**Black History Month**

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Black History Month is celebrated with big fanfare in Canada and the United States in February. Did you know that black history month is celebrated in October in the Netherlands, Ireland and the United Kingdom? Who knew? I just found out as I was doing research for this article for the JCRA Newsletter.

**Why do we celebrate black history month in Canada?**

To highlight the contributions of black diaspora to our wonderful country.

It is as simple and straightforward as that.

The government of Canada website says

***‘Black History Month is about honouring the enormous contributions that Black people have made, and continue to make, in all sectors of society. It is about celebrating resilience, innovation, and determination to work towards a more inclusive and diverse Canada—a Canada in which everyone has every opportunity to flourish’.***

I like their explanation better than mine.

Over the years, our kids have done one project or the other about the more famous black people like Nelson Mandela, Dr Ben Carson or more recently Barack & Michelle Obama.

These are very accomplished people in their own right and are deserving of the thousands of school projects that highlight their accomplishments.

Having said that, I want to learn more about Black Canadians who have contributed their own quota to the rich tapestry of what is present day Canada. Whilst the underground railroad is a very important part of Black Canadian history, there are other aspects of black history that we do not hear about regularly, or if at all.

**A little Trivia**

1/ Who was the first free black person to arrive and live in Canada?

2/ When did he arrive?

3/ Where did he come from?

Don’t fret, I will give you the answers right now. You do not need to get to the end of this article to find the answer in small print and written upside down. I just aged myself!

Moving along!

Mathieu Da Costa is known to be the first black person to arrive and live in Canada.

He came in the 1600s. He was an intelligent man and a polyglot.

A polyglot is someone who speaks numerous languages. He worked with the Acadia Governor, who needed an interpreter between explorers and First Nations people, living in what is known as present day Quebec.

The coolest thing I discovered in my research was that Mathieu Da Costa’s family was originally from the African kingdom of Benin, in the southern part of Nigeria!

This is exciting because I grew up in Benin City, Nigeria. I had my first piano lesson in Benin, even though I never became the prolific pianist I am sure I could have been, if only, I took my piano lessons a little bit more seriously!

Back to Mathieu Da Costa. He was a dashing young man who was invaluable to the traders and government of the day. Mathieu Da Costa lived in Port Royal (Nova Scotia) for a short time and was (maybe) born in the Azore Islands.

His contributions to the Black Canadian story are recognized with a school in Toronto named after him; a street in Montreal and another street in Quebec City have also been named after him. Canada Post created a stamp with a picture of Mathieu Da Costa.

Seems to me like he is a hero of sorts. The kind of hero I like, that opens the doors for people coming behind to pass through.

Happy Black History Month!

Nene Akintan

Joshua Creek Resident

**Sources:**

<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/black-history-month/about.html>

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