Black McGill
The names of Black McGill students, staff, and faculty are bolded in
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Black McGill

This history is intended as a brief overview – a chance to celebrate, question, correct, generate debate, and most of all spark a great deal of further research. What follows aims to situate McGill’s history (and necessarily Montreal’s history) within the larger currents of Black history; the slave trade and emancipation, colonialism, and the circulation of labour, talent, and people around the Black North Atlantic; and the Black diaspora in an age of globalization. McGill has been both a site of racial discrimination and colonialism, and also a location of pan African solidarity, with rights/liberation activism. In turn, the presence of Black students, faculty, and staff has shaped the university into the place it is today.

There was never a single or uniform Black experience connected to McGill. It is not unified across time, nor is it entirely appropriate to link the experience of past enslaved people and present-day university professors. Given the biological non-existence of race, “Black” is used here not as a biological description but as a historically, politically, and socially constituted marker of identity - one that is not fixed in time, but constantly contested, negotiated, and evolving. Indeed for many students, McGill was the very site of their racialization, the place they were first identified - and for some, came to identify themselves - as Black.¹ There is also a great deal of diversity within McGill’s Black community, with its particular histories and the experiences of colonialism, racism, and dispossession. Early international students from the Caribbean, Montreal-raised children of Caribbean railway porters, post-1967 immigrants from the Caribbean and more recently, newcomers from Africa, are all more likely to be present at McGill than individuals who trace their background to Canada’s 18th and 19th century Black communities.

James McGill’s 1813 bequest of £10,000 and his Burnside estate en-
dowed the university on the condition that it carry his name. His household owned at least three Black enslaved people, Jacques (Jack) c1760-1838 born in Africa, Sarah c1763-1809 (later as a free woman known as Marie-Charles Cavilhe or Charlotte McGill), and Marie Louise (c 1765-1789). We need additional research to know much more about their lives. James McGill not only owned Black enslaved people, but he also profited from this trade, acting as agent in 1784 in the sale of two enslaved individuals, “Caesar” and “Flora,” to Montreal merchant Levy Solomon for £100. Slavery was a reality in Montreal but by 1800, James McGill’s intimate connection was not typical or universally accepted. Historians have estimated that after 1760 there was a total of between 370 and 400 Black people enslaved on the island of Montreal. While this number is significant and painful, the exceptionality of James McGill becomes clear with historian Frank Mackey’s conclusion that in the year 1786 alone, the number of enslaved people was probably slightly fewer than forty, including children. This was in a city with a population of less than 9,000 people. Slavery endured into the 19th century but with the exception of a few examples such as James McGill, it was not typical of the vast majority of Montreal white settler households.

Until the 1850s, McGill College was almost exclusively a Faculty of Medicine. Only six students registered in the Faculty of Arts in 1848. That same year, within the Medical College, Quebec City-born biracial William Wright (1827-1908) graduated as probably the first Black medical doctor in British North America. Wright co-founded and co-edited The Medical Chronicle or Montreal Monthly Journal of Medicine & Surgery. He was Chair of Chemistry, Pharmacy and Materia Medica from 1854 to 1883, making him the first Black faculty at the college. This same unit, under the name Pharmacology & Therapeutics, was led by Jamaica-born Dr. Kenneth I. Melville between 1953 and 1967.

McGill College’s precarious finances improved dramatically after 1860 with a large loan from the Province of Canada, drawn from trust funds kept on behalf of certain Indigenous Peoples, and the gener-
osity of private benefactors. Among the most generous donors were Peter and Grace Redpath who provided family money earned in part through refining sugar grown and harvested by Afro-Cuban enslaved people. Probably the important private benefactors until the 1890s,
they financed a magnificent library, museum, and made generous contributions to the university’s endowment. This money developed McGill into a leading international educational institution.

**Caribbean Connection**

With the exception of Wright, Black students before the First World War came exclusively from the West Indies or the United States. This remained generally the case until the 1970s. To the present day, significant historic Black Canadian communities concentrated in the Maritimes and Southern Ontario have been excluded from McGill by racism and its related poverty and social marginalization. After 1900, an important but small Black community developed in Montreal, primarily associated with the families of railway sleeping car porters, one of the few jobs available to Black men. Until the 1960s, when immigration laws aimed at excluding non-white people changed, the local Black population remained small. In 1961, Montreal had an estimated 7,000 Black residents in a city of over 1.2 million.

