

Viola Davis Desmond: Entrepreneur, Beautician, Visionary, Anti-Racist Activist, Community Leader

Viola Davis Desmond was one of the most successful Canadian, Black or White, entrepreneurial women of her time. She was born in Halifax's North-end on 6 July 1914 to James Davis and Gwendolyn Johnson Davis. Being born in 1914 meant that Viola survived the Halifax explosion of 1917. During that disaster she was blown from her high chair. The Halifax Explosion is a main incident in Viola's eventful life. She was the 5<sup>th</sup> child of eleven children.

Viola's maternal grandfather, Henry Johnson was originally from West Virginia and had graduated theology at the Tuskegee Institute (Reynolds, 2016, 70). Before the turn of the century he had been a minister at the Cornwallis St. Baptist Church in Halifax (Backhouse, 1999, 71). He met his wife, and Viola's grandmother, Susan Smith, in Hew Haven, Connecticut, where he had invested in real estate before moving his family to Halifax. From the 1890's to the 1930's he bought properties in Halifax and Connecticut and rented them out (Backhouse, 233).

Viola's mother, Gwendolyn, was educated and had a business sense given that her family was immersed in the real estate holdings in Halifax. Gwendolyn had been trained in Home Economics at Boston Ladies College upon the insistence of her father, the Reverend Johnson (Reynolds, 2016, 69). Gwendolyn's business sense would have a tremendous impact on Viola's profession and outlook in life. James, Viola's father, was a shipwright and also engaged in barbering for a long time; barbering was customary for men in his family. James also owned a car dealership for a short while in Halifax prior to becoming a property manager in the 1920's through inheritances from his father and his wife's father (Backhouse, 232, 404). Both of Viola's parents were passionate community leaders, who always defended his children's rights to equality. (Robson, 2010, 59). Thus, Viola came from an educated and well-to-do family with a keen sense of business.

In 1932 Viola graduated from Bloomfield High school in 1932. By doing so, she followed in her uncle Charles Davis' footsteps, who had been Nova Scotia's first Black graduate

(Reynolds, 2018, Ch. 1). While at school, Viola excelled and became great friends with the celebrated opera singer Portia White. Later, she passed an exam to become a school teacher, and from 1933-35 Viola taught elementary classes at segregated Black schools in Hammonds Plains and Preston. (Robson, 2010, 35). Around this time, she read an article about African American beauty mogul Madame C. J. Walker of the United States. Walker had started a cosmetics and beauty business for Black women at the turn of the century, and became a self-made millionaire as a result. In fact, it is believed that Walker was the first self-made female millionaire in American history. Mme. Walker and her system of teaching Black beauty culture influenced many of her students, including Sara Spencer Washington who started the Apex School of Beauty Culture. Mme. Washington's schools eventually spread to twelve locations across the United States (CBU online lecture, 2017, Appendix page 6). Reading about Walker and her extraordinary success changed Viola's life. She wanted to become Canada's own Mme C.J. Walker. Viola saw what Walker did for Black women in the United States, and she wanted to do the same for Black women in Canada. Madame Walker was for her a spiritual mentor. Thus, Viola left teaching and began her journey to beauty culture and business success.

But there were obstacles to overcome. Racial discrimination and segregation was a fact of life for Black people in Canada. In the 1930's Canadian beauty schools did not accept Black women as students, and these schools certainly did not teach Black beauty culture. Thus, in 1936 Viola had to go to Montreal, at the Field School of Hairdressing for training. By this date, she had begun dating John (Jack) Desmond of Halifax, her future husband. Jack was a barber and entrepreneur from an old Black family from New Glasgow with a Baptist background. Jack had begun barbering after losing an eye in a construction accident (Reynolds, 2018, Ch. 1). In 1932 he opened the very successful Jack's Barber Shop at 136 ½ Gottingen Street, right in the heart of the bustling theatre district (McAlpine's 1945 Directory). Jack was the first certified Black barber in Nova Scotia. He was nine years Viola's senior, and though he was a barber, he was also an award-winning dancer. His barber shop did great business for more than twenty years. He was known as the "King of Gottingen Street" and was very well-liked (Backhouse, 235). Jack fell in love with Viola, and in 1936, he took the train from Halifax to Montreal and

