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Late Edition

Today, breezy, sunshine and some clouds, high 74. Tonight, mainly clear, low 58. Tomorrow, a bit cooler, yet seasonable, partly sunny, high 72. Weather map is on Page D8.

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Travel

A Journey Through Black Nova Scotia

The 400-year history of African culture in this Canadian province is broad.

By SHAYLA MARTIN

"Whenever I travel and tell people where I'm from, they always say, 'There are Black people in Nova Scotia?'" said René Boudreau, 30, founder of Elevate and Explore Black Nova Scotia, a travel community and experiential business designed to inspire Black travelers to visit the province. "They're always surprised when I'm like, 'We've been here for 400 years.'"

As a Black American who's developed a near obsession with the African diaspora, I'll admit that I would have asked her the same question had we met under different circumstances. Though the 400-year history of African culture in the maritime province of Nova Scotia is one that is rich and expansive, it's a story that's been tucked into the shadows of Canadian history and not widely acknowledged for its contributions to the African diaspora.

Thanks to a collection of grass-roots tourism initiatives in the province, the narrative is shifting.

Ms. Boudreau said that the lack of Black representation within Nova Scotia's tourism industry is what inspired her to start her business in December 2019. Born and raised in Truro in central Nova Scotia, but with familial ties to the historically Black communities of Shelburne in southwestern Nova Scotia and Africville, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Halifax, she noticed that among her own friends and family, there were many places in Nova Scotia they'd never visited to explore their own history. Pandemic-related travel restrictions forced her to re-evaluate her target audience.

"I realized it's the local people here that have yet to experience a lot of these cultural sites in their own city," she told me over coffee in Halifax. "When you don't see yourself represented somewhere, you're not going to think that place will be welcoming to you."

A Complicated Relationship

Truth be told, I had a hard time imagining Canada, and Nova Scotia in particular, as unwelcoming to anyone. The sea-swept peninsula dotted with charming light-houses seemed downright idyllic, and it's home to the Nova Scotia Lobster Trail, celebrating my shellfish of choice with more than 40 stops.

I developed a curiosity about Black Nova Scotia history in early 2020 after reading a Saver piece about the African roots of Nova Scotia cuisine. After monitoring the Canadian pandemic border closure for more than two years, I finally booked my ticket to explore the province this summer.

I stayed in an Airbnb on John Street in the North End of Halifax, a trendy neighborhood filled with colorfully painted row-houses, restaurants and boutiques. Halifax is on a peninsula jutting into the Atlantic Ocean, and its main draw is the Halifax Waterfront, an almost 2.5-mile boardwalk where you'll find the Halifax Seaport Farmers' Market, the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 and harbor sails with J Farwell Sailing Tours.

For some Black Americans, Canada seemed like a bit of a promised land after the 2016 election, and they weren't alone. The Canadian government's immigration website crashed on election night because of a significant increase in traffic, and "move to Canada" remained among the top-trending Google search topics the next day.

But I'd be remiss to believe that Nova Scotia's relationship with its Black population has been a love story. The first recorded Black person to arrive in Canada was an African, Mathieu da Costa, who came to Nova Scotia sometime between 1605 and 1608 to



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLINA ANDRADE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

be an interpreter for the French colonizers Pierre Dugua de Monts and Samuel de Champlain. During the past four centuries, the province has been home to more than 50 Black communities.

One of the most significant waves of Black migration took place between 1783 and 1785 around the American Revolution. Thousands of free and enslaved Africans known as Black Loyalists fought during the war for the British, with the promise of freedom and land seemingly within their grasp. But once British defeat seemed inevitable, more than 3,000 Black Loyalists left New York for Nova Scotia.

Their journey is honored at the Black Loyalist Heritage Center in Shelburne, a roughly two-and-a-half-hour drive from Halifax, past pine-dotted hills and freshwater lakes. The natural-light-filled, ultramodern museum and education center rests on the site of the former community of Birchtown, the largest settlement of free Blacks in the world outside of Africa in 1783. The complex includes the Birchtown Schoolhouse from the 1830s, St. Paul's Anglican Church and an African burial ground.

As I walked toward the heritage center, I noticed metal ribbons of text installed along the stone walls. A yellow ribbon stated "Is this the place? BIRCHTOWN, haven of freedom?" A brown ribbon, seemingly in response, stated, "This is the place. Our harbor of hope."

The 'Book of Negroes'

The Black Loyalist Heritage Center opened in 2015, after the original building was lost in a racially motivated arson attack in 2006. At every vantage point in the new space, guests will see the names of each Loyalist etched into the windows, walls and even the floor — names that we now know today, thanks to the "Book of Negroes."

The 150-page document, created by Brigadier General Samuel Birch, detailed the name, physical description and legal status of each person of African descent who fled the United States to Nova Scotia after the war. A fictionalized version of the book and its subsequent journey was immortalized by the Canadian novelist Lawrence Hill in his 2007 novel, "The Book of Negroes" (pub-

lished in the United States as "Someone Knows My Name"), and again in a 2015 mini-series, developed by CBC and BET networks. One version of the original document resides in England, at the National Archives in Kew, London, and another at the National Archives in Washington.