In this local and national context, the British Empire provided the source of almost all Black students. The colonial connection between the British Caribbean and Canada opened doors, at least temporarily, with the expectation that after graduation, usually in medicine or agriculture, Black students would return home. In 1912, according to the Barbados’ *Official Gazette* an estimated 20 percent of its registered physicians had studied at McGill. McGill University records no student information by race. Voluntary surveys and self-identification options did not appear until around 2010. For what follows in this booklet, the identification of individuals depends on scholarship, self-identification, and the remarkably imperfect, subjective, and problematic strategy of identifying individual graduating students in old yearbooks. Photography, calibrated for taking the photos of the majority white population, made some light-skinned Black students very difficult to identify. We also need to acknowledge economically marginal students may have been less likely to have formal graduation photos, and not all students at McGill graduated. It is easy to ignore the presence of Black students if you are not paying attention.
But Black students there were. Among these was Ernest Melville Dupporte (1891-1981) who arrived from Nevis in 1910 and stayed. Dupporte was the first Macdonald College zoology graduate to obtain a MSc in 1914, followed by a PhD in 1921. In 1915, he began teaching duties and retired in 1957 as Head of the Entomology Department. He was central to the establishment of McGill’s Institute of Parasitology in 1932.

Black students at McGill enlisted in the Canadian military during the First World War with very different experiences. Medical student Charles Lightfoot Roman (1889-1961) – probably the third Canadian-born Black student to graduate from McGill and the grandson of fugitive slaves who came to Ontario through the Underground Railway, was able to enlist with the Canadian General Hospital No. 3 (McGill) in 1915. In contrast, Jamaican-born brothers George Alberga (Science’15) and Albert Alberga, (Science’16), both graduates in civil engineering, were segregated in the 2nd Construction Battalion.

On rare occasions, internationally prominent Black intellectuals passed through McGill and received attention. When African-American leader Booker T. Washington addressed a crowd at Montreal’s St. James Methodist Church in February 1907, there was “a tremendous gathering of students and a most memorable piece of oratory.”7 Thirty years later in February 1938, the McGill Cosmopolitan Club hosted American poet Langston Hughes who spoke at the Student Union in his first public event after returning from Spain. In 1944, the McGill Sociology Club hosted Professor Alain LeRoy Locke, head of the Department of Philosophy at Howard University, the first African-American Rhodes scholar, and an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance.8

Sociology student Wilfred Israel, writing in the 1920s, noted an increase in the number of Black students from the West Indies again after 1917 in spite of enrollment caps in the medical school.9 Although often hidden from the mainstream press, evidence of the growth of a Black West Indies population appears in new university-based Black institutions. In 1923 the first international chapter of the Omega Psi Phi fraternity (the first predominantly African-American fraternity)
was established at McGill. Duporte was one of the original thirteen members and medical student Charles Drew joined the fraternity when he arrived in 1928.\textsuperscript{10} Omega Psi Phi was never mentioned in the student newspaper, the \textit{McGill Daily}, nor did it ever appear among the many fraternities listed in McGill’s annual yearbook. At some point in the 1930s, Omega Psi Phi became inactive and the chapter relocated to Michigan State University. McGill’s cricket team was likely composed at least partly of Afro West Indian students (McGill also attracted West Indian students who were of European, South, and East Asian descent). Next to his photo in the 1925 yearbook, graduate Charles H. Este drew attention to his participation in the Dunbar Debating Society. This society, named for African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), never appeared in McGill media but may have been linked to the community-based Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) as Marcus Garvey’s ideas around Black race pride and self-sufficiency were very popular in the city.\textsuperscript{11} Both Black international McGill students and Kenneth I. Melville, who was appointed as a Lecturer in Pharmacology in 1930-31 and Assistant Professor three years later, supported the UNIA. As a medical student at McGill, Melville graduated at the top of his class in 1926 and was awarded the Holmes Gold Medal. Beyond his academic career and clinical practise, Melville was active in the Montreal Black community. In 1940, he chaired the fundraising committee of \textit{Christie v York} – a landmark but unsuccessful legal case about the right to be served in public regardless of race - taken to the Supreme Court of Canada.\textsuperscript{12} Melville continued his activism into the postwar period. In 1960, he was among eight physicians arrested in Atlantic City after being refused service as a result of race.\textsuperscript{13} The links between Marcus Garvey and McGill continued after the Second World War when Garvey’s youngest son Julius Garvey graduated with a BSc 1957 and MD in 1961.\textsuperscript{14}

Values around race pride, education, and justice found a ready audience among Black immigrants from the United States and the West Indies who were recruited to Montreal to work in the racially segregated occupation of railway porter. Charles H. Este was recruited by the CPR in Antigua but entered McGill’s Congregational College
as a divinity student in 1918 and graduated in 1925. The Rev. Este became associated with Montreal’s Black church in 1921 as a student minister. After graduation, he was engaged as full-time minister and negotiated the creation of Union United Church. He remained there until his retirement in 1968 and, along with congregational members, founded the Negro Community Centre in 1927.

