

# AFRICVILLE

A SPIRIT THAT LIVES ON

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Ruth Johnson *Church Scene, Africville* 1949

# Preface

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Every July, hundreds of former Africville residents and their children come from all parts of Canada and the United States to the Africville Reunion on the shores of Bedford Basin, the site of Africville. They come to get re-acquainted, to reminisce, to re-establish themselves as a community. While the place called Africville no longer exists, its spirit continues in the unity of Africville people.

*Africville: A Spirit that Lives On* is the result of a collaboration of the Art Gallery, Mount Saint Vincent University; the Africville Genealogy Society; the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia and the National Film Board, Atlantic Centre. Funded by grants from the Museums Assistance Programs of the Federal Department of Communications, with assistance from the Nova Scotia Department of Tourism and Culture, the exhibition marks the first time that those who lived in Africville can share with a wider community their memories and concerns.

Opening at the Art Gallery, Mount Saint Vincent University, in October 1989, the exhibition tours nationally from July 1990 to December 1992, after which it will return to Nova Scotia and be on

permanent display at the Black Cultural Centre in Westphal, Dartmouth.

The exhibition uses the past as a message for the future. The artifacts, contemporary and historical audiovisual material, photographs, memorabilia and documentation — much of it, such as Ruth Johnson's powerful linocuts of 40 years ago, only recently come to light — show the human drama of a beleaguered community which made a richly varied and self-sufficient life for itself.

In the 1950s and 1960s, two otherwise disparate movements — civil rights and city planning — embraced the "urban renewal" which brought about Africville's demise. The policy of relocation, formulated with virtually no participation from Africville residents, stands as a caution to other communities. The experience helped shape the response in neighbouring Dartmouth, as black residents faced with the prospect of similar development schemes, affirmed: "There'll be no more Africvilles!"

At the 1988 Africville Reunion, Reverend Donald Skeir, a former Africville pastor, urged, "Residents, descendants of Africville, lift your heads high. Don't be

ashamed from whence you have come. When people ask you where you were born and where were your forefathers, tell them: We were born in Africville! We are proud of Africville!" Through their collaboration in this exhibition, the former residents of Africville can surely tell all of us.

Is there a lesson to be learned from the experience of this community, which, though physically destroyed in the 1960s, is spiritually alive to-day? The people of Africville show us that once it is achieved, community endures to enrich succeeding generations and all who witness its spirit.

Africville Exhibition Steering Committee:  
Irvine Carvery, Africville Genealogy Society  
Dr. Bridglal Pachai and Henry Bishop, Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia  
Shelagh Mackenzie, the National Film Board, Atlantic Centre  
Mary Sparling, Art Gallery, Mount Saint Vincent University

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# Acknowledgements

There are many to thank for this coming together, for this exhibition which grows and grows: Shelagh Mackenzie for the initial idea which grew out of our working together on the exhibition *A Black Community Album*; the people of Africville for sharing their precious material and memories; the Museums Assistance Programs of the Department of Communication for the generous funding which enabled us to undertake an exhibition of this scale and its subsequent national tour.

Nova Scotia's Department of Tourism and Culture financed the poster. The Department of Education is generously supporting our production of a future comprehensive book. Two public collections of photographs of incalculable importance were available to us: the Public Archives of Nova Scotia gave us the rights to use the Bob Brooks Collection and the National Archives of Canada did the same for its Ted Grant Collection. The Halifax Herald was equally generous with its archives.

Our Advisory Committee, which collectively and individually supported our steering committee in a variety of ways, consisted of Ruth Johnson, President of the Black Cultural Society (and the artist who created the linocuts 40 years ago); Stanley Carvery, former President of the Africville Genealogy Society;

Gerald Clarke of the Black Educators Association; Sylvia Hamilton, Assistant Regional Director, Secretary of State; and Professor Donald Clairmont, Professor of Sociology, Dalhousie University. Dr. Clairmont also made significant contributions from his archives for the book *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community*.

Stephen Archibald, Scott Robson and Sheila Stevenson of the Nova Scotia Museum Complex were unstinting in their help and advice. Bernard Hart and Glenda Redden, of the Department of Education helped us in our exploration of the possibilities of a future publication.

Rhonda Crawford and Dwane Provo were the two field workers who gathered our first interviews and lists of materials. Rhonda remained with the project as co-ordinator and registrar of the continuing documentation. Donna James photographed and Chuck Clark taped interviews with Africville residents. Earl Conrad designed the catalogue and poster, and Stephen Osler designed the exhibition. This bald listing of "the hired help" conveys nothing of the spirit and dedication which they all brought to their tasks.

*Africville is a spirit that lives on.*

Mary Sparling

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you to *Africville: A Spirit That Lives On*. I hope that after you have experienced it that you come away with an appreciation for the true Africville, dispelling the images created in the 1960s.

The people of Africville would like to express their heartfelt thanks to Mary Sparling, Mount Saint Vincent University; Shelagh Mackenzie, National Film Board; Dr. Bridglal Pachai and Henry Bishop, Black Cultural Centre; Charles Saunders, writer of the catalogue essay and all of those other folks who have worked so hard to make this exhibit possible.

Irvine Carvery, President  
Africville Genealogy Society

# Africville: From the Outside In

## Introduction

I'm not from Africville. In fact, I'm not even a Nova Scotian by birth, although I have become one by choice. Given that background, you can well imagine the difficulties involved in the task the Africville Exhibition Steering Committee set before me: to tell the story of Africville from the viewpoint of the people who lived there.

It didn't take long for me to realize that I wouldn't be the one who was telling the story. The story wouldn't be told by me. It would be told through me, by the people of Africville themselves.

As I listened to taped interviews, read articles and books, and talked with former Africville residents, I was struck by the vividness, clarity, and passion of their

memories. Sometimes, I felt as though I were actually there with them in Africville, sharing their experiences as they happened. People, places, and events — all of the elements of life in the community formed definite pictures in my mind as I listened to Africville's voices.

But there was still one stumbling block. Which voice would finally commit the story to paper — mine, or Africville's? With my own voice, I have written novels, screenplays, and other creative works. Yet as I wrestled with the demons that beset all writers, I came to realize that my voice was not the right one for this project. My task wasn't to *create*. It was to *re-create* — to enable the reader to share the experience of Africville as Africvilleans understood it.

The Africville Genealogy Society provided the final nudge I needed. Names, places, and stories, they told

me. That's where you'll find the true Africville.

Finally, I found the right voice. Or maybe it found me. It was as though all the voices I had listened to on tape and in interviews had combined into one. And that one voice decided to speak through me.

What an honour and a pleasure it has been to be the vehicle for that voice! It's always going to be with me, although I don't know if it will ever speak through me again.

And now, it's time to step aside and allow that voice to speak to you. Turn the page . . . Africville is waiting to greet you.

Charles R. Saunders  
August 1989



# A Visit to Africville

Summer, 1959

We start at the end of Barrington Street. See where the pavement cuts off and the dirt road begins? That's the "Welcome to Africville" sign. We're still on Barrington Street, you understand. But it's also the old Campbell Road, and it's got a history that goes way, way back in time.

Just call it "The Road." Everybody around here'll know what you're talkin' about.

You can still catch a little whiff of the oil the City sprays to lay the dust. If you look over to your right, you can see the docks of Pier 9. Some of our people work as stevedores down there, and on other docks all over the waterfront. You've got a good view of Bedford Basin from up here. But wait till we get closer to the water. You'll really see something then.

Now we're crossing the first of the railroad tracks that pass through Africville. We call it The High Track, because of the way it slopes upward, like some kind of ski hill. But you ain't seen all the tracks yet. Farther down the road, we got a set of three. They slash through our community like a big pirate's sword. You don't think they had to tear down some houses to put those tracks in? No way to tell which side of *these* tracks is the right one or the wrong one — you know?

You better believe we learn about trains at a young age here. Trains are a big part of our lives. They can make some noise barrelin' through in the middle of the night! When they had steam locomotives, you used to be able to catch rides on the freight cars. Trains got a rhythm all their own. If you can catch the rhythm, you can catch the train.

We used to get coal that fell off the hoppers and the tender. In the wintertime, you need every piece of coal you can get to heat your house. No more of that, with

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"... railroad tracks ... they slash through our community like a big pirates sword."

Photo from the Bob Brooks Collection, courtesy of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia



"... we learn about trains at a young age here."

Photo courtesy of The Halifax Herald Limited

these growlin' diesel engines. Steam engines sounded friendly; these diesels sound like they want to kill you. And they go too doggone fast.

Can't complain too much about the trains, though. Plenty of our menfolk worked as Pullman porters. Travelled all over Canada and down in the States, they did. Kept those sleepin' cars cleaner than the Sheraton Hotel. They'd come home in their uniforms with the shiny brass buttons, and they'd be like heroes comin' back from a war. Best job a coloured man could get back in the old days. Not so bad now either, if you want to know the truth.

Water, tracks and bushes — that's all you can see right now. Kind of reminds you of the country, even though we're still in Halifax. But you want to see some houses, right? We've walked farther than Jesse Owens ever ran, and you're wonderin' when you're gonna get to see Africville.

Well, take a look up that hill past the tracks. See those houses up there, lookin' like raisins on a layer cake? That's the first part of Africville, if you're comin'

in from Barrington Street. We call it Big Town. Don't know why; it ain't even the biggest part of Africville.

