

John Ware Report

John Ware was a Black Canadian rancher and horseman in Alberta. He was a trailblazer and innovator who helped shape the frontier landscape of what would become the province of Alberta. Ware made lasting contributions to ranching and farming, which were the main economic drivers in the development of Alberta and other Western provinces.

Ware was born into slavery in the American South likely between 1850 and 1854 and was freed at the abolition of slavery in 1865 when he was about eleven years old.¹ He worked in the cattle industry in Texas as a cowboy and eventually worked as a member of cattle teams to transport large herds of cattle over long distances. Ware was working in Texas as a cowhand and made his way north to Idaho on one such job. He was in Idaho in 1882 when he was offered a job to help drive 3,000 cattle to Alberta, Canada with a colleague named Bill Moodie. They were hired by Tom Lynch a colleague of Fred Stimson, who was one of the owners of the North West Cattle Company, also known as Bar U Ranch.² Stimson ordered “3,000 Durham-Shorthorn stocker cattle, 21 purebred Shorthorn bulls and 75 saddle horses” and asked Lynch to find a competent group of men to trail them up to the new ranch.³

Ware worked as the dragman, the most unpleasant, dangerous job on the team, riding behind the herd in the dust, rounding up strays, and pushing the cattle forward. He also served as a nighthawk, guarding the herd overnight to protect the cattle from wild animals and cattle thieves. The journey took four months from May to September, arriving in Longview, Alberta on September 25, 1882.⁴ Ware decided to stay in Alberta when he was offered a job as a ranch hand at the Bar U Ranch and learned that the government was issuing “free” land to homestead. He also worked at the MacPherson and the Quorn ranches. Ware’s roles on the ranches included

working as a roper and rider, a cow puncher, a bronco buster, and a manager of a horse herd. In the ranching world, demonstrating one's skills and abilities with handling cattle was popular. Ware participated in many competitions that were based on the daily duties of cowboys, where he exhibited his talents that Albertans became aware of. In 1885, Ware participated in a round-up cattle competition where he displayed his exceptional riding skills and garnered the reputation of as being one of the best rough riders.⁵ That year, the *MacLeod Gazette* reported that "The horse is not running on the prairie which John cannot ride."⁶

By 1890, Ware purchased land to establish his own ranch near Millarville, called the Four-Nines Ranch.⁷ John Ware married Toronto-born Mildred Lewis, whose family emigrated from Ontario to homestead in Alberta, in February 1892.⁸ They had 6 children – two daughters and four sons: Amanda Janet "Nettie" (1893-1989), Robert Lewis (1894-1980), twins William Henry (1898-1934) and Mildred Jane (1898-1988), Arthur Nelson (1900-1989), and Daniel Lewis (1901-1904).⁹ In 1900, the Wares moved near Brooks, Alberta in the Gem/Duchess area, built a cabin along the Red Deer River, and set up a new ranch.¹⁰ In 1902, their home was destroyed during a spring flood and immediately began rebuilding on higher ground.¹¹ Ware would come to own hundreds of cattle and horses on his ranch.

Other members of the Ware family used their entrepreneurial talents and skills or developed new ones to sustain their families in this new settlement. Mildred, new to rural living, learned how to milk cows and make butter, which she sold.¹² Mildred's parents both operated their own businesses. Her father, Daniel Vant Lewis, was a carpenter by trade in Toronto and after an unsuccessful attempt at homesteading, relocated his family to Calgary where he resumed his trade. He specialized in building fancy staircases in upscale homes in the city. Her mother, Charlotte (Campbell) Lewis, took in laundry to help take care of her family.¹³

Ware made tremendous contributions to ranching and farming, which were the main economic drivers in the development of Alberta and other Western provinces. As a rancher, he pioneered new agricultural techniques. He was one of the first ranchers in the area to develop irrigation systems on his farm. Ware dug ditches from the creek to channel water to his farm for his family and his crops and cattle.¹⁴ Ware was one of the first ranchers to use the method of dipping cattle in a special parasiticide that prevented a burrowing mite disease called mange.¹⁵ He walked across the backs of cattle in crowded stockyards. He rode the wildest bucking horses and wrestled steers onto their backs with his powerful grip. In fact, Ware is credited for introducing steer wrestling to the Prairies. He was very skilled with the lasso. As a testament to his prowess, Ware won his first roping contest at Calgary Exhibition in 1893 and again in 1894 when he broke his own record, a skills competition that would become a highlight of the Calgary Stampede.¹⁶