Historian Robin Winks reports that McGill applied racial restrictions in the 1920s, 1930s and again after the Second World War. Certainly, the number of Black students on campus in the 1920s was small. Ida Greaves in her 1930 sociology thesis estimates the number to be only six or seven in medicine any given year. In September 1916, a group of West Indian medical students organized into the Gamma Medical League to petition the McGill Board of Governors for greater access as the McGill medical registrar had referred to a “quota” of eight or ten Black students when the Montreal Maternity Hospital excluded Black students from obstetrical training there. After eight months of no action, the students published letters in the most prominent West Indian newspapers, creating the strong public association between McGill and discrimination. In the 1920s, the Bahamas Legislature voted to remove McGill from the institutions where its government scholarships were tenable, and specifically wrote to the university to inquire if Black students were excluded. During a 1930 visit to Trinidad, Quebec former politician and newspaper publisher Henri Bourassa fielded questions about an unnamed Canadian University – not Laval or Université de Montréal and assumed to be McGill – that excluded Black students. The small number of elite Black students accepted at McGill were notified about arrangements to complete their clinical work at a “Negro hospital” in the United States if a local Montreal hospital objected to their presence. In particular, there was an arrangement between the McGill Faculty of Medicine and Howard University. In at least one case, the local UNIA financially supported a McGill medical student to do his internship at the newly opened African-American Homer G. Phillips Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri. No Black medical students interned at the Royal Victoria Hospital from the early 1930s until 1947. The attitude of local hospitals provided the university with
a justification for limiting the number of Black students entering the faculty and refusing admission in some years. When Trinidad-born Elrie Clifford Tucker (BSc’57 MD’61) joined the obstetrics staff at the Royal Victoria Hospital in 1967, he dismantled the long-lasting racial barrier in the field of women’s health.

These limits did not keep out all exceptional students. Despite obvious racial discrimination, McGill may have offered more opportunities for Black students than many American institutions. Two of McGill’s most famous Black graduates attended the medical school in 1930s. Charles Drew, an African-American, graduated with a medical degree and master of surgery and would go on to teach at Howard University revolutionizing the storage and preservation of blood. Guyana-born “Phil” Edwards arrived at McGill in 1931 via the United States and graduated in 1936. He served in the Canadian army during the Second World War, returning to McGill to do graduate work in tropical diseases where he became “the” specialist. Edwards taught in the medical school and worked at Queen Mary Veterans Hospital and in the Parasitology Department at the Royal Victoria Hospital until his early death in 1970. Notwithstanding a successful medical career, Edwards’ considerable fame came as an athlete. Winning five bronze medals between 1928 and 1936, he remained Canada’s most medalled Olympian until 2002. At the infamous 1936 Berlin Olympics, Edwards was captain of the Canadian Track and Field team.

Graduate-level chemistry attracted African-American W. Lincoln Hawkins who completed his PhD in 1939. In his professional career at AT&T’s Bell Laboratories, Hawkins developed a long lasting, safe, and economical polymer cable sheath still used in fibre optic cable. He received the National Medal of Technology. In 1937, the Faculty of Law graduated Theodore Owusu Asare, who already held a MA (UMass-Amherst) and LLB (Michigan). After Ghanaian independence in 1957, he became Ghana’s first ambassador to Germany.

These students noted above were not only predominantly non-Canadian but also male. The few Canadian-born Black students to attend McGill before the 1960s were almost exclusively the male children of 10
Caribbean immigrants. Canadian-born women with Caribbean connections were more exceptional. Somehow Regina Victoria Reid of Baltimore graduated in 1921 from Royal Victoria College, but it was not until the 1930s that Juanita Corinne DeShield (later Chambers) arrived on campus. 27 DeShield (1913-2007) was born in Montreal of Bajan descended American-born parents. Her father, like many Black men, was employed as a railway porter. Her mother and maternal uncle were leaders in the local Black community. Although she had been repeatedly told she could only be a domestic, she graduated top of her class in 1936 with a BA Honours in French, earned an MA and PhD in psychology at the Université de Montréal and eventually taught at the University of Alberta.28 While at McGill, she published fiction in an African-American journal and was a prominent and suc-

Juanita DeShield (left) was a member of the Women’s Intercollegiate Debating Union, Old McGill 1935.
cessful member of the women’s debating society.