Museum guests can swipe through a virtual copy of the "Book of Negroes," and follow a digital timeline wall with four touchscreen presentations that detail Black Loyalist history, from capture in Africa; hardships and broken promises upon arrival in Birchtown; a mass exodus of nearly 1,200 Black Loyalists to Sierra Leone in 1792; and finally the legacy and impact of their experiences in the present day.

I felt conflicting emotions at the center. I had a shared sense of pride that the names and stories of these 3,000-plus ancestors were known and could be celebrated by Black Canadians today, yet I was jealous that for so many Americans like myself, we will never know the names of our ancestors.

It felt like yet another distinct cruelty of American slavery, where names were infrequently recorded (usually only as property records), if at all.

Here, visitors are encouraged to search for the names of their ancestors and learn what became of them after arriving in Nova Scotia. With advance notice, the Black Loyalist Heritage Society staff members offer genealogical research services to the public, a service that members themselves have utilized.

"This is a document that shows the history of my lineage and a breakdown of all the generations," said Andrea Davis, 56, the executive director of the Black Loyalist Heritage Center, as she slid a stack of pages across her desk toward me. The document charted nine generations of her family, tracing her roots back to a free Black Loyalist who arrived in Nova Scotia in 1783.

Named executive director this past July, Ms. Davis believes that a return to Shelburne, her hometown, from Toronto is answering a call from her ancestors. "There was no focus on Black culture or understanding in the education system during my upbringing, and sometimes even the families chose not to tell us our stories," she

said. "My ancestors brought me back here and I believe I've been touched by them to tell our story, but I'm not just focused on the past, I'm here to bring us into the future and bring some of this education to our schools."

The Pain and Pride of Africville
After days spent exploring hope-centered sites, there was one cultural site in Nova Scotia that filled me with apprehension. The story of Africville, a small community of predominantly Black Canadians on the edge of the sparkling Bedford Basin, and its eventual destruction, is wrought with the pain of deceit and disenfranchisement.

The original size of Africville ranged from 23 acres to 500 acres, depending on who is asked. Today it is a 2.5-acre site that includes a park with views of the graceful A. Murray MacKay suspension bridge, and a reconstruction of the Seaview African United Baptist Church, once the social heart of the community. The church now houses the Africville Museum, which explores the history of the African Nova Scotian residents who lived there for more than 100 years.

Established in 1849, Africville was a close-knit, thriving community, with a school, businesses, a post office and, of course, the church. Though Africville was mostly self-sufficient, the City of Halifax refused to provide the many amenities normally taken for granted, like sewage, access to clean water and garbage disposal, even though residents paid city taxes. Over time, other initiatives were developed to make the neighborhood seem less desirable, including placing an infectious disease hospital, a prison and the city dump nearby.

Similar to the urban renewal policies of the 1950s and '60s in American cities, Halifax relocated the residents of Africville to build commercial and industrial districts. In 1964, the Halifax City Council voted to authorize the relocation of residents, though it was later reported that more than 80 percent of residents never had contact with the Halifax Human Rights Advisory Committee, the volunteer citizens' group created to protect the interests of Africville residents.

The city claimed that relocation would improve the standard of living for residents,



A view of Dock Street, in Shelburne, where some 1,500 Black Loyalists settled.



Andrea Davis, of the Black Loyalist Heritage Center, says, "There was no focus on Black culture or understanding in the education system during my upbringing."



St. Paul's Anglican Church in Shelburne served as a place of worship for many Blacks. It is on the grounds of the Black Loyalist Heritage Center.

but most were moved into public housing complexes. Adding insult to injury, the belongings of residents were moved by city garbage trucks; despite much resistance, the last home in Africville was destroyed in 1970. The city issued a formal apology to former residents in 2010.

As I approached the sunny yellow church where the Africville Museum is housed, and gazed at the calm waters of Bedford Basin, it was easy to imagine a community of children playing, families fishing and folks gathering together after a church service. I noticed that the park behind the museum (once briefly a dog park in 2014 before Africville descendants expressed outrage) was filled with campers, tents and R.V.s. After I viewed historic photographs, news segments and protest memorabilia with an Africville descendant, Marc Carvery, whose grandfather was forcibly removed in his youth and to this day can't discuss the experience, Mr. Carvery mentioned the coming weekend was the Africville Reunion.

In its 39th year, the annual homecoming is celebrated in July by former residents who park their campers where their homes would have been, cooking, singing, dancing and reliving memories. I made my way into the camp and immediately a woman so strikingly similar to my own aunts waved me over to chat. Forged from Africville at the age of 15 and now in her late 60s, Paula Grant-Smith took a deep sigh when recalling that traumatic experience.

"Growing up here was wonderful," she said. "If I fell and skinned my knee, I could go into any house and they'd patch me right up. If I needed a snack, I could go stop by my neighbors and they'd feed me. I get very sad when I think about Africville, especially as I get older, because we had so much freedom to play but also feel protected.

"We have a saying as Africville folk: The spirit lives on. And when we come back here, the spirits of all of those folks that have gone on before us are right here with us."