You want to know who lives there? The Byers family, the Carters, the Flints, and the Browns. Pay attention to those names, now. You'll be hearin' them again as we go along. Some of our names have a history goin' back to before there ever was an Africville. The first family to settle here was named Brown.

You probably heard of Queenie Byers. She does some bootleggin'. But don't get the idea that everybody here is a bootlegger. It's just another way to get by, that's all. The way some people talk, you'd think Africville was the only place that's got bootleggers.

We do have our fun, though. All kinds of parties. Remember when the soldiers and sailors came back after World War II ended? It was one big party then! If you had a uniform on, you had it made in the shade.

Didn't need a phonograph to get a party goin'. Had plenty of musicians here just as good as what you hear on records. Boyisie Dixon could make a piano sing like

a bird in the sky. Archie Dixon played the saxophone and clarinet. We had guitar players, fiddlers, and drummers, too. Some folks even made their own instruments. Flutes carved from a tree branch, spoons, washboards — anything and everything! We had people who could sing some, too. You could get a whole concert goin' at the drop of a hat.

Why, we even had some of our people study at the Halifax Conservatory of Music. Ruth Johnson — her name was Brown then — went there. So did Jessie Kane. And Ida Mae Thomas went down to Chicago and ended up playin' the organ for the biggest coloured church in the city.

Now, everybody wants to be Little Richard. That's him on the radio now. They sure don't teach *that* kind of music at the Conservatory. You can have a good time to it, though. Yes, indeed.

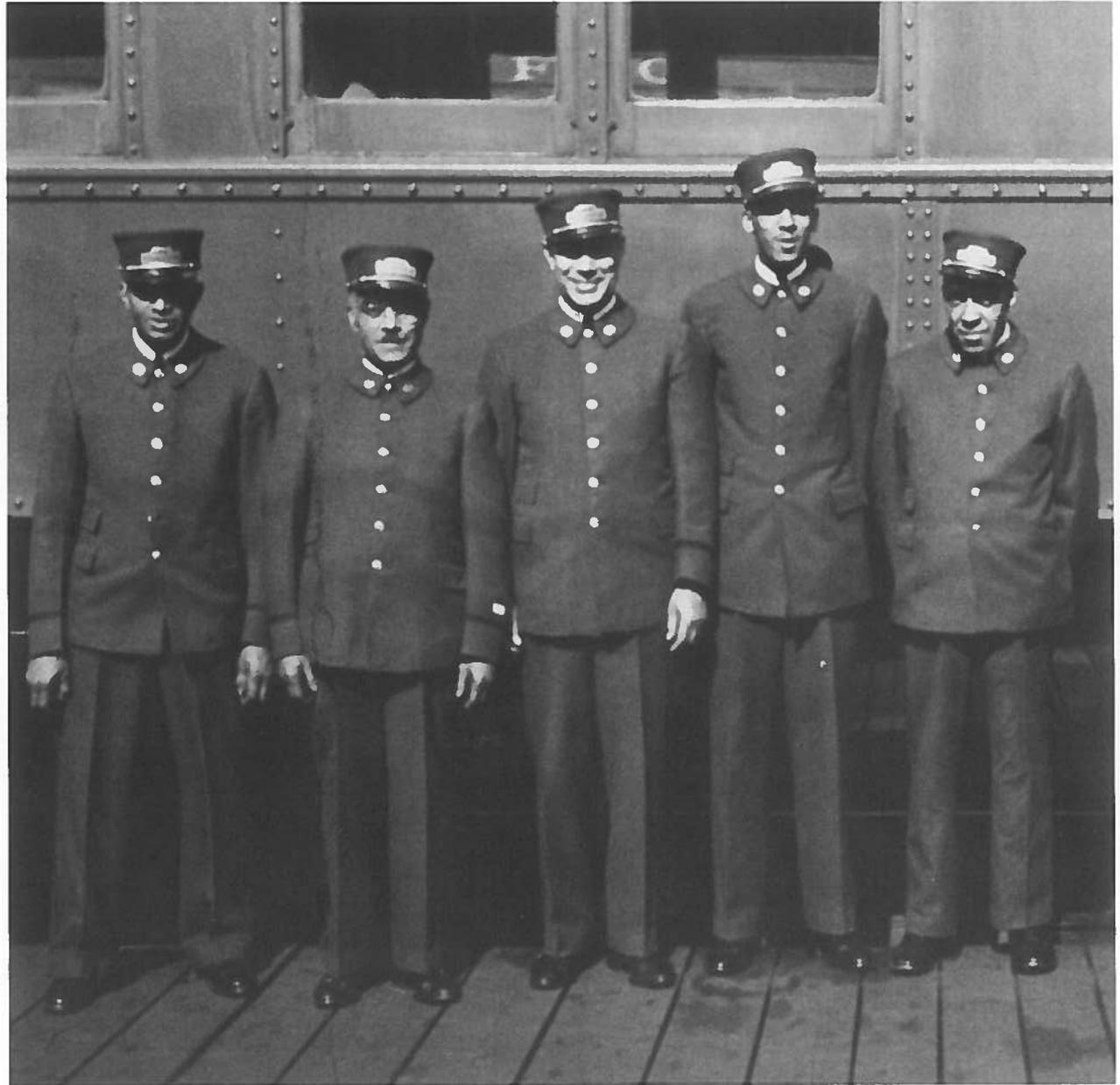
Maybe we'll pay a visit up to Big Town on our way back. Bound to be somethin' goin' on. For now, though, let's just keep goin' up The Road.

Look over toward the water. See the big field there? We call that Kildare's Field. It's a good place for picnics. It's also a good place to go swimmin'. Look at those kids divin' off that big rock out in the water. They've probably been there since sunrise. And they'll still be there when the sun goes down.

This field's got some history. Used to be a bone mill there. A lot of our people worked in it, makin' fertilizer. Then the mill shut down, and you can see what's left. Tell you somethin' else. Gypsies come to Kildare's Field every year. They pull up their wagons and stay for about a week or so, tellin' fortunes and all. Some Mamas try to keep their kids away by sayin' Gypsies steal children. But have you ever seen a black Gypsy? Think about it.

Maybe they only steal white folks' kids. Or maybe they don't steal kids at all, and it's just another story like the ones people make up about *us*.

You can see The Road slant downhill now. If you look up toward Big Town, you can't see the houses anymore. Those three tracks are almost like The High Track — up on a slope. This whole area's like a big scoop leading to the Basin.



“... Pullman Porters . . . they'd come home in their uniforms with the shiny brass buttons and they'd be like heroes comin' back from a war.” Left to right, in front of the train used for the 1939 Royal Tour: John Pannell, Tom MacDonald, Henry Lawrence, J. H. Franklin and George Dixon.

Photo courtesy of Ruth Johnson

And now that we're past Kildare's Field, we can see Joe and Retha Skinner's house. It's the first house you get to in Up The Road, or "Africville proper", or whatever you want to call it. You could say this is the "main part" of Africville, if you like to classify things.

Joe's out there bringin' up some water from his well. That's all the water we got here — wells. City says there's too much rock here to put in water lines. Don't make sense — we pay our taxes just like everybody else, but we had to petition the City for telephones and electricity. Ended up gettin' those things. But when we petition for water and sewers, all of a sudden the City goes deaf.

Hi, Joe. How you doin'? No, we're just passin' through right now. Maybe we'll drop by later.

We got to be careful about makin' too many commitments to go to people's houses. When you go to somebody's house in Africville, they're gonna offer you somethin' to eat. And you *know* better than to turn them down. We got to watch ourselves, or we'll be goin' out of here lookin' like prize pigs.

Speakin' of pigs, people out here used to raise 'em. For a long time, there was a slaughterhouse on our outskirts. Once the slaughterhouse shut down, there wasn't no more reason to keep pigs.

Out behind Joe's house you can see Tibby's Pond. It's a tidal pond — you know. When the tide's out, there's a land bridge between the pond and the Basin. When the tide's in, it's all just part of the Basin. It's called Tibby's Pond, because it's on Aunt Tibby Alcock's property.

Whose aunt is she? Well, everybody's. All the older folks here are Aunt or Uncle, Ma or Pa, whether they're related to you by blood or not. It's really like a big family out here. And you know what families are like — lovin' and fightin' all at the same time. Easy to get into; hard to get out of.

Tibby's Pond is where our fishin' boats tie up. All kinds of fishin' goin' on here. Cod, mackerel, halibut, haddock, pollock — we catch all those different fish, just like everybody else in the Maritimes. We get crabs, mussels, and lobsters, too. Imagine poor people eatin' so many lobsters they get sick of 'em! Of course, the

fishin' we do is what they call "non-commercial". All that means is, we eat what we catch.

Sometimes you can sell your fish down at the markets on the wharf. But some of the buyers start actin' peculiar when they find out who did the catchin'. God bless 'em.

Next door to Aunt Tibby's is Deacon Ralph Jones' house. His son's house is right beside it. A lot of people build their houses on their parents' property. Keeps the land in the family, deed or no deed.

You can't miss the end of Deacon Jones' lot. That huge tree we're passing is about the biggest property marker you'll ever see. We call it The Caterpillar Tree. That's the only kind of fruit it grows — caterpillars. There's a story behind that tree. A long time ago, Deacon Jones went out and got a post to mark off his land. Next thing he knew, that post was sproutin' leaves, and over the years it grew — and grew. Nobody knows why the caterpillars like it so much.