Ivy Lawrence (later Mayier, 1921-1999) was born in Canada of Trinidadian parents. She graduated with a BA in 1942 having been class treasurer and involved in the Société Française, the Debating Union, the Women’s Debating Society, the Cosmopolitan club, and the British West Indies Club. Lawrence also had the distinction of being the first woman ever to receive the McGill Debating Union’s top prize. When she graduated, no local Black student had ever been admitted to McGill Law and the University of Toronto offered her a scholarship. She became the first woman of colour to graduate from that program. Lawrence was called to the bar in England in 1947, worked for the United States Information Service in Paris, and eventually taught at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica.

About this time, several Black women can be identified at the McGill Music Conservatory. Celebrated musician and piano teacher Daisy Peterson (later Sweeney, 1920-2017), whose parents immigrated from St. Kitts and found work in Montreal as railway porter and domestic, worked herself as a domestic to pay her fees for her McGill music diploma.

With a rare exception, before the Second World War, Black women from outside Montreal could not attend the university. They were barred from Royal Victoria College and the women’s residence at Macdonald campus, where all female undergraduates who were not at home were required to live. Both women’s residences inquired into the background of all women coming from the West Indies and, according to the College Warden, “it was intimated that students showing signs of an admixture of colour were not admitted.” When a Black Ontario applicant nearly slipped through the colour bar, the RVC Warden was informed by private communication that the young woman was a “negro.” Her application was “negatived.” Thereafter, all applicants to Royal Victoria College had to submit a photograph. In 1932 American Margaret Walker MA’35 “evaded” requests for a photograph and managed to stay in RVC’s annex during the French Summer School while being refused meals in College. That October
when she unsuccessfully asserted her right to take up the previously promised accommodation, she was dismissed as “aggressive and impertinent.”

By the 1950s, RVC accepted Black students, but white students refused to share double rooms with them. When Rosemary Wedderburn (later Brown, 1930-2003) arrived at Royal Victoria College in 1950 from Jamaica, she experienced shock at the polite racism she met there. At Royal Victoria College, she was “ghosted” save for two or three white friends and another Black student. Upper-year West Indian students explained that it was not personal. It was an established strategy to apply for the less expensive double residence rooms with the confidence that no white student would be willing to share a room and that the university would offer a single room at the reduced price.

McGill did not open residences for men until after the Second World War and off campus accommodation for male Black students was hard to find through the 1960s. Scholar Wilfred Israel noted that in the 1920s Black students found rooms in the St. Antoine District, adjacent to the railway stations, where many Black Montreal families also found housing and employment. This had not changed much in thirty years and Wedderburn remembered in the 1950s that, apart from a six-block circle around McGill, Black students still could only find accommodation in St. Antoine. Employment, freedom of mobility and even safety for Black students were issues. Part-time or summer work was almost impossible to get. Many Black West Indian students travelled to the United States in the summer for work. Moreover, Black international students were vulnerable to the racism of immigration officers, and they had to learn to navigate a city which did not hang explicit signs forbidding entry or service to Black customers but had very clear informal rules.

Reminiscing about her McGill student days, Wedderburn, the first Black woman to be elected to a Canadian provincial legislature, remembered “that on the surface my life was no different from that of other students. Study and party, party and study – deadlines, panic,
fun, anxiety, relief, graduation. Yet in those years I changed in profound and basic ways – for I was never the same after my encounter with racial discrimination, Canadian-style. With the passage of time, the hate faded and disappeared. But I never lost the rage at the injustice, stupidity and blind cruelty of prejudice.”

Sometimes racism was less polite. In December 1915 Simpson Leaman, a “coloured student in medicine” was beaten up by “Roughs” in Point St. Charles. It could also be odious within McGill majority student culture. On the introductory page to the fraternity section of the 1929 yearbook, Old McGill published a cartoon of a Black man, prepared to be tarred, feathered, and lynched.

**Postwar Issues**

Accommodation remained an issue in the 1960s as McGill housing continued to permit landlords registering with its housing office to state racial preference of tenants. Even after Quebec laws intended to prohibit housing discrimination were introduced in 1963, McGill fraternities – which played an important role in housing male students – continued to face accusations of discrimination.

The number of Black students increased significantly during the Second World War as difficult wartime conditions encouraged students from the West Indies to transfer from British universities. McGill opened its doors a bit wider just as its own male wartime enrolment dropped. West Indians, coming from a range of different racial backgrounds, remained the largest group of international students at McGill throughout the 1950s. In 1949, *Time* magazine estimated that there were 150 “Negroes” among an overall student population of 8,500.