proposed marriage to her. She accepted his proposal, and they were wed by a Montreal Baptist minister. Viola was 22 years old at the time. Jack would become one of Viola's biggest supporters as she established her own beauty business. (Reynolds, 2018, Ch 1).

When Viola graduated her first course in Montreal as a beautician, there were no beauty services available to Black women in Halifax. Black women in Nova Scotia, could not go to white salons to receive service. In 1937, back in Halifax, Viola registered as the first Black beautician in Nova Scotia. She opened her first beauty shop right next to her husband's barber shop. Her salon was named Vi's Studio of Beauty Culture. She used this opportunity to provide an invaluable service to the Black women's community. In return, Viola was climbing the economic ladder as a successful and astute business owner. (Backhouse, 235).

1937 was the same year that Marcus Garvey, the first international Black activist and global leader, spoke to Black communities in Toronto, Halifax, Sydney, and elsewhere across the country (Reynolds, 2015, 142). One of Garvey's key message to the Black community was racial uplift through economic development. Garvey felt that Blacks should own their own businesses and not depend on Whites for economic advancement. Viola Desmond took Garvey's message to heart.

Viola and her husband Jack, pioneers in their own right, joined forces in combining their business endeavours. They were unstoppable, and became the Black business couple *par excellence*. By 1940 they moved their businesses to the ground floor of Viola's parents' house at 91 ½ Gerrish St., on the corner of Gottingen St. (Reynolds, 2018, Ch. 1). This was one block from the famous Gerrish Street Hall at #107, and two blocks from their own (the Desmonds') home at 4 Prince William St. (Miller, 1997, 236; McAlpine's 1945 Directory, Robson, 2010, 40, Appendix page 2). Gerrish St. Hall hosted many historical Black community events in north Halifax during the 1930's and 40's and most likely hosted Marcus Garvey when he spoke in Halifax in 1937 (Miller, 1997, 236).

In 1939 Viola continued her training in Atlantic City at the Apex school of Beauty Culture under Mme. Sara Spencer Washington (Reynolds, 2016, 76). It is instructive to note that Washington was a protégée of C.J. Walker, Viola's spiritual mentor. Much like Mme. Walker's beauty schools, the Apex system taught hairdressing, cosmetology, cosmetics chemistry, and salon management (CBU online lecture, 2017). In the early 1940s Viola took several trips to New York to continue her training in wig-making and hair-dressing. While studying in New York, Viola ran a hairdressing salon, and worked as a cigarette girl at the famous Small's Paradise night club in Harlem. She stayed at the YWCA (Backhouse, 1999, 406; Personal correspondence with Graham Reynolds, 2018, Appendix page 2-3). During these years, she befriended other Black Nova Scotian women that came to become significant to Canadian history and were influential in her later life. Her best friends were Portia White, Carrie M. Best, the newspaper editor and social activist, and Pearleen Oliver (Reynolds, 2016, 80), co-founder of the Nova Scotian Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NSAACP) and the wife of Canada's only Black chaplain during WWII, Dr. William Pearly Oliver. Her close friends, clients, parents and grandparents influenced Viola's code of ethics throughout her life

Viola had great confidence in her ability to succeed in a white business world. In 1945, back in Halifax, she started her own college, the Desmond School of Beauty Culture at 467 Gottingen Street using the Apex model. Students from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Quebec registered at the beauty college. Here, Viola was filling a niche in the beauty education of Black women, because due to racial discrimination and segregation, they could not attend beauty schools in Halifax or Nova Scotia. By opening her own beauty college for Black women, Desmond ensured that they would not have to travel, like her, long distances to Montreal or New York City for training. (Backhouse, 240).