The Road's startin' to rise again now. See that ocean view? You couldn't buy a better view than that. When the wind's not blowin', the Basin looks like a big sheet of glass. Maybe that's why there's so many houses here. Go ahead, wave to the people; you're among friends.

There's more Browns on this part of the road. There's also Clarence Carvery's place, and Mrs. MacDonald's. Yeah, there's MacDonalds here. What you think, they're all in Cape Breton?

You're noticin' the different colours people paint their houses. Like flowers, right? Folks do what they want to with their houses. If you want to have a different-lookin' door or window, that's OK. Keeps things interestin'.

Down past the Browns' property you can see what we call Back The Field. It slopes down into a gully, then rises back up. That place where those two hills come together is where the kids from Up The Road swim. We play football on Back The Field, too. This is football without helmets or shoulder pads, where you just line up and bust into each other till your Momma calls you in for supper.

We're coming to another driveway now. The house that's closest to the road is Jack Carvery's. He deals in

scrap metal from the dump. Yeah, you've heard about the dump. We'll be comin' to it soon enough; don't hold your breath. Those other houses behind Jack's belong to Carverys, too. Uncle Dook's got a candy store on his first floor. His wife runs it. Then there's Uncle Phum and Aunt Polly's place.

Who knows where those nicknames come from? Childhood, most likely. Sometimes the nickname becomes the real name. Call somebody what it says on their birth certificate, and they'll look at you like you're crazy.

You're beginnin' to notice that Carvery is a pretty common name around here. So is Brown, Mantley, Howe, and Dixon. You got to be careful who you get involved with — it might be your cousin. Older folks know every root and branch on the family tree, though. They'll keep you out of trouble.

Here's Aunt Hattie Carvery's place. She runs our Post Office. Address a letter to Africville, Nova Scotia, and it'll get here, all right. No, Aunt Hattie. Don't want to see no mail today. Probably nothin' but bills.

Let's go down this other driveway. Bertha Mantley's house is right on The Road. Behind it, there's a small house that gets rented out to different people. And then there's Bully Carvery's place. Don't have to tell you how he got that name. He's a hard rock. You don't want to mess with him.

You say you want to keep goin'? OK, we'll head back to The Road. Didn't mean to make you nervous. There's Curley Vemb's house. That's his real name, all right. He's a Norwegian. Married an Africville girl and moved out here. Gets along just fine.

Now you're lookin' at a whole string of houses. They all got front yards to separate 'em. Sarah Byers and Edward Dixon live here. And there's Pooh Izzard's place. Pooh's a prizefighter. Trains up at the Creighton Street Gym. How you doin', Pooh? Good luck in your next fight.

Now we're passin' the homes of Bill Gannon, John Tolliver, and Bub Cassidy. And if you look over to the other side of the road, just where it starts to bend, you'll see the church. Seaview African United Baptist Church, to be exact.

Let's go over to the church and stop for a minute. Look at the way that white paint gleams in the sun. Look at the steeple standin' against the sky. Now, be perfectly quiet. Tune out the sounds of the kids and the cars and the dogs.

Listen close . . . can you hear it? Can you hear that sound, coming from the church? It's like a heartbeat . . . the heartbeat of Africville. This church is the living, breathing soul of our community. Long as this church is here, *we'll* be here.

We pretty well have to run the church ourselves. Ain't enough money here to pay a full-time minister. We get visitin' preachers from places like the Cornwallis Street Church in the City and Saint Thomas Church in North Preston. Old Reverend Wise used to walk all the way from Lake Loon to preach to us. We've had some of the best in our pulpit — Reverend White, Reverend Skeir, Reverend Oliver, and Reverend Coleman.

Now we got Reverend Byrant. On Sundays when he can't come out here, the deacons take over. And some of those deacons can really rock your soul once they get goin'.

And the singin'! You'd have to go a long, long way before you could find singin' like you get here. It's like the people put all their soul in their voices, then send it straight on up to God's ears.

But you know it takes more than singin' and preachin' to make a church. Church got to be more than just a place you get dressed up to go to every Sunday. Especially in a place like Africville, where we don't have our own mayor or city council or policemen. Church got to be all those things wrapped up in one. All kinds of business goes on in this church, and not just on Sunday. We got clubs, youth organizations, ladies' auxiliary, and Bible classes. You want to get somethin' done here, you get it done through the church.

Funny thing — not everybody 'round here goes to church on a regular basis. We got our share of sinners and backsliders: folks who only set foot there on Christmas and Easter, and others who don't set foot there at all and don't mind tellin' you so. But you know

what? Even those folks say this is "our" church. It belongs to everybody, whether they go or not.

You ought to come out here next Easter for Sunrise Service. That's the biggest day of the year in Africville. Folks from all over Nova Scotia come here to take part. Got to warn you, though. Be prepared to get up early. Service begins at five in the morning, soon as the sunlight starts to fillin' the Basin.

Yes indeed, folks take that day seriously. Most people spend the whole night gettin' their clothes ready and their kids washed. When you're young, you don't even sleep that night. You're wide awake when your Momma comes in to get you up while it's still dark outside.

By the time the preacher's ready to start his sermon, the church is full. You could be listenin' to Reverend Bryant or maybe somebody from farther away. We sing those old-time spirituals to the tune of organ and piano music. If you want to hold hands and sway to the music, that's OK. If you want to stand up and testify, nobody's stoppin' you. Everybody's got their own way to get close to the Lord and each other.

The worship goes on till about noon. Then it's time for the baptism. We do baptisms all year long, but there's something special about bein' baptized on Easter.

You can see the candidates dressed in their white baptismal robes. They might look a little nervous on the outside, but inside, they're strong. They'll line up behind the Reverend, and the rest of the congregation lines up behind them. Then the Reverend leads us all from the church down to the Basin. It's a long procession. Each step you take, you realize that your grandparents took it before you, and their grandparents took it before them.

Then we reach the shoreline. Men, women, and children, all lookin' wide-eyed with wonder at the beauty of the Basin. The singin' goes on; it doesn't stop even when the Reverend begins the baptisms. Don't need a choir. The whole congregation is the choir. Our voices lift up while the candidates get immersed in cold sea water. Salt water — just like the first baptism that was performed in the Sea of Galilee.

Then we go back to the church. The candidates are wet and happy. Everybody else is happy, too. Some of the people go back to church; others go home to celebrate in their own way. The young ones get to eat all the eggs they want. That's probably what they been thinkin' about all day, anyhow.

Still, some of the meaning of Sunrise Service rubs off on them. One day, they'll be the ones to go into the water. And they'll know this is a day when Africville shines.

Didn't mean to go on like that. But if you want to understand Africville, you got to know about the church. Then again, you heard the heartbeat. So you do understand. Let's keep goin'. There's more of Africville to see.

Right next to the church is the old school. They closed it down back in '52. We use it for recreation now. See the swings, still standin' in the playground?

It sure was a sad day when that school shut down, and our kids had to walk all the way up to Richmond School from primary on. When children come up from Africville, it's like there's a sign on their forehead saying "Auxiliary Class". You know what that is, don't you? That's where they put the "slow learners".

First thing you got to do at Richmond is prove you're not a "slow learner". Why? Well, once they get you in that Auxiliary Class, you can't get out. It's like bein' caught in a lobster trap. You might as well say your education's over right then and there.

Wasn't like that when we had our own school. Went all the way up to Grade Eight, it did. Only had one room, but that room was partitioned in two sections. One was for the lower grades; the other for the "big kids." Times bein' what they were, it was hard to stay in school. So many of us had to quit in order to help support our families. But if you could stick it out in that school, you got an education. You could go on to Queen Elizabeth High or Saint Pat's, and know you

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" . . . if you want to understand Africville, you got to know about the church."

Photo courtesy of the Halifax Police Department Museum





“The young ones get to eat all the eggs they want. That’s probably what they been thinkin’ about all day, anyhow.” Sunday School, Seaview African Baptist Church, Easter, 1961.

Photo courtesy of Ray and Evelyn Lawrence

could hold your own with the other kids.

There were some good teachers at that school. Everybody down here remembers old Mr. Jemmott. Could be even his wife didn’t know his first name; he was just “Mister Jemmott.” He was from the West Indies. That man taught for twenty-five straight years without missin’ a single day. His son, Gordon, ended up bein’ the principal, and Gordon was just as strict as his old man.

Those black teachers did us proud. John Brown was the first one. Then there were other Jemmotts: Clyde and Clarice. Teachin’ sure ran in that family. People

remember Laylia Grant and Verna Davis, too. And Portia White taught in our school for a while. Can’t that woman sing! But she could teach, too. No doubt about that.

Well, the school’s gone now. Can’t do nothin’ about it. Let’s keep goin’.

There’s our old friends the triple tracks. Remember how they were risin’ up? Well, now they’re level with us again. We’re gonna stop at this bend here. Take a look all around you. Right here is where you can see all of Africville — the whole layout.

Look back where we came from, and you can see

Big Town and Up The Road. Now, take a look in the other direction. See those houses peekin’ out from behind those woods? That’s Round The Bend, the third part of Africville. We’ll be goin’ there shortly. But there’s still more to see right here.

We’re gonna be delayed anyhow. Here comes a train. Lord, that noise is terrible! Sounds like an avalanche thunderin’ right past you.