Like other ranchers of the time, Ware created his own cattle brand used to mark the cattle that he owned for identification purposes. Initially, his brand was “9999,” hence the name of his Millarville ranch, Four Nines. In 1898, he registered his modified iron brand for cattle as “999,” called walking sticks. Ware also registered the use of one “9” for his horses. His brand for cattle that he wished to transfer to his daughter Nettie was “DC” and a cross “+” for the cattle he was transferring to his son Robert.¹⁷

John Ware was involved in his community in a number of ways. During the month of February in 1885, John Ware attended a dinner and dance that was attended by other ranchers and their families. It was described as “the biggest dance ever given in the country” and Ware called off the dances and did it way up.”¹⁸ In November 1890, Ware donated \$10 to support the newly opened Calgary General Hospital.¹⁹

Things took a turn for the worse in Ware's life beginning in 1904. His two-year old son Daniel Lewis passed away. Then Ware's wife Mildred died on March 30, 1905 of typhoid and pneumonia.²⁰ Ware's mother-in-law took the young children to stay with her for a while, so he could focus on his ranch. Six months later, Ware had a horrible fatal work accident. On September 11, 1905, he was attempting to cut a steer from a bunch of cattle and was killed when his horse stumbled in a badger hole and fell on him. His son Robert was with him and rode the horse to get help, but Ware could not be saved.²¹ His funeral was held on September 14th, two weeks after Alberta became a province. Ware's unfortunate passing was reported as the largest gathering in Calgary to that point. People from near and far converged at Calgary's First Baptist church to pay their respects.²²

John Ware was known as a fine man. He was noted as being well known and respected. In spite of his upstanding character, Ware was commonly known by the racist euphemism of "Nigger John." It was also used in newspapers several times to describe him, including in his death notice.²³ The N-word has always been a potent word, that conveys a sense of inferiority of Black people throughout our history. There is a myth that persists that Ware accepted this name as a term of endearment. Cheryl Foggo quoted Ware's daughter Nettie who said, "No one called my father 'Nigger John'. Not to his face. The only time I saw someone do it was in Calgary - and that man ended up in hospital. But Father paid his bill."²⁴ It is important to note this discussion here, because this term was used to name several landmarks after Ware in efforts to remember him and to identify places that he was associated with and lived near. A mountain was known as Nigger John Ridge and was registered by the government as its official name. In 1970, this

official title was renamed as John Ware Ridge, after Ware's daughter Nettie and son Robert campaigned to have the derogatory term changed.²⁵

Other places were named after John Ware. There is Ware Creek, which flows through the lands that were part of Ware's original ranch, on the north end of John Ware Ridge. The Dominion Land Survey recorded the name in 1893 and the name of the creek was officially adopted in 1909.²⁶ A Calgary junior high school was named after him in 1968, John Ware Junior High School, and a building at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology was also named in his honour. Prairie historian and author Grant MacEwan wrote a book on Ware's life in 1960.

There have been ongoing efforts to memorialize Ware. A plaque dedicated to Ware was installed on a large rock near Ware Creek on what was once the Ware family property by the new owners.²⁷ The last Ware log home was relocated to Dinosaur Provincial Park in 1958 by volunteers and repaired. It was moved again to its current location in the park in 1993 for preservation and underwent a 3-year restoration beginning in 1998. After the cabin was completed, new interpretive displays were installed. The cabin was reopened to visitors in June 2001 and officially unveiled on Parks Day in July 2002.²⁸ Ware was one of the two Black Canadians featured in the 2012 Canada Post Black History commemorative postage stamps.²⁹ The Glenbow Museum & Archives in Alberta have included Ware in their focus on the pioneers of the province and house many documents and images on the Ware and Lewis families. In 2006, Alberta musician Diamond Joe White memorialized Ware in a song titled "High Rider: The John Ware Story."³⁰ Lastly, in 2017, Cheryl Foggo, a Black Canadian author, poet, journalist, documentary, in film director, screenwriter and playwright, produced a play on John Ware's life called, *John Ware Reclaimed*, life and is currently producing a documentary of the same title that will present current, more accurate research on Ware.³¹

John Ware is an important part of the historical fabric of Alberta and of Canada. He had a significant impact on his family, his community, and the emerging ranching industry in Alberta at the turn of the twentieth century. Although he became a local legend, Ware was a maverick, a real man who left a very real lasting impression.