Most of the Black students, including those who would play an important role in postwar newly independent Caribbean governments, continued to be international students. William Randolph Douglas immigrated to Montreal as a child and graduated with a BA in 1942. He held a leadership role in the International Labour Organisation and became Barbados’ first independent chief justice in 1966, remain-
ing in this position for twenty years. But there were also some rare students from historic Black Canadian communities such as Stanley Clyke (1907-1970). Clyke held a BA from Acadia University when, as the new Director of the Montreal Negro Community Centre, he began a Master of Social Work at McGill in 1949. His wife, Emily Davis Clyke (1913-2018), also from an African-Nova Scotian family (and sister of human rights activist Viola Desmond), earned the same degree in 1960. Both Clykes supervised social work student placements for the McGill social work program.

Where Black students came from and the faculties in which they were enrolled expanded in the postwar years. At least two Black veterans had access to McGill. Frederick Philips used his veterans’ benefits to gain a high school equivalency and in 1956 became the first Black Social Work Graduates, *Old McGill* 1951. Owen Rowe (centre back)
The Caribbean Chorus was an offspring of the McGill West Indian Society and was composed of both McGill and Sir George Williams students. Folkways (Smithsonian) released this album in 1957 and it is still available. https://folkways.si.edu/bwi-british-west-indies-songs/caribbean-world/music/album/smithsonian

graduate in almost twenty years of McGill’s Faculty of Law. He would be the first Black person to be admitted to Quebec’s bar. Owen Rowe emigrated from Barbados in 1942 to join the Canadian Army and transferred to the air force. He graduated from McGill in 1951 with a Bachelor of Social Work and in 1955 with his MSW. Upon graduation and until 1960, he was employed as the British Caribbean Student Liaison Officer in the city’s West Indies Commission.

Black students were also coming to McGill from beyond the Caribbean. In the early 1950s the number of male students from Nigeria
and Ghana increased, and in 1957, a cohort of six Ethiopians graduated from the Faculty of Law. African women began entering nursing in the early 1960s. In 1966, there were graduates from Ghana and Nigeria.

**Organization and Activism**

In October 1940, a group of thirty McGill West Indian students, led by Joseph Saltibus established the West Indian Society for the purpose of improving “the status of British West Indians at McGill.” This society provided social activities, West Indian political discussion, and pragmatic activities related to the adjustment of living in Montreal. Rosemary Wedderburn Brown had been warned before coming to Canada in 1950 to stay away from this group, as it was a “hotbed of communism.” In her experience, the group was much more focused on the politics of decolonization. The West Indian Society was the most important association for all Black students on campus. Certainly its membership included the Canadian sons and daughters of Caribbean immigrants and African Americans who may have had no connection to the West Indies. The Society was large and visible on campus. One of its offshoots was the Caribbean Chorus of McGill University and Sir George Williams College, which in 1957 released “Songs from the British West Indies” with Folkways Records. In the fall of 1951, a second Black organization was founded on campus, the McGill African Students’ Association. By 1961, there was a Nigerian Association, by 1970 a Ghanaian Students’ Society, and by 1972 a Cameroon Students’ Association. The increased number of Black students on campus and their organizations made them more visible to the majority student population.

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From 1948 to the late 1960s, one of the high points of the student life calendar was the Winter Carnival, the culmination of which was the coronation of the Winter Carnival queen voted upon by all McGill students. In February 1949 McGill made international news when it crowned Beryl Dash-Dickinson (later Rapier) queen. The *Black Worker* proudly reported, “She won over four other charming contestants, all white, who immediately became princesses and attend-
Montrealer Dash-Dickinson was the daughter of Trinidad immigrants. Her father was Secretary-Treasurer of Montreal Division of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and her mother was very active in the Black community. Her victory was not only remarkable because of her race, but also her class background. At the time of her coronation, the McGill student press said nothing about either.
Almost ten years later **Rae Tucker**, BA’59 MSW ’74 (later Tucker Rambally), a Black international student and former schoolteacher from Trinidad repeated this accomplishment. After her coronation, when she was asked if her successful election “show[ed] broadmindedness.” Tucker was not explicit about McGill’s racism, but noted she had not been asked to join any sororities. When pushed further and asked if she thought “the McGill campus [was] really as cosmopolitan as it keeps telling itself,” she replied that “the over-all atmosphere [was] cosmopolitan. But when you [got] right down to it, there [were] still areas of discrimination.”

Indeed! Tucker would go on to a forty-year career as a professional social worker in England, Barbados, and Montreal.