There’s Dick Killum’s house. Look past it, and you’ll see a level field. We call it The Southwestern. It’s a sports field, mostly. There’s some buddies out there now playin’ soft-ball. We play horseshoes there, too. In the wintertime, the whole thing freezes over, and you can play hockey on it. You ever hear of the Africville Brown Bombers? The team Gordon Jemmott coached? That’s where they practiced.

Back in the old days, the Basin used to freeze over, and they played hockey out there. Imagine playin’ hockey on part of the Atlantic Ocean! Can’t do that nowadays. Winters ain’t what they used to be. Nothin’ is.

Fellas here play hockey just for the fun of it. Ain’t lookin’ to get in the NHL. NHL ain’t ready for no Jackie Robinson yet, so they say. Every now and then, though, somebody gets ideas. Once there was this boy who wanted to be a goalie. He’d be out there on the Southwestern every day, stoppin’ rubber balls and whatever else kids used instead of pucks.

Well, one day his cousins get hold of a real puck. They start shootin’ it around, practicin’ that newfangled rifle shot. Buddy figures he was gonna stop that puck just like he stopped all those rubber balls. So he sticks his leg out, with nothin’ on it but his pants.

**KA-RACKKK!**

You could hear the sound all the way over in Big Town. And that’s one boy who didn’t play no more goal that day.

Train’s gone at last. Let’s cross the field and go behind that little hill. There’s more houses back that way. We’re still Up The Road, understand. This is just a different neighbourhood.

Hold it. Got to throw this ball back. Catch it next time, Cousin! Yeah, right! In your dreams!



Mr. Gerald Jemmott. "That man taught for twenty-five straight years without missin' a single day."

Photo courtesy of Rossie Dixon

Those boys wouldn't be so smart if they remembered how good the girls' teams were back in the 40s. The Africville Ladies' Softball Club, that's what they called it. White blouses, black skirts, and a winnin' attitude. Gordon Jemmott coached them. They used to play all over the Province — Stellarton, New Glasgow, places like that. One year, they took the Provincial championship.

The three Brown girls were on that team — Lucinda, Jessie, and Ruth. There was Wilhemina and Alma Dixon, Amy Carvery, Stella Dixon, and Evelyn Jemmott, too. Those ladies are all married and settled



"... the school's gone now. Can't do nothin' about it." Children play near the foundation of the demolished school while the city dump smoulders in the background.

Photo courtesy of The Halifax Herald Limited

down now. But you know what? They could still come down here and send those boys runnin' to their Mommas.

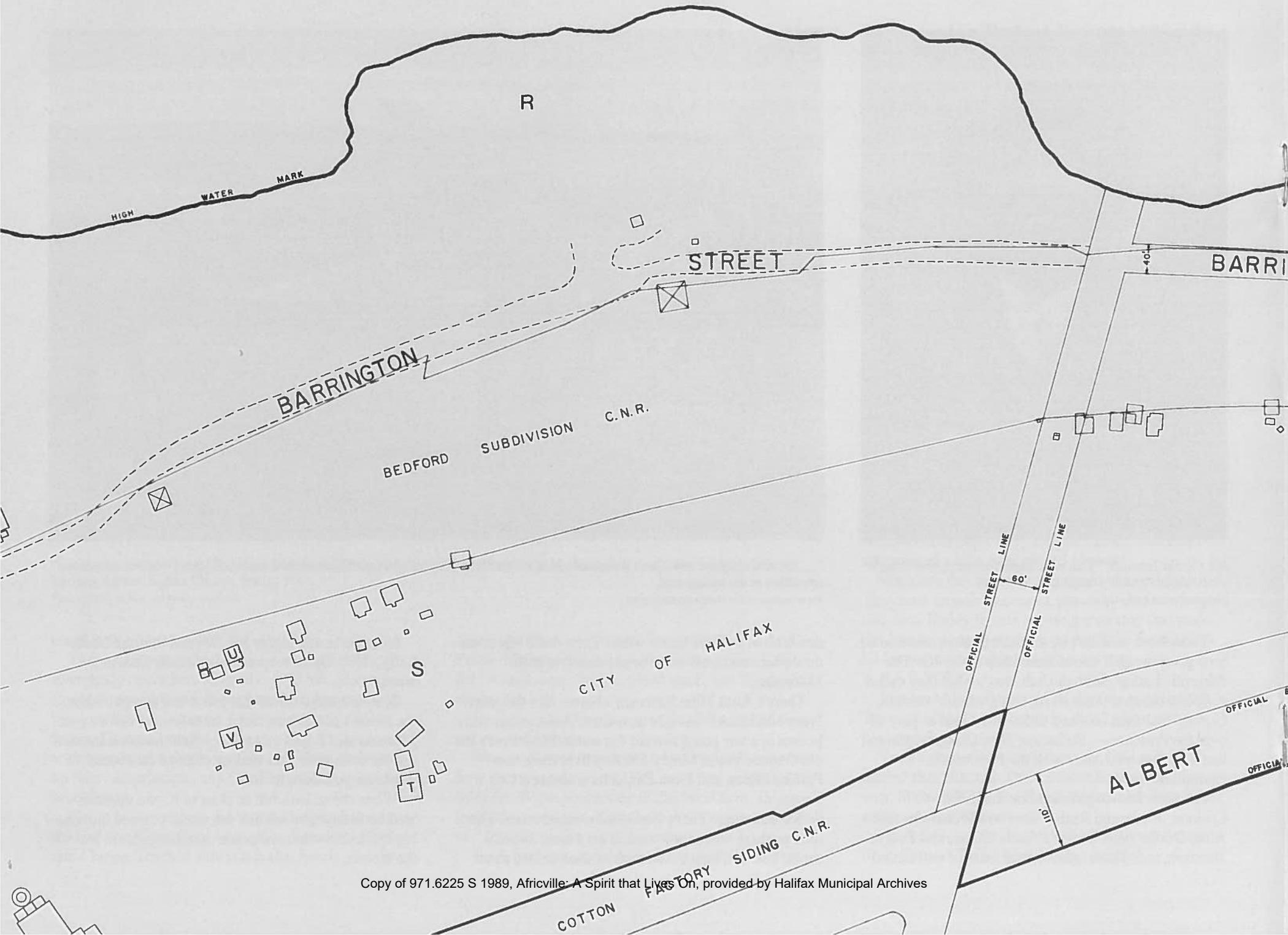
There's Aunt Tillie Newman's house. Her daughter Ivory Marsman lives right next door. You can see more houses in a line going toward the water. First there's the old Gannon place. Minky Carvery lives there now. Pauline Dixon and Dora Dixon have the next two houses.

See that shed? That's Uncle John's card room. The men go there when they want to play some serious cards. You don't get cut an inch of slack in *that* shed!

Now we're at a bigger hill. We call this one Uncle Laffy's Hill. That's where kids ride their sleds in the winter.

Best time to go down that hill is late at night when the moon's out. Seems like it takes forever before your Momma and Poppa go to sleep. Half the fun is sneakin' out the door with your sled, or piece of cardboard, or whatever you want to use.

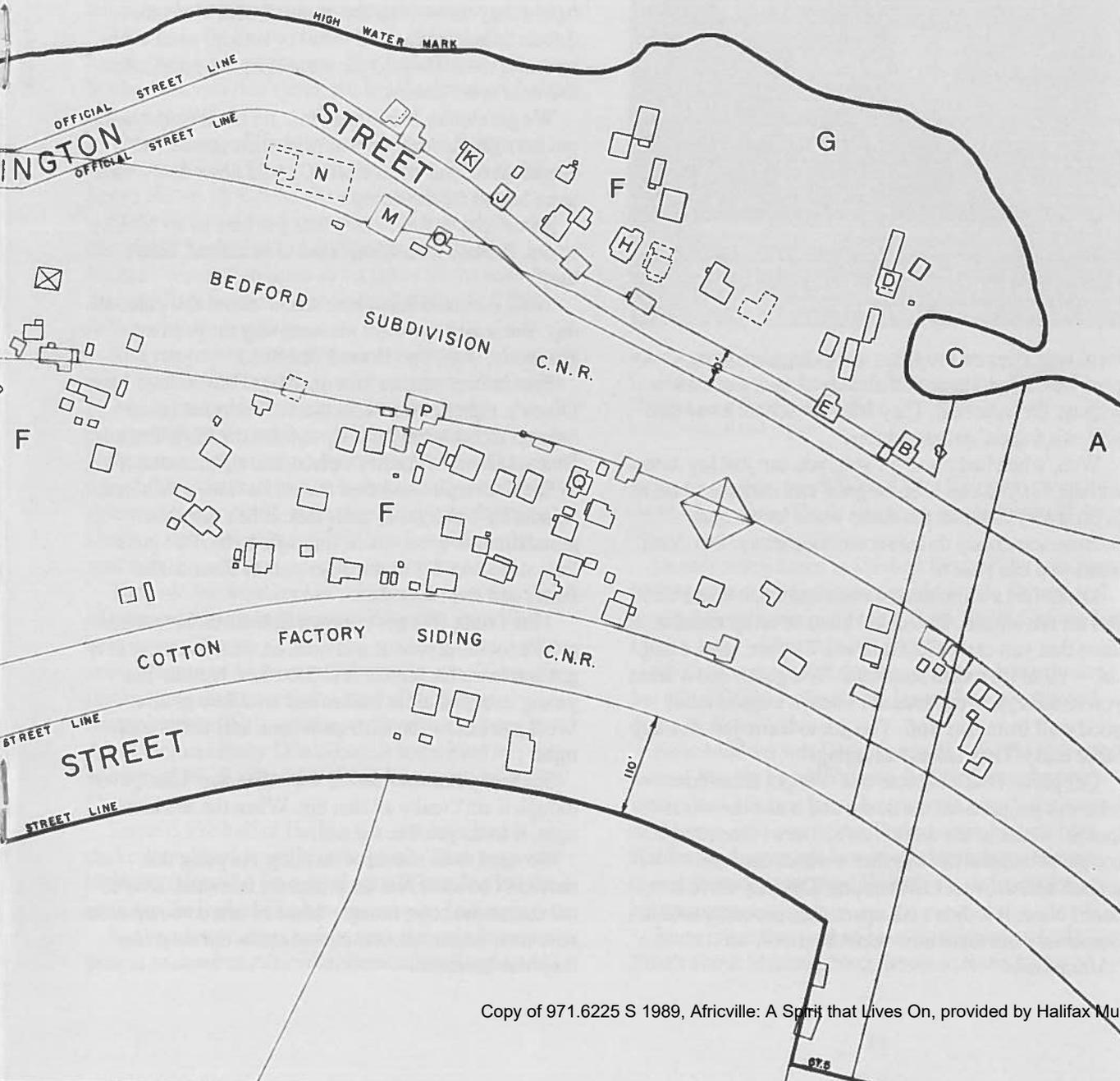
When the moon's full or close to it, you might as well be in daylight. It's like the world's turned into one big black-and-white snapshot. And the kids are part of the picture.



