque at 1243 Rudlin St., commemorates a house originally completed in 1862 as a home for black pioneers John Dandridge and his wife, Charlotte. Numerous black settlers are commemorated in the pioneer family bricks that outline the profile of Fort Victoria stockade in Old Town.

**Nathan & Sarah Pointer.** Brick No. 22 in Bastion Square. Nathan Pointer owned and operated a men's clothing and accessories store on Government Street.



**Louis & Sylvia Stark.** Brick No. 23 in Bastion Square. The Stark's initially settled in South Saanich in 1859. They moved to Salt Spring Island in 1860 where he worked as a dairyman and farmer and she worked the farm, tending the animals and orchards and also worked as a midwife. Sylvia lived to be 106!

**Howard & Hannah Estes.** Brick No. 24 in Bastion Square. Howard and Hannah Estes are Sylvia Stark's parents. They were farmers who settled in the South Saanich area. Hannah Estes is buried at Pioneer Square (the Old Burying Ground), which is located at the south end of Quadra Street between Meares Street and Rockland Ave. in Victoria.

**Ringo's Restaurant.** Brick No. 25 in Bastion Square. Samuel Ringo owned a restaurant, situated on Yates Street that was noted as the best in Victoria.

**Wellington Delaney Moses.** Brick No. 44 in Bastion Square. Moses owned and operated several business in Victoria and Barkerville including barbershops, salons and bath houses in Victoria and Barkerville. Lady Franklin, wife of the Arctic explorer, Sir John Franklin, stayed at the Wellington's home with her niece Sophia Cracroft in 1861.

**James and Mary Louisa (nee Lowe) Barnswell.** Brick No. 1106 located between 1130 and 1140 Government Street. Barnswell was a carpenter who built some of Victoria's most elegant homes, and was a prominent member of the Victoria community during the 1870's. It is also said that he had also been a private carpenter for Sir James Douglas and as having built a church that stands on the corner of Pandora and Quadra in Victoria.

**Mifflin Wistar Gibbs.** Brick No. 2526 located at 1000 to 1002 Government Street. Gibbs is considered the leader of the emigration of the 600 Blacks to Vancouver Island. His business interests and achievements are varied and numerous.

**Charles and Nancy Alexander.** Brick No. 2232 located at 1016 Government Street. On July 1, 1858, Charles, Nancy and their two children boarded the ship

Oregon to Victoria in response to Sir James Douglas' call for colonists. Victoria was then a city mostly comprised of tents. They made their home on a site later occupied by the Hudson's Bay Company at the corner of Douglas and Fisgard Streets. In the fall of 1861, the Alexanders moved to South Saanich. The family resided there for 33 years and farmed.

**Charles & Ada Alexander.** Brick No. 1617 located at 1102 Government Street. Charles Alexander was born in Victoria on September 9, 1863, the son of Charles and Nancy Alexander. He married Ada Barnswell who was born in Victoria on May 14, 1874. Later, Charles worked as a Teamster.

**Kenneth Alexander.** Brick No. 1445 located at 1108 Government Street was the grandson of Charles and Nancy Alexander. He worked in the chimney sweeping business.

**Sir James Douglas and Lady Amelia Douglas.** are bricks 654, 655 in Bastion Square. Sir James Douglas was the governor of Vancouver Island in 1858, son of Caribbean black mother. Douglas sent an emissary to San Francisco to meet with Blacks in San Francisco and invite them to immigrate to Vancouver Island.



## Observations

- While the American black migrants from California occupy a place in the generally known narrative of Victoria's settlement history, the significance of their contribution to the early life of the City is much underappreciated. Indeed, their role as farmers in particular rivaled that of the Hudson's Bay Company's in-house efforts to develop local agriculture. In addition, little attention has been paid to their cultural contributions.
- As the settlement of the "black pioneers" is treated as a distinct event, almost a one-off, amid the on-going arrivals of migrants from other, particularly European nations, the notion of an ongoing Black ongoing presence in Victoria has also been over looked.
- The Douglas invitation to American Blacks has assumed symbolic significance, particularly in on-going comparisons of Canadian "tolerance" versus the American history of racial discrimination, but it has no doubt prompted a general avoidance of the fact of ongoing prejudice faced by the original settlers which continued into modern times.
- Today's Black population is multi-national and multi-cultural. It is not clear how they may see themselves in relation to this part of the Victoria settlement story, whether it is meaningful at all, or even if it should be. In any event a more recent Black history has yet to be compiled.

## References

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