Mrs. Desmond then trained and graduated numerous Black women in beauty culture and hairdressing. As a result, many of these women established their own businesses by opening their own salons, and providing beauty care in their communities. Viola Desmond also began making her own beauty products. She started buying cosmetic products in bulk from the

U.S., mixing and packaging them for the Black women's market in Canada. Some of these products included a face powder and hair pomade. Viola stamped these products with a picture of her own face on the label. (Long Road to Justice, 2011; CBU online lecture, 2017: Appendix page 6). She also sold her products at her salon, and to her graduates who used the products in their own businesses. During the 1940's Viola successfully filled a niche in the Canadian marketplace, especially in the area of beauty culture for Black women. Viola's ambition was to set up a beauty school and studio franchise operation across Canada (Backhouse, 240). She had no real competition in Canada until the 1950's (CBU online lecture, 2017). Business was in Viola's blood dating back to her two grandfathers, who were both educated real estate investors. She was resourceful, ambitious, and resilient, and today, one could compare Viola's success and personality to Martha Stewart's or Oprah Winfrey's.

By 1946 Jack and Viola's marriage was on the rocks, but their businesses were doing great. Viola's first cosmetology class had graduated, and she had added chemistry and wig-making to her program, extending the course from one to two years. She was selling her products to beauticians by word of mouth and through the Canadian Black press (CBU online lecture, 2017). Driven, Viola was inclined to starve and overwork herself relentlessly (Robson, 2010, 43). If her car had not broken down in New Glasgow one chilly night in November of 1946 while she was on a sales trip, she would surely not have given herself a break by going to see a movie at the Roseland Theatre, although she and Jack loved to go to the movies (Robson, 2010, 95).

History records that Viola Desmond's car broke down in New Glasgow while she was on a business trip to Sydney in 1946. She had no choice but to stay overnight and wait for a part for her car, so she decided to take in a movie. Viola asked for a ticket for the downstairs seats because her eyesight was poor, but she was told to sit upstairs with other Blacks. Sensing that racial discrimination was a play, Viola refused to change her seat and location. She was then told to leave the cinema, but she refused to comply. Subsequently, the theatre manager and the police were called. They physically removed her from the theatre, bruising and injuring her

as they manhandled her, and flung her out of the cinema. Viola was thrown in jail where she spent the night. At her arraignment the following morning, she was not told of her right to retain a lawyer, and was summarily convicted of defrauding the government of one cent in entertainment tax; the difference in tax between the upstairs and downstairs price. The court charged Viola Desmond \$26 for her 'crime.' All this happened within twelve hours of the incident in front of an all-white male court. Viola was not offered legal counsel or given a fair chance to defend herself, as the law permits. The issue of race discrimination was never discussed in her court proceedings, even in the years to come, when she was to take her appeal to the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia with the support of the NSAACP (Long Road to Justice, 2011).

The morning after the incident, the Olivers' insisted that Viola see a doctor and a lawyer. She saw Trinidadian-born doctor, Alfred Waddell who treated her injuries and bruises. He recommended that she took legal action against the theatre. The Reverend William Pearly Oliver recommended Frederick Bissett, a man who had represented the NSAACP previously in legal cases against Nova Scotian restaurants, theatres, and entertainment spaces which discriminated based on race. Carrie Best posted the story on the cover of the Black newspaper, *The Clarion*, in 1946 (Appendix page 5) and probably fund-raised on her radio program (Backhouse, 1999, 411). These influential and well-respected Black friends of Viola were the preeminent civil rights activists in Nova Scotia at the time. Nationwide, and in Halifax's north end, newspapers had opposing views about her right to challenge the unspoken rules of Canadian white privilege (Appendix page 5). Eventually her business started to suffer a loss of patronage and her strained marriage collapsed, due to the stress her court battle created in the community and in her relationship with her husband. (Robson, 2010, 100).