Copy of 971.6225 S 1989, Africville: A Spirit that Lives On, provided by Halifax Municipal Archives

BEDFORD

BASIN



### Map of Africville, 1964

City of Halifax, Works Department  
Courtesy of the Map/Architectural Plan Division, Public Archives of Nova Scotia

- ☒ N.S.L.&P. towers
- A Kildare's Field
- B Joe and Retha Skinner
- C Tibby's Pond
- D Tibby Alcock
- E Deacon Ralph Jones
- F Up The Road
- G Back The Field
- H Post Office
- J Curley Vemb
- K Pooh Izzard
- M Seaview African United Baptist Church
- N School
- O Dick Killum
- P Tillie Newman
- Q Albert 'Whoppie' Sparks
- R City Dump
- S Round The Bend
- T Aaron 'Pa' Carvery
- U Rossie Dixon
- V Reggie and Stella Carvery

We get up to the top of the hill . . . then WHOOSH! Down we go! When the snow's got a crust of ice on top of it, you zoom down so fast Africville turns into a speeded-up movie, everything flashin' past before you can get a good look at it. And you don't make any noise, either. You go zippin' through the trees and between the houses like some kind of ghost.

Well, it sure ain't wintertime now. Tell you who lives up on Uncle Laffy's Hill these days. Whoppie Sparks lives there. He runs a penny store. There's Dixons, Howes, and Carverys there, too. And you'll also find Leon and Emma Steed in that neighbourhood. Leon came from the West Indies; Emma is a Carvery.

We could climb up to the top of the hill, but you want to see Round The Bend before it gets dark. So we'll take a different way. We can just skirt around to the other side of the hill and head back to The Southwestern.

You can see the Paris house at the bottom of the hill. Now, look way up. There's the High Track. Remember we crossed it when we first came down Barrington Street? More folks live along the road that follows the track. Another Paris family's up there, and there's more Dixons.

You say you're gettin' thirsty? Let's head to Whoppie's store and get some pop before we go on.

How you doin', Whoppie? Can we get two Cokes? Thanks. Naw, can't stay too long. We're takin' the Grand Tour of Africville. More to it than there seems to be, right? That's what people always say when they come here the first time. See you later, Whoppie.

Want to show you a couple more houses past The Southwestern before we go Round The Bend. You see the horseshoe curve over there? Roy Mantley lives down that way. So does Lee Carvery. What's that? You say there's more Carverys around here than there are trees? Don't get smart. We can always go back to Uncle Bully's, you know.

Now we're following the curve of the triple tracks. Your nose is wrinkl'n already, like it wants to be someplace else. That's a sure sign we're gettin' close to



In front of Albert 'Whoppie' Sparks' store. Left to right: Marie Carvery, Earl Carvery, Doris Dixon and Evelyn Carvery.

Photo courtesy of Ray and Evelyn Lawrence

the dump, over on the water side. Doggone thing's only been here a few years, and already people associate it with us. Or us with it. They take our school away and give us a frigg'in' garbage dump!

Well, when bad times hit you, you can just lay down and die. Or you can keep on goin' and make the best of it. So we try to make the dump work for us. Just because somebody throws something away, that don't mean you can't use it.

Looks like a mountain of trash and junk, doesn't it? But it's not all bad. There's all kinds of scrap metal in there that you can collect and sell. Copper, steel, brass, tin — all of it's worth somethin'. You got to know what you're doin', you understand. There's ways of tellin' good stuff from bad stuff. You got to learn, just like any other trade. They call it "salvaging."

Car parts. That's another one. We got fellas here who can get parts off the dump and make the worst-lookin' wreck in the world run like new. One time, a couple of buddies put together a whole car from scratch and drove it to Winnipeg! Did they drive it back? Naw. If it didn't fall apart, they probably sold it. Somebody out there now could be drivin' an "Africmobile."

You know what really gets up folks' behinds out here? When those newspapers talk about us "scavenging" food and clothes off the dump. People read that stuff and think we're runnin' around diggin' week-old tomatoes and nasty rags out of that messy dump. Any fool knows you get stuff off the trucks *before* they throw it on the dump. Doesn't hurt the drivers to give us day-old bread or leftover meat every now and then. They do the same thing for people that live near other dumps.

We get clothes from them, too. By the time the ladies out here get through workin' with their needle and thread on second-hand clothes, you'd never know they were bound for the dump.

Some folks say the dump was put here to try to drive us out. If that's true, things kind of backfired, didn't they?

Well, we could stand here talkin' about this place all day. But it ain't the most pleasant way to spend an afternoon, so let's go Round The Bend.

First houses you see here are Mrs. Thomas' and Dan Dixon's, right off the tracks there. That other house belongs to Lucy Carvery. Up toward the High Track is Deacon George Mantley's place, and right next to it's Willie Carvery's. And then there's Pa Carvery's house. "Uncle Pa", everybody calls him. If he's not your grandfather or great-uncle, he ought to be. Pa's got a little store, too. It's in the other part of Round The Bend, past these woods.

That's right. We got our own little forest here. Used to be a lot more woods and bush around, but most of it got cut down for lumber and firewood. Nothin' but young trees and alder bushes and wildflowers now. We'll just follow this little path here, and we'll be all right.

See that pond over there? We call it our "lake", even though it ain't really all that big. When the sun hits it right, it looks just like a jewel.

No need to be scared of that dog. Any dog that shouldn't be loose, we keep chained in a shed. Don't tell that to the cops, though. Some of 'em come up here with their huntin' jackets on and shoot our dogs like they was in season.

Go on home, boy. That's right. Got nothin' for you here.

Well, that's the end of the woods. We're in the last part of Africville. Some of those houses we're lookin' at now got runnin' water and indoor toilets. They're far away from all that "unbreakable" rock the City keeps tellin' us about when we want to get water lines put in.

There's Lully Byers' house. Yeah, that's Lully hangin' her wash on the line. Her real name's Wilhemina. But don't ever call her that, or she'll hang you out to dry!

There's Rossie Dixon's place. And the Emersons'. Reggie and Stella Carvery are here, and Ronald and Sooks Howe. Pa Carvery's store's out here, too.

Did you know Joe Louis stayed at Rossie's house one night? Yeah, Joe Louis. The Brown Bomber himself. We used to listen to his fights all the time on Jamesie Paris' radio. He had one of those old RCA radios with the big horn.

You remember when Joe came to Halifax a few years ago to referee some rasslin' matches? That's how he had to make his livin' when he gave up the heavyweight title and then couldn't get it back.

Anyhow, the promoter for the rasslin' put him up in one of those downtown hotels that usually don't take coloured guests. Well, when Joe got wind of that, he checked right out of that hotel. You know how Joe was. Never would put up with no discrimination.

Then ol' Joe went lookin' for the coloured folks' part of town, and he ended up here. When he found out he'd be stayin' with a Dixon, he just lit right up with a smile. Turns out he knew all about George Dixon, the first colored man to win any kind of prizefightin' championship. Well, you know George was born in Africville, and every Dixon here is some kind of relation of his. So Joe felt right at home, stayin' with a Dixon.

Seemed like half of Halifax was out here lookin' to shake Joe's hand or get his autograph. That was some night for Africville, let me tell you. When Joe left the next day, he looked like he was sorry he had to go.

But you know, Joe Louis wasn't the only famous person to come to Africville. Remember Reggie and



"... every time Duke brings his band to Halifax, he comes out here to see his in-laws." Left to right: George Dixon, Duke Ellington and Gordon Jemmott.

Photo Courtesy of Stella Carvery

Stella Carvery's place? Well, Duke Ellington stops by there all the time. That's right, the one and only Duke. There's a story behind that, too.

Duke's wife's name is Mildred Dixon. She was born in Boston, but her father was an Africville Dixon, and he never forgot where he came from. Stella Carvery's a Dixon, too — Mildred's her cousin.

Mildred was a ballet dancer. Duke took one look at her and BOOM — he was in love. They got married down in New York.