By Natasha Henry

¹ In an 1898 attestation form in his homestead records, John Ware states his age is 44, which places his birth year at 1894. John Ware Homestead Files 337153 and 373769, Acc. 1970.313, Films 2020 and 2023, Provincial Archives of Alberta; Cheryl Foggo, personal communication, September 24, 2018. Many aspects of the early years of John Ware's life story that are held as common knowledge have not been substantiated by documentation. The main source referenced on John Ware, the 1960 book *John Ware's Cow Country* by Grant MacEwan, is not sourced and some parts rely on passed on stories. For instance, it is stated that Ware was born on May 14, 1850 in South Carolina. Many aspects of John Ware's life are unknowable, due to many factors such as the lack of record keeping on Black people and by Black people. Research is ongoing.

² Grant MacEwan. *John Ware's Cow Country*. (Edmonton: Institute of Applied Art, 1960), 25 - 34.

³ Duane McCartney. "The Bar U Ranch has a special place in Canadian history," *Canadian Cattlemen*, March 25, 2015. Accessed September 10, 2018 <https://www.canadiancattlemen.ca/2015/03/25/the-bar-u-ranch-has-a-special-place-in-canadian-history/> .

⁴ Interview with Nettie Ware, August 1956, John Ware, Lewis Family Fonds, Glenbow Museum & Archives. Access September 13, 2018 <https://www.glenbow.org/collections/search/findingAids/archhtm/extras/ware/m-4215-1.pdf> ; Bar U Ranch National Historic Site, Parks Canada. Accessed September 12, 2018 <https://www.pc.gc.ca/en/lhn-nhs/ab/baru/visit>.

⁵ David H. Breen, "Ware, John," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 13, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed September 15, 2018, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/ware_john_13E.html.

⁶ Phillip Lewis. "On the Trail of Canada's Black Pioneers," National Film Board Blog, November 14, 2017. Accessed September 6, 2018 <https://blog.nfb.ca/blog/2017/11/14/canadas-black-pioneers/> .

⁷ John Ware Letters Patent, Land Grants of Western Canada Database, 1870 – 1930, Library and Archives Canada, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/land/land-grants-western-canada-1870-1930/Pages/land-grants-western-canada.aspx#toc5> . Ware had four registered patents for his two ranches: Section 22, Township 20, Range 4, West of the Meridian W5, Part NE; Section 23, Township 20, Range 4, West of the Meridian W5, Part NW; Section 27, Township 20, Range 4, West of the Meridian W5, Part PT E; and Section 27, Township 20, Range 4, West of the Meridian W5, Part E.

⁸ *Calgary Tribune*, Wednesday, March 2, 1892.

⁹ John Ware, Lewis Family Fonds, Glenbow Museum & Archives. Access September 13, 2018
http://ww2.glenbow.org/search/archivesMainResults.aspx?XC=/search/archivesMainResults.aspx&TN=MAINCAT&AC=QBE_QUERY&RF=WebResults&DL=0&RL=0&NP=255&%0AMF=WPEngMsg.ini&MR=5&QB0=AND&QF0=Main%20entry+%7C+Title&QI0=John+Ware+Lewis+family+fonds

¹⁰ See note 7.

¹¹ Laura Neilson Bonikowsky. "John Ware." In *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historica Canada. Article published January 27, 2013; last modified July 27, 2017. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/john-ware>

¹² MacEwan, *John Ware's Cow Country*, 149.

¹³ Cheryl Foggo. *My Home Is Over Jordan – Southern Alberta's Black Pioneers*. Accessed Sept 6, 2018
<https://johnwarewpt.squarespace.com/my-home-is-over-jordan/> .