In 1957-58, the same winter Tucker was crowned Winter Carnival Queen, the editor of the *McGill Daily* was also a Black Trinidadian. **Neville Linton** (BCom’ 58) was the only Black McGill student ever to head one of the main student newspapers. It has not been repeated in sixty years. Linton who, only four years later would get his first academic appointment in Political Science at University of Alberta, was another of these exceptional and ambitious students McGill was fortunate to attract.

McGill’s self-congratulatory tone and claims of being a “cosmopolitan” campus fit within a postwar Montreal context. Montreal’s professional baseball team pioneered racial integration in 1946 with African-American baseball star Jackie Robinson, another truly exceptional individual. But it was also the same postwar city where talented Black graduates could not get decent employment, be served in many restaurants or taverns, or get public accommodation. An editorial by a white McGill student in 1956 acknowledged that racism obstructed employment opportunities in Montreal but insisted that McGill students still had the right to condemn racism at southern American universities. Said the editorial “our hands are not perfectly clean but seven years ago, a Negro co-ed, the daughter of a railway porter, was named Queen of the Winter Carnival, Queen of McGill University.”
In the 1960s, this superficial, self-image of “cosmopolitan” McGill would be shattered by the rise of Black politics and Black consciousness.

Current events both in the United States and South Africa had an impact on campus. The *McGill Daily* covered stories of southern Black students, and in 1956 McGill students voted to support a scholarship for an African American woman banned from an Alabama campus. The US Civil Rights movement received regular coverage, but so did South Africa. Historian Paul Hébert reminds us that in the 1950s and 1960s, McGill’s African students were deeply invested in all debates concerning decolonized Africa, especially those debates related to the future of South Africa, Rhodesia and Congo. The South Africa Committee founded in 1965 was affiliated with the main students’ society. After 1968, it had the strong support of Professor John Shingler, a white South African and former president of the National Union of
South African Students who had joined the political science department. In 1985, after a student-led campaign, McGill became the first Canadian university to announce it would divest in companies with ties to Apartheid South Africa.\textsuperscript{53}

Black consciousness movements expanded in the late 1960s and early 1970s as students organized around a “Black” identity, establishing the political landscape that continues to this day.\textsuperscript{54} Historians such as David Austin, Paul Hébert and Sean Mills have argued convincingly that in the 1960s Montreal was a major international centre of Black thought.\textsuperscript{55} In 1965, the West Indian Student Society helped organize the Montreal Conference, which laid the foundation for the McGill Congress of Black Writers in October 1968. This, in the words of historian David Austin was a “public display of Black politics.”\textsuperscript{56} Co-chaired by Roosevelt “Rosie” Douglas (1941-2000) a Dominican McGill graduate student in political science, and Elder Thébeaud, a McGill postgrad in psychiatry, the event attracted leading Black activists and intellectuals including Stokely Carmichael, and historians C.L.R. James and Walter Rodney.

In February 1969, on the heels of the Congress of Black Writers and its visible display of Black Power, came the “Sir George Williams Affair,” in which students occupied what is now Concordia University’s computer facilities to protest the way in which that university had handled charges of racism against a faculty member. The occupation lasted for ten days and ended when police brutally stormed the facility arresting 97 students, 42 of them Black. They included three Black McGill students – Anne Cools (BA’81) a native of Barbados, Roosevelt “Rosie” Douglas (1941-2000) and Montreal-born Brenda Dash. All three were found guilty. Cools and Douglas were sentenced to terms of six months and two years and fines of $1,500 and $5,000, respectively, and Dash, a $2,000 fine. After an important career in social work, Cools became the first Black woman appointed to the Canadian Senate. Douglas received a deportation order shortly after his release and left for Jamaica. Eventually, he became Dominica’s fourth prime minister. In the aftermath of the “Affair,” Dash – the sister of the 1949 Carnival Queen – played a leading role in Montreal Black politics as a Black nationalist and one of the rare visible women leaders in the movement.\textsuperscript{57}

students at McGill. After students had been successful in getting the university to establish a meagrely-resourced African Studies major – the first in Canada - starting in 1969, they immediately began pushing for a Black Studies program.58 A group of students and staff successfully lobbied the McGill Senate to establish a Subcommittee on Black Studies in March 1970. The Dean of Arts immediately dampened expectations by noting that parts of Black Studies were covered in the new African Studies program. In a timeless strategy of pitting demands against each other, the Dean noted that “Some people at McGill believe that a Canadian Affairs Program studying Indian, Eskimo and Métis affairs would be more relevant to McGill than a Black Studies Program.” The Subcommittee was to establish which was to be a university priority. The answer seems to have been neither.59

The same year, McGill had acknowledged that there were only fifteen Canadian-born Black students registered in the entire university, a remarkably small number on a campus of 16,317 students. Nearby Sir George Williams, with its more flexible course offerings and admission policies, had become a more viable option for the local Black community. McGill Black students pushed for greater access for local students and lobbied for necessary resources.60 “Across the Halls” was a summer remedial program initiated by McGill Black students aimed at preparing local Black high school students for entry to the university. Fourteen of the 60 students who completed the program registered that fall. An additional six had been accepted but could not afford fees. This program’s most enduring legacy was the creation of the Quebec Board of Black Educators.