Now Mildred was Duke's second wife. He had a son named Mercer by his first one. Mildred was the one who raised Mercer; far as he was concerned, she was his Mama. And every time Duke brings his band to Halifax, he comes out here to see his in-laws. Mercer comes this way, too. And Duke gives us free tickets to his concerts.

Remember that song of his, "Sophisticated Lady"? That's about Mildred. Next time you listen to the

Duke's music, maybe you'll remember there's a little bit of Africville in it.

You know, that's one of the reasons why we don't pay much mind when people talk down to us. If we're good enough for folks like Joe Louis and Duke Ellington, we figure we're darn well good enough for anybody else.

Well, we're just about at the end of our trip. The Highways Board Building and the Fairview Overpass — that's the end of Africville.

Sure, you're welcome to stick around. Stop by for supper, we'll be glad to have you. Stay overnight, too, if you want. Always room for one more here.

And when you get back home, if anybody asks you about Africville, you just tell 'em we been through good times and hard times, but we're still here. Yeah, there's been talk about gettin' us out of here. "Relocation," they call it. But we've heard that kind of talk before. Long as it's just talk, we got nothin' to worry about, right?

## Relocation and Its Aftermath: A Journey Behind the Headlines

1960 - 1988

We were wrong.  
It wasn't just talk.  
This time, they really meant it.

A lot of us tried to convince ourselves it wasn't gonna happen. So many times before, City Council or some newspaper would talk about how Africville was some kind of "blot on the face of Halifax," and how it would be better for everybody if they just tore down our houses and put us someplace else. Then the talk would die down, and we'd just keep on goin' about our business.

But around 1960 or so, the talk didn't end in one of those City Council reports that nobody ever pays attention to. Some big things were goin' on. Winds of change were blowin' like storms out on the Basin. Those storms had names, too. Not pretty names like the ones they give hurricanes. You know, "Hazel," "Betsy," and all. Naw, these were *serious* names. Names like "Urban Renewal." "Slum Clearance." "Social Planning." "Integration." "Industrialization."

And by the time the 1960s were over, those winds tore us apart and scattered us every which way. Took a long time for us to get back together again, even in spirit.

For a long time, we almost didn't know who we were. You'd pick up a newspaper and see some headline about Africville, and wonder who in the world they were talkin' about. Didn't sound like anybody you knew. Oh, they always used to run little stories about us in the local papers every now and then. But by 1965, it seemed that everybody in Canada had read something bad about Africville. They read — but what did they really *know*?

Let's take a little trip through some of those headlines. The headlines'll tell you what other folks thought about Africville. But you'll also learn what Africville thought about the headlines.



"... they found out things weren't as simple as they seemed." A meeting in the Seaview African Baptist Church during relocation.  
Photo from the Bob Brooks Collection, courtesy of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia

### Africville cleanup set for spring

— *The Chronicle-Herald*, 1961

"Cleanup". What do you think when you see something like that? Tidying-up? Spring cleaning? Maybe even a bunch of Boy Scouts with buckets and brooms comin' to do their good deed for the day?

We knew this "cleanup" really meant "cleanout." They wanted us "clean out" of Africville. City Council had already made up their minds. The houses would be comin' down; the people would be moved out. Folks were already gettin' advice on sellin' their land. "Better

sell now," they said. "You don't sell, City's gonna take it anyway, and you'll be left with nothin'. Buddy next door just sold — that oughta tell you what's goin' on."

If you had papers for your land, sometimes you could get a good price for it. If you didn't have papers, they'd give you five hundred bucks — sometimes right out of a suitcase, so it'd look like more money than you'd ever seen in your life. And for a lot of us, it was.

And so it started, whether we liked it or not. Once something big as a city gets its wheels to turnin', it's doggone hard to get 'em to stop. But "cleanup"? Naw. That's no way to talk about fellow human beings.

## Integration not answer, Progressive Club told

— *The Mail-Star*, 1962

Segregation's always been a dirty word. With good reason, too. Pushin' people off in one place just because of their colour or religion or language — that never has been right.

So when the City started gettin' serious about tearin' down Africville, they said it was a way to "undo segregation". That was before anybody got around to askin' us if we thought we were segregated. Finally, some people from the Progressive Club came down to talk to us. And they found out things weren't as simple as they seemed.

Nobody could say segregation wasn't part of our history. Back when Africville got started, we black folk pretty much had to live where we were told to live. Darn near all of us were segregated back then. Didn't have much of a choice.

So we did the best we could. Some folks moved away — went down to the States, or to Montreal, or Toronto. The ones who stayed here worked hard and built what they could. After a while, things started openin' up a little on the outside. You could put some money together and move out of Africville if that's what you wanted. So it wasn't like we were livin' behind barbed wire.

Another thing. Africville never was restricted just to colored. Remember Curley Vemb, the Norwegian? He wasn't the only white person who ever lived in Africville. We even had a family from the Philippines once. But coloured was always the majority, so that's why they called us "segregated".

Funny thing is, we knew all about segregation. But we didn't look at ourselves as a segregated community. We just looked at ourselves as a community. And when the people from the Progressive Club and others like them held out integration like some kind of Holy Grail, we told them we weren't sure exactly what integration could do for us as a community.

And the fact that we would raise doubts about it — well, that kind of shocked 'em.



"... sooner or later, the house you were in would go down, too." Deacon Ralph Jones' house, boarded up during relocation. To the left is The Caterpillar Tree, to the right is Tibby's Pond.

Photo from the Bob Brooks Collection, courtesy of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia

## Dwellings at dump not very historic

— *The Mail-Star*, 1963

How could anybody call a community that was more than 120 years old "not very historic"? We looked at that headline, then looked at each other and wondered how blind some folks can be. There were all kinds of places in Nova Scotia that hadn't been here as long as Africville. Don't have to tell you how loud they'd whoop and holler if somebody wrote something like that about *them*. They'd be goin' to court!

We knew better, though. We knew what our grandmothers and grandfathers went through, and what their grandmothers and grandfathers had to do just to keep themselves alive and give hope to their children. What Africville went through . . . people livin' out their lives sittin' next door to a prison and a TB hospital and a slaughterhouse and a bone mill and railroad tracks in your front yard and to top it all off a miserable garbage dump set right in the middle of town . . . goin' through all that, and still survivin' and scufflin' to do better . . . if that's not history, then what is?

## City to make Africville move as painless as possible

— *The Chronicle-Herald*, 1964

To this day, nobody's ever explained to us how watchin' a bulldozer knock down your house when you don't want it to can be "painless". When we had to load our family belongings onto City garbage trucks because the movin' companies wouldn't take 'em, nobody gave us a pain-killer, even though we sure did need one.

To this day, we still feel the pain. We feel it every time we drive over the MacKay Bridge, and see nothin' but empty space where our homes used to be. Some people feel it more than others. But we all feel it.

## The Slow and Welcome Death of Africville

— *The Star Weekly*, 1966

How can a death be "slow and welcome" at the same time? Slow death is never welcome. Slow death is unbearable. Slow death destroys not only the one that's dying, but also the ones who have to watch it happen.

If you ever watched someone you love die slowly, day-by-day, hour-by-hour, then you know what it was like being in Africville during the relocation. Every day, you'd hear the bulldozers eat up another house that was like a living thing to you. You'd hear the wood crackin' like bones. You'd know that sooner or later, the house you were in would go down, too. And you'd know there was nothing you could do about it.

Why did it take such a long time to finish the relocation? Mainly because some people just didn't want to go. Sure, there were some who couldn't wait to get out. But others kept holdin' on, some hopin' for a better settlement from the City, others just hopin' for a miracle. Miracle never came, though. All of us had to get out.

Know who the last person to leave was? Pa Carvery. That old man's house was the last one standin' in Africville. Nothin' but big piles of rubble all around it. City tried to get him out with one of those suitcases full of dollar bills. Pa was too proud to go for that. He



Aaron 'Pa' Carvery. "That old man's house was the last one standin' in Africville. Nothin' but big piles of rubble all around it."

Photo courtesy of The Halifax Herald Limited

finally took what they were willin' to give him, and he moved out in January of 1970. But he didn't take it out of some suitcase. No way.

And that was what reporters and social planners called the "end of Africville".

But it wasn't.

## Relocation short of goals

— *The Chronicle-Herald*, 1972

They got that one right. Relocation was supposed to make things better for us. It did — for a few. If you were able to get a good price on your house and property, you could buy your way into a better life. But not too many people were that lucky. For the rest of us, it was a different story altogether.

They said we'd get better housing. Well, some of the houses in Africville weren't all that great, but what some of us got put into was even worse. After they got through tearin' down our houses, some of us ended up in places that were condemned. Those folks wondered when they were goin' to get to live in a house that wasn't ready for the wreckers.

And then there were the ones who got nothin' at all other than that five-hundred dollars. Didn't take long for them to find out five hundred wasn't worth as much as they thought. Before they knew it, that money walked.

They had to go around knockin' on doors, lookin' for somebody to take 'em in. And when they did find a place to stay, half the time some City inspector would come by and say there was too many people livin' there, and guess who'd have to get out. We're talkin' about folks who'd owned their homes before, who'd had property in their family for more than a hundred years.