Many Blacks in Halifax, including her husband Jack, felt that Viola should have prayed to the Lord instead of stirring up trouble for the few successful Blacks in Halifax. The incident infuriated her friends, her father, her community and the country, but not Jack (Backhouse, 1999, 244). Jack was from New Glasgow. His father was an important Baptist minister there,

and he had worked at the drugstore next to the Roseland theatre. He knew the racial boundaries in New Glasgow. Feeling that his wife should have towed the line, he did not accompany Viola to her Supreme Court case in 1947 (Backhouse, 264).

Unlike in the southern United States, segregation in Canada was not written into statutes and laws; it was an unspoken rule, institutionalized, and generally kept off the records. Viola's friend and regular customer, Carrie M. Best was from New Glasgow. She had been the first Black graduate of New Glasgow High in 1929 (Reynolds, 2018, Ch. 1). In 1942, Ms. Best and her son intentionally challenged Nova Scotia's segregation practices by sitting in the exact same section of the Roseland theatre that Viola did while waiting for her car to be repaired in November of 1946. They charged the theatre manager and two police officers with assault and battery worth thousands of dollars in damages and reparations, but they lost the case. Pearleen Oliver, the legendary Canadian activist and Viola's friend, was also from New Glasgow, as were two of the Supreme Court judges who presided over her legal challenge the following year (they had both been mayors of New Glasgow). Viola cannot have been a stranger to New Glasgow politics and neither were the judges hearing her case (Backhouse, 1999, 265).

There was much dissent within the NSAACP about supporting and paying for her defence. Many Halifax Blacks were afraid of the possible backlash from whites. Nevertheless, the NSAACP raised funds for her defence. Money was donated by whites and Blacks alike, due to the fund-raising efforts of Carrie Best and Pearleen Oliver. Viola's lawyer, William Bissett was accused of mishandling the case because he lost due to a technicality. Because of this, he decided to donate his fee to the NSAACP and the money was used to continue the fight against racism in Nova Scotia (Viola Desmond Biography, Nova Scotia Museum, infosheet 2015-001-N). Viola's father advised her to put the entire business of battling the Canadian legal system to rest. Not only did she do that, but she also retired her businesses, her marriage, and her commitment to a Canadian Black beauty empire. She fell out of love with the beauty business entirely and gave up her role as the successful salon owner and happy wife. In the next phase of her life, Viola reinvented herself yet again as an entrepreneur and entertainment agent.

Between the years 1948 and 1953 Viola shut down her businesses, leaving her protégé and former student, Rose Gannon to run her shop at 445 Gottingen St. The Desmond School of Beauty Culture's final graduating class was in 1948, and Viola's last known company calendar was in 1953 (CBU online lecture, 2017; Appendix page 1). In 1953 she moved to Montreal to take a business course and in 1954 she left Jack and her marriage. (Backhouse, 1999, 428).

In the mid-fifties, with her keen business sense, Viola began buying houses with her savings; renovating and renting them out to Black families in Halifax as her parents had done. In 1955, Viola moved to New York for the third time to reinvent herself.

Music was changing rapidly in the late fifties and so were Blacks' tolerance for racist practices. Rock, Folk, Blues, Jazz, and protest music all melded together in Greenwich Village (Miller, 1997, and Viola took part in these developments as an entertainment agent. It is known that she helped some musicians in New York gain copyrights to their lyrics. (Backhouse, 406). Sometime during the 1950's she discovered that her parents had lost much of their property due to financial mismanagement by lawyers. Putting her own business aside, Viola returned from New York and spent months preparing a legal case against her mother's lawyer. Without a law degree or anyone's help, she beat the white Halifax lawyer and regained her family's dignity, settling out of court for \$20,000 and paying herself half of the settlement for her work (Robson, 2010, 140).