In September 1970, the Black Students Association formed. Its “chairman” Sally Cools declared “We’re being f*cked around left, right and center at McGill.” This criticism was directed at the “useless” existing associations for Black students. The new Black Students Association placed its emphasis on pragmatic actions such as tutorial and orientation programs for Black students, increasing the number of Black students on campus, and continuing to exert pressure for Black Studies.61

As happens after many periods of intense activism and extraordinary
visibility, in the early 1970s both the West Indian Student Society and
the Black Students Association disappeared. In 1972-73 there was a
Black Student Union on campus and the much less political Caribbean
Student Society had formed by 1974. By 1986, in addition to the “na-
tional” societies, which played a vital role in social lives, there was
the Black Students’ Network of McGill, which focused its political and
educational efforts on expanding African Studies offerings. The BSN
campaigned in 1991-92 for a Black history course to be taught by an
instructor of African descent. The 1990s efforts to expand African
Studies to Africana Studies, a field that would include the diaspora.
re-emerged in 2018. The particular issues and concerns of Black stu-
dents in the Law Faculty led to the establishment of the Black Law
Student Association in 1991.

The audible and visible presence of Black students on campus in-
creased with active participation in McGill radio and the McGill Daily
introducing a special Black History Month supplement beginning in
1986. Among those students involved in radio was Ottawa-born Adrian Harewood (BA'93) who hosted Soul Perspectives, a program on
Black Canadian issues, and Montreal-born Richard Iton. Iton gradu-
ated BA'83 and MA'87 in political science and is recognized as a ma-
ajor figure in African-American Studies producing influential works
from his position at Northwestern University before his early death in
2013. (Iton’s St. Vincent-born father, John Iton, also studied at Mc-
Gill (BA’62) and spent his career as a faculty member in the Econom-
ics Department.)

The difference in origins of the two Iton generations reflects a lar-
ger trend. With increased international student fees and thriving lo-
cal Caribbean institutions, Black students on campus are no longer predominantly West Indian. Black students from the Caribbean still
attend McGill. Barbados-born Alan Emtage (BSc’87 MSc’91) de-
veloped “Archie,” the world’s first pre-web internet search engine
while a master’s student in computer science. But, the presence of
Canadian-born men and women, such as Richard Iton, was an im-
potent departure from the past. Before the 1960s, Federal Canadian
immigration policy generally prevented non-white immigration. But
24
things were changing. About 3,500 Haitians, most with French-language skills arrived in Montreal in the 1960s. It was not until the 1970s that large-scale family-based Black immigration was possible. New immigrants first arrived from the Caribbean, then and after the 1990s, from English and French-speaking Africa. Today, more than 10 percent of Montreal is Black - a reality not reflected on campus.

**Staff and Faculty**

Black McGill staff played an important role in the life of the university. Rosemary Wedderburn Brown remembered Mike DeFreitas whom she described as an early West Indian immigrant who had retired from the railway to become Royal Victoria College’s senior custodian in the early 50s. DeFreitas was a “surrogate father” to Black West Indian women there. A 1958 Royal Victoria College yearbook photo shows “Our man Ken” who perhaps was a college porter. There were likely others. By the 1960s, McGill was hiring some Black clerical support staff. Rubie Napier was the formidable administrative assistant in History from 1963-1992. By the 1970s and 1980s, people of African descent could be found in many areas of administrative support such as student housing, food services, facilities management and development, and the library. One example is Anne Farray (1979- to present) previously Assistant to the Dean in the Faculty of Education, now Administrative Officer, Institute of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Arts.