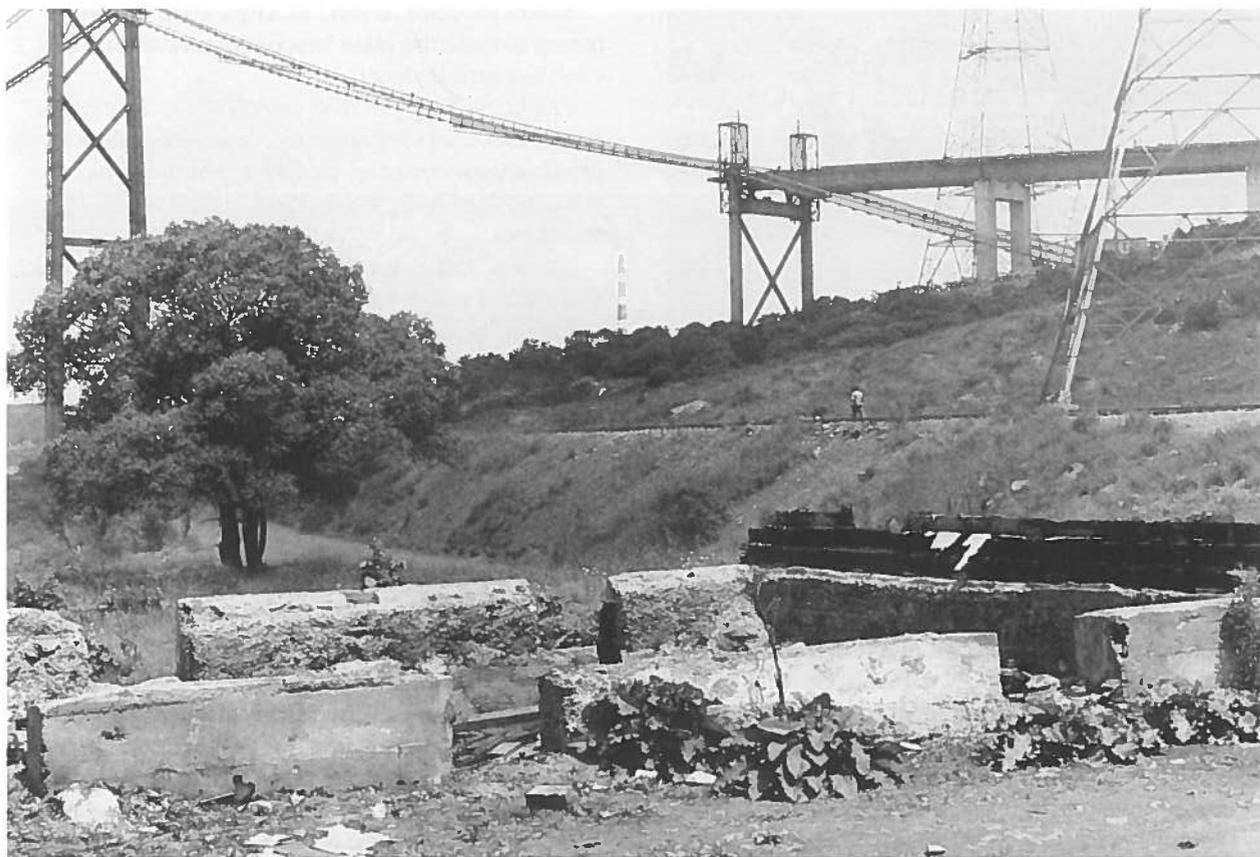
A lot of us ended up in public housing — Uniacke Square and Mulgrave Park for the most part. We could appreciate the indoor toilets and the showers and all. But the people already there were kind of stand-offish. Some of those folks were our friends, and used to come to our church. But now that we'd been kicked out of Africville, it was like they didn't want to know us anymore. They didn't know what we were gonna do.

The thing is, we didn't know, either. Out home, we didn't have a lot of money, but we had each other. After the relocation, we didn't have a lot of money — and we didn't have each other.

## Ten Years Later: The Shame of Africville

— *Canadian Heritage*, 1979

As time passed, people started changin' their minds about what happened to Africville. Some of the ones who thought relocation was the best thing that could have happened to us had second thoughts after a while. And Africville folk decided it was time to put away the sadness and the grief. Oh, it would always be there. A loss like that never goes away. But we weren't gonna let



“We still feel the pain . . . every time we drive over the MacKay Bridge, and see nothin’ but empty space where our homes used to be.”  
Photo by Albert Lee

our sadness be the main part of our lives anymore.

They thought that once the houses were gone and the people were scattered all over the place, Africville would be forgotten. That’s not the way things turned out, though. We found ways to get back together — reunions, meetings, committees, and all. We made sure the City knew we weren’t satisfied. All those wonderful things that were supposed to happen to us once we got out of our “ghetto” — well, those things seemed to have disappeared, just like our houses.

But something else was happenin’. It was hard to believe, but some folks were beginnin’ to change their

minds about us, and what happened to us. They were beginnin’ to understand that we had something out there on that strip of land by the Basin. It was something you couldn’t pin down in property values, or plumbing, or indoor toilets. It was the spirit of people who’d gone through all kinds of hard times but still kept on tryin’ to do better. It was a spirit that wouldn’t die, no matter what.

All of a sudden, we were a symbol. Other black folks looked at us, and saw what could happen to them if they weren’t careful. People who weren’t all that particular about knowin’ us before the relocation

started usin’ the name “Africville” as something to rally around. Like, “They ain’t gonna do to us what they did to Africville!”

But what were we gonna do? That’s what we were still tryin’ to figure out back in 1979.

### **Africville Descendants Society wants injustices corrected**

— *The Chronicle-Herald*, 1987

We tried doin’ some political things after Africville was torn down. The Africville Action Committee tried its best. But it didn’t do any good. The City thought it had done the right thing, and it was gonna keep on thinkin’ that, come hell or high water.

After a while, we decided we needed something that was goin’ to bring us together and keep the memory of Africville alive for us and our children. So we started the Africville Genealogy Society. It’s there to let everybody know what Africville was, and what happened to us. It brings Africville to life for young people who have roots there, but never saw their parents’ and grandparents’ homes.

Not too long ago, the Society started askin’ the City for compensation because of all the problems relocation caused for us. Maybe we’ll get it; maybe we won’t. Tell you one thing, though. Back when they started the relocation, nobody listened to what we were sayin’. This time, they’ll listen for sure.

# Africville Revisited

Summer, 1989

Good to see you! Glad you could make it. Yeah, flattery will get you everywhere. You're lookin' good too, after all these years.

Here we are, in the same place we started from before. See the sign on that little gate there? It says "Seaview Park Entrance". That's what they call Africville nowadays — Seaview Park. Named after our church.

Road's paved now. Heads right on down to a parking lot. You can see what's left of The High Track — couple yards of rusty rails. Same thing with the triple track. No more trains runnin' out this way. No more tracks cuttin' things to pieces.

Hear that music? Never thought it'd ever get so loud and raunchy, did you? These new sound systems put our old stereo boxes to shame. Well, loud as it is, it's still good music. And it's as good a sign as any that us Africville folk are back for our reunion. We've had one almost every year since the relocation. Used to have 'em in church halls and community centres. Now we use this park.

Park's been here only four years. Twenty years ago, nobody would've thought there'd be something like this where our houses were. Factories, or apartments, or container piers — that's what we thought they'd put here. Well, some people's dreams are bigger than their wallets — you know? At least with this park, we can come here once a year and feel like we're out home again.

Don't look like all that many people are here yet. Nothin' to worry about; they'll make it. Most of them are probably still recoverin' from that dance last night. That's the way all the reunions go — dance Friday night, picnic on Saturday, church service Sunday. Come to think of it, we had a lot of weekends like that before there was ever a need for reunions.

Then again, there's bound to be people out on the highway, still tryin' to get here. You see, when some of us heard that word "relocation", they took it to heart. There's Africville people in Montreal, Toronto, Calgary, Winnipeg, Boston — even California. Some of them might not come home more than once in their lives. But



"... our memorial — the only thing that tells you this used to be Africville."

Photo by Earl Conrad

they get here, even if it is just that one time.

I see where you're lookin'. You got a good memory; that's where Big Town was, all right. Just about where the MacKay Bridge supports are now. You know, even if we had gotten to stay here, that bridge would've wiped out a lot of Big Town.

That green tent's close to where Joe Skinner's place used to be. We put it up in case of rain. For at least two of these reunions, it's rained cats and dogs. One time it was like a hurricane. Wind darn near blew the tent into the Basin! Just ask Roslyn Carvery over there; she'll tell you. Made you wonder if somebody "up there" was tryin' to tell us something.

Well, we've been through worse. And it's a beautiful day today.

There's the monument. That's our memorial — the only thing that tells you this used to be Africville. You can see William Brown's name engraved in the stone. All the other families' names are on the other side of the marker.

No, that gravel path doesn't follow the old Road. The Road's mostly grass now. The way these hills slope, it's just like waves ripplin' across the water. All this space — it looks so much bigger without the houses here.

Makes you think, doesn't it? City's willin' to spend money to make this place look pretty, now that people don't live here anymore.

You know, the older folks can tell you exactly where their houses used to stand. A lot of them bring their grandchildren around and tell them what it was like to live here. They really know how to make the place come alive again.

Speakin' of kids, watch out! There they go, chasin' after a ball just like those ones up by The Southwestern years ago. Remember that cousin with the smart mouth? Guess kids'll always be kids, no matter where they're raised.

Some of the younger ladies like Joanne and Carrie Toussaint there got activities organized for them. You know — sack races and all that kind of thing. Sometimes those kids can get right quiet, though, just sittin' in the grass and watchin' the sailboats skim across the Basin.