Viola died unexpectedly of an intestinal haemorrhage in 1965, childless, after ten years in New York. She bequeathed her assets to the education of each and every one of her nieces and nephews and left a stipend for her brother Alan, who had been diagnosed with schizophrenia during her teens, and lived in a mental hospital in Dartmouth (Robson, 2010, 24). Shortly before she died she also made the down-payment on her youngest sister Wanda Davis Robson's house.

#### Honours for Viola Desmond



Fifty four years after the Roseland Theatre incident, in the year 2000, Wanda Robson enrolled in a class at Cape Breton University that Dr. Graham Reynolds was teaching. Her sister, Viola's story, was a major part of the course (Reynolds, 2016, ix). Wanda then established a partnership with Dr. Reynolds which resulted in several books written on the Desmond story. As a result of her partnership with Reynolds, (Appendix page 8) a snowball effect began with the objective of correcting the legal wrong done to Viola and to honour her courage, resilience, and independent spirit.

Wanda Robson, along Dr. Graham Reynolds, and many others began advocating for Viola to be pardoned for the trumped up charge of defrauding the province of one cent. That was the crime that she was convicted of and for which she had to pay \$20. This advocacy bore fruit and in 2010, Hon. Mayann Francis, lieutenant-governor of Nova Scotia, acting on behalf of the Province and the Crown gave Viola Desmond a free posthumous pardon, the first of its kind in Canada. <sup>1</sup>Hon. Francis also apologized to Desmond for the wrongful conviction. But because Viola was deceased, her sister Wanda received the apology on her behalf. Hon. Francis also commissioned a portrait of Viola Desmond to be hung in Government House, the official residence of the lieutenant-governor. (Wikipedia, 2018) The pardon that Viola received enshrined her as an icon in the Canadian civil rights movement.

The pardon opened a floodgate of honours for Mrs. Desmond. Streets were named after her in Montreal and New Glasgow; a public school was named in her honour in the Halton District School Board in Ontario, Canada Post unveiled a stamp commemorating her life and history, the Viola Desmond Chair in Social Justice was established at Cape Breton University, after the pardon was granted, with Dr. Graham Reynolds as its first chair, scholarships, a public park, a Halifax ferry, and other awards have memorialized her. Additionally, in March 2018, Mrs. Desmond was named by the Federal Government of Canada as a Person of National Historic Significance. But perhaps, it is the new Canadian ten-dollar bill and silver dollar, set to be released by the Canadian Mint in November 2018 that have now made Viola Desmond a household name. When the Canadian government asked the public for helping in naming a

Canadian woman whose image was to grace the ten dollar bill, Viola Desmond handily beat thousands of Canadian women to that honour. Viola Desmond was the unanimous choice. (Appendix page 7).

Additionally, Historica Canada created a heritage minute in Viola's honour, the Canadian Museum for Human Rights launched the "Story of Viola Desmond" as part of its offerings, and she was one of the personalities honoured in the online historical videos *Black Halifax*.

Viola Davis Desmond is now buried in Halifax at the Camp Hill Cemetery (Wikipedia, Appendix page 6). Though she and Jack never had children, she has numerous lateral living descendants in Halifax. Her family, as well as the entire country are proud of Viola for her stance against anti-Black racism.

Viola Davis Desmond was an indomitable, entrepreneur, businesswoman, teacher, mentor, social and anti-racist activist, beauty culture expert, hairdresser, feminist, and community leader. She created a niche for Black women beauticians, and use entrepreneurship to break down gender and racial barriers that, for Black women had existed for centuries. With her stand against racism at a New Glasgow cinema, she embarked on activism that helped to eradicate some of Canada's worst forms of segregation and racial discrimination. Desmond was a visionary, and we in Canada are better for her life and work.

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<sup>1</sup> "Late Viola Desmond Granted Apology, Free Pardon," <https://novascotia.ca/news/smr/2010-04-15-pardon.asp>