Black faculty remained (and remain) rare, and it would be a mistake to imagine that the number has increased over time. In 1973, Barbados-born Glyne Piggott, a specialist in Ojibwemowin began an appointment in Linguistics, which lasted until his retirement in 2010. From 1982-86 he served as Associate Dean of Arts and was one of the first Black faculty member to have an administrative role beyond his department. Lorris Elliot (1931-1999) immigrated to Canada from Trinidad in the late 1950s and taught Caribbean literature in the Department of English from 1969 to 1990. American-born Harry Anderson taught drama from 1965 to 1988. In the same department Haitian-born Max Dorsinville held an active appointment between 1970 and 2006, contributing to Caribbean, postcolonial, and the French
Canada programs. With **John Iton** in Economics, today’s much larger Faculty of Arts cannot claim this number of Black faculty. Elsewhere in the university American-born **Carole Pigler Christensen** taught in the School of Social Work between 1970 and 1991 before leaving for the University of British Columbia. There she became the first Black person to be appointed Director of a school of social work in Canada. **Dorothy Thomas-Edding**, taught from 1974 to 2001, at the School of Physical and Occupational Therapy. She was originally from Jamaica, an early female president of the student’s West Indian Society, and a program graduate in 1964.

The hiring of Black faculty has not been a simple progressive line but a series of ebbs and flows. After 2000, the background of Black faculty members began to change when Canadian-born (rather than American or Caribbean-born) scholars such as **Adelle Blackett** (BCL/LLB McGill) in the Faculty of Law in 2000, followed by **Charmaine Nelson** (who resigned in 2020) in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies, and **David Theodore** (BSc, B.Arch., M.Arch McGill) Architecture, joined the university. A handful of new Black faculty can be found throughout the university, but numbers remain very low. The composition of faculty does not mirror the composition of its students nor does access of Black students to McGill which, while improving, does not reflect the general Canadian population. There is a reason why many Black students understand their position as marginal.

Today there is a vibrant Black Students’ Network and a Black Alumni Association was created in 2016. In Spring 2019 these two organizations, together with the Joint Board Senate Committee on Equity and the Subcommittee on Racialized the Ethnic Persons hosted a **Black Grad** for graduating students.

As the University prepares to mark its 200th anniversary, it is important to remember that Black people have been connected to McGill since the beginning. It is a history of exploitation, racism, and exclusion, but also a history of extremely talented students, staff, and faculty. Both community and individuals fought to change the University
and the greater society for the better. Moreover, Black individuals at McGill have been central to the university’s understanding itself as a cosmopolitan and international institution with strong local and national roots. Whether through now extinguished colonial connections, more recent pan African engagement or international recruitment, the pride the university takes in its global, outward facing engagement and connectedness can often be linked to McGill’s Black students, staff and faculty. McGill’s Black past must be claimed, recorded, and made visible. There are many more stories to uncover and be told.

Endnotes


5 Williams, *The Road to Now,* 46.

6 Juanita De Barros, “Imperial Connections and Caribbean Medicine, 1900-1938,” Lawrence Monnais, David Wright eds. *Doctors beyond Borders: The Transnational Migration of Physicians in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 24. It is impossible to know the racial composition of this group.

7 Daybook 1905-07, 17 February 1907, Susan Cameron Vaughan Fonds, MG 4014, MUA..

8 *Old McGill* 1944, p 222.


Bertley, “Role of the Black Community,” 17,


Winks, Blacks in Canada, 387; Winks and Jaunita De Barros in “Imperial Connections,” suggests that like Queen’s University, the McGill Medical Faculty instituted a complete ban on the entry of Black students. This was never the case (p 24).


Old McGill 1921, p 155.


https://www.law.utoronto.ca/alumni/giving-0/gifts-have-made-difference/ivy-maynier-bursary

31 Susan E Vaughan to Arthur Currie, 7 October 1932, Arthur Currie Fonds RG 2 c 65, file 1206, MUA,
33 Brown, Being Brown, 30.
34 Brown, Being Brown, 33.
35 McGill Daily, 8 December 1915.
38 “Winter Queen,” Time, 28 February 1949.
40 Anthony Morgan, “McGill’s first black law grad – and Quebec’s first black lawyer,” Law Focus Online spring 2010 The claims of being the “First” are not true as Theodore Owusu Asare had graduated in 1937.
41 Dawn P. Williams, Who’s Who in Black Canada: Black Success and Black Excellence in Canada, A Contemporary Directory (Toronto: DP Williams, 2002), 316
43 Brown, Being Brown, 34. The society, like the West Indies, was also composed of South Asian and West Asian students.
44 https://folkways-media.si.edu/liner_notes/folkways/FW08809.pdf
49 Burke Doran, “Rae Tucker Interviewed: Cites Broadmindedness in Election as A


56 Austin, *Fear of a Black Nation*, 126.


58 Williams, *Road to Now*, 123.


67 Hampton, “Racialize Social Relations,” 175.