¹⁴ MacEwan, *John Ware's Cow Country*, 149; Robert Colby. *Paradise*. (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006), 9.

¹⁵ Kelly Cryderman. "Seeking truth in the legends of John Ware," *Globe and Mail*, December 29, 2017, accessed September 6, 2018 <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/alberta/john-ware-alberta-black-cowboy/article37463119/>

¹⁶ Karen L. Wall. *Game Plan: A Social History of Sport in Alberta*, (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2012), 135; Maxwell Foran, Max Foran (eds.). *Icon, Brand, Myth: The Calgary Stampede*, (Edmonton: AU Press, 2008), 24.

¹⁷ Correspondence of John and Nettie Ware re brand registrations, 1898-1899. M1283-1, Glenbow Museum and Archives. Accessed September 16, 2018
<http://www.glenbow.org/collections/search/findingAids/archhtm/extras/ware/m-1283-1.pdf>

¹⁸ *Calgary Weekly Herald*, February 19, 1885.

¹⁹ *Calgary Weekly Herald*, November 26, 1890. This was the first of several constructions of the Calgary General Hospital. This first building was located at 7th Street and 9th Avenue S.W. and opened in October 1890 in the form of a 2-story wood-frame house accommodating eight or nine patients. "Calgary General Hospital," Wikipedia. Accessed September 24, 2018 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calgary_General_Hospital.

²⁰ MacEwan, *John Ware's Cow Country*, 186; Mildred Ware, Find A Grave (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/122746255/mildred-jane-ware>; accessed September 6, 2018), Union Cemetery, Calgary, Alberta, John Ware memorial ID #122746255 with gravestone photograph.

²¹ MacEwan, *John Ware's Cow Country*, 186 - 187; John Ware, Find A Grave (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/122746083/john-ware>; accessed September 6, 2018), Union Cemetery, Calgary, Alberta, John Ware memorial ID #122746083 with gravestone photograph; "Ranchman Killed," *The Edmonton Bulletin*, September 18, 1905, Page 4. Accessed September 15, 2018
<http://peel.library.ualberta.ca/newspapers/EDB/1905/09/18/4/Ar00403.html?query=newspapers%7C%22john+ware%22%7C%28pubyear%3A1905%29+AND+%28publication%3AEDB%29%7Cscore> .

²² MacEwan, *John Ware's Cow Country*, 186 – 187; Foggo. *My Home Is Over Jordan*.

²³ *The Calgary Weekly Herald*, February 29, 1888, page 8; *The Calgary Weekly Herald*, May 30, 1888, page 5; "Ranchman Killed," *The Edmonton Bulletin*, September 18, 1905, page 4.

²⁴ Foggo. *My Home Is Over Jordan*.

²⁵ Nigger John Ridge, Natural Resources Canada. Accessed Sept 21, 2018 <http://www4.mcan.gc.ca/search-place-names/unique/IAAQN> .

²⁶ RETROactive Blog, Historic Resources Management Branch of Alberta Culture and Tourism. Accessed Sept 22, 2018 <https://albertahistoricplaces.wordpress.com/2016/02/17/naming-and-renaming-the-place-names-of-john-ware/>

²⁷ Gillean Daffern. *Gillean Daffern's Kananaskis Country Trail Guide*, Volume 4 (4th Edition) (no city: Rocky Mountain Books, 2012), 195; Ruth Oltmann. *Lizzie Rommel: Baroness of the Canadian Rockies* (Exshaw: Ribbon Creek Publishing, 1983), 118.

²⁸ John Ware Cabin, Alberta Parks. Accessed September 12, 2018 <https://www.albertaparks.ca/parks/south/dinosaur-pp/information-facilities/nature-history/john-ware/> .

²⁹ John Ware and Viola Desmond Stamps, Canada Post, 2012
https://www.canadapost.ca/web/en/blogs/collecting/details.page?article=2012/02/01/john_ware_and_viola_&cattyp_e=collecting&cat=stamps.

³⁰ Diamond Joe White. “High Rider (The John Ware Story),” *Alberta: Wild Roses, Northern Lights*. Smithsonian Folkways, 2006.

³¹ Lewis, “On the Trail of Canada’s Black Pioneers.”