Look over there, at that place where the triple tracks used to rise. That's a campin' spot. You think that's a lot of cars and tents there now? Wait till the sun goes down! There'll be a whole neighbourhood of campers stayin' overnight, waitin' for the church service tomorrow. Reverend Skeir or Reverend Mack will do the preachin'.

Some folks are settin' up barbeques already and breakin' out the liquid refreshments. Let's go over and see if we can get a beer or two.

Hey, Puppy. How you doin'? Sure, we'll have a couple of brews. Naw, none of that rum. Maybe later.

How are you, Mrs. Johnson? Yes, this day is a blessing. Sunshine one year, storms the next. Seems to be a pattern. We'll have to bring our umbrellas next year.

Raymond Lawrence! Good to see you. Still got those movies? Yeah, Ray had a movie camera back in the old days. He's got the last Sunrise Service on film.

There go Irvine and Dickie and Stanley Carvery. They were all just boys last time you were here. You know, the younger generation always has a choice: to keep the past alive, or go ahead and let it die. Just look around you, and you'll see what choice our young people made. They're doin' their best to make sure their children never forget where their roots are.

Well, we can do some more socializin' later. There's some other things we want to see.



“The heartbeat, the spirit — it was in us then and it’s in us now. It always was in us, and it always will be.”

Photo courtesy of The Halifax Herald Limited

Let’s go down this little slope. Another parkin’ lot here. It’s gettin’ filled; told you a lot more people’d be comin’. There’s Pooh Izzard just pullin’ up. You remember him. Yeah, Pooh. Be with you in a few minutes. We’re just takin’ a walk now. Just walkin’ and rememberin’.

You can see how the old bend starts at the end of the parkin’ lot. That road is the one we followed before to get to Round The Bend. They put gravel on it. Not much left up that road. Mostly woods on the side that’s toward the highway. Reminds you of the woods between the two parts of Round The Bend.

There’s some old house foundations and pieces of cement block scattered around. And a wire fence on the Basin side of the road. They even got signs up sayin’ “NO TRESPASSING BY ORDER OF THE CITY OF HALIFAX”. Kind of makes you laugh; what if *we’d* put up signs like that way back when?

Oh, the dump’s still down there too. But it’s all dried up

now. Even the smell’s gone, thank the Lord for small blessings.

What we want to see is right here, by the bend. You remember what stood here. Well, that bare slab of concrete on the ground is all that’s left of Seaview African United Baptist Church.

It had to’ve been the saddest day in Africville’s history when that church got torn down. It was like havin’ your heart taken out of you while you’re still alive. Some people still haven’t gotten over that day.

But if you listen real close, you can still hear the heartbeat — the same one you heard when you first came here all those years ago. It’s still there. Do you know why? Because it’s in us. The heartbeat, the spirit — it was in us then, and it’s in us now. It always was in us, and it always will be. If we haven’t learned anything else over the last twenty years, we’ve learned that.

Can you smell those ribs cookin’? They’re sendin’ a

message: time to go back up to the park and join the party. See how full the parkin’ lot is now? We can just skirt around it.

Look at that rack of ribs that little girl’s eatin’! Darn near big as she is. Naw, can’t place her. She could be a Mantley, or a Dixon, or a Carvery. Or maybe a name we’ve never heard before. All kinds of new names are in the family now. Let’s talk to her.

How you doin’ child? Those ribs sure look good. Yeah, we’ll get our own. Don’t worry. Say, where are you from? Haven’t seen you around here before. Did you hear what she said?

“I’m from Africville.”

Charles R. Saunders

Charles R. Saunders is a freelance writer who has lived in Halifax since 1985. Since he began writing in 1971, he has produced numerous short stories, novels, scripts and screenplays.

### Acknowledgements

As I mentioned in the Introduction, the voice that tells this story is a composite of those of many individuals. Without them, the story could never have been told. These acknowledgements are only a fraction of the credit the following people deserve.

The basic layout, locations, and landmarks of Africville were provided by Irvine Carvery, President of the Africville Genealogy Society. Irvine’s descriptions and stories laid the groundwork for the narrative.

Other details and stories came from the memories of a variety of people, young and older. Their names are as follows: Dickie Carvery, Matilda Newman, Ronald “Puppy” Howe, Jr., Ruth Johnson, Jik Desmond, Stella Carvery, Reginald Carvery, Joanne Toussaint, Carrie Toussaint, Raymond Lawrence, Isabel Wareham, Elsie Desmond, Carol Toussaint and Roslyn Carvery.

In turn, each of these voices reflects the experiences of many others — parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and everyone else in the great extended family of Africville.

The story is theirs. Any errors of detail or substance in the narrative are mine.

C.S.

# Before Africville: The Black Presence In Nova Scotia

When the last house in Africville was demolished on January 6, 1970 a chapter closed in the lives of some 80 black families numbering about 400 individuals. With the closing down of the settlement, it could be argued that what happened stands without comparison with any other black community in the annals of the history of Nova Scotia. For all its uniqueness, and for all the special lessons derived from it, the story of Africville is an integral part of the black experience in this province.

In the 1600s European trading companies were criss-crossing the oceans of the world in search of minerals, spices, slaves and areas for settlement. European merchant ships owned by state-licensed commercial companies competed to establish monopolies. For over 200 years, European nations like Britain, France, Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands fought to promote their respective economic and, later, political interests.

Black people were drawn into this European competition as slave labourers. Between 10-15 million slaves were shipped from West Africa to the Americas and the Caribbean between 1600 and 1850. Black slaves and settlers, immigrants and refugees from this general pool came in diverse ways and at different times to Nova Scotia in search of freedom.

Their numbers were small before 1782: 15 in Halifax in 1750; 104 in Nova Scotia in 1767. But numbers were small all round in those years. The Scots, for example, numbered a mere 52 in 1767. More important than numbers is the fact that persons of African descent were among the earliest residents in Nova Scotia. By that virtue alone, they have a place alongside the charter peoples of Nova Scotia, who include the Micmacs, the English, the Scots and the

Acadians. Micmacs, Acadians and Blacks have experienced grave difficulties. Of the three, Blacks were the only group to carry the stigma of an experience that ranks as one of the most degrading acts of human exploitation in modern history. Historically, there were other slaves; the enslavement of African peoples was the last in a long line. The scale, the distances, the dehumanization, the images, the stereotypes and much more, followed later generations to their graves in many parts of the settlement countries. Whether or not they later became free, enterprising, contributing, patriotic, deserving, citizens, the stigma endures today.

It is in this context that the African/Black presence in Nova Scotia should be analysed and understood. The common denominator is clear: black people were placed in a category in which acceptance, opportunity, justice and recognition were deliberately denied.

From the beginning a pattern of settling the black population was designed and carried out: small allotments of poor-quality land were set aside on the outskirts of the central areas. These allotments and the central areas were not necessarily great distances apart. Indeed, usually the distances between them was insignificant. What was significant was that segregated settlements were created to keep whites and blacks apart on the basis of an evolving British ideology, shared by most Europeans at the time and beyond, that "non-white" peoples belonged to a lower level of civilization and had to be treated as a lower order. Since the standard of living was correlated with level of civilization, the lower order was poorly housed, paid, treated and perceived according to their divinely-decreed status. In this regard, there was no difference in what the British were doing at the time in colonies all over the world.

Thus when black Nova Scotians arrived at the invitation of the British and were received with indifference and hostility, they responded decisively by looking inward to their own institutions and initiatives: Black Baptist churches sprang up everywhere; the church became a pillar of the black community, and the pastor became a leader. Black preachers and teachers held the black communities together.

In Nova Scotia, there were many segregated settlements: Beechville, Hammonds Plains, Preston, Birchtown, Brindley Town, Tracadie, Africville, to name a few. The imprint of neglect and denial became indelibly associated with these segregated settlements.

From the white perspective, social Darwinism became deeply rooted: Blacks were wards of the State; they needed help to survive, because they were genetically incapable of managing on their own. Decisions were taken outside the black communities to regulate the lives of neglected people.

Despite this treatment Blacks survived and produced their own leaders, institutions and initiatives. The story of Africville is an account of some 120 years of community life. It is a monumental testimony to the struggle for survival in circumstances where the odds were heavily weighted against black Nova Scotians in general and the residents of neglected, segregated settlements, like Africville, in particular.

## Bridglal Pachai

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# Africville: An Overview

Until the increased immigration of recent decades, Nova Scotia was considered to be the centre of the black experience in Canada. Of all the Nova Scotian black communities Africville is the best known. Books, national and international magazine articles, television and radio programs, poetry and song — all have told the story of this small black community, physically bulldozed out of existence in the late 1960s but even to this day spiritually and symbolically resistant to burial.

Africville was founded by descendants of black refugees from the War of 1812 who were settled in the rocky, barren farmlands of Hammonds Plains and Preston in Halifax County. Seeking jobs and better economic opportunities, the original settlers of Africville purchased Halifax City properties from white merchants in the late 1840s. Community-building began as families such as the Dixons, the Carverys and the Byers followed the Browns and the Arnolds. A church congregation was formally established in 1849, and throughout the years the church remained the major community institution with the deacons representing Africville to outside authorities. The census of 1851 reported eighty black persons living in the Africville area.

After much unsuccessful petitioning of the government and years of informal teaching provided by an Africville resident, an elementary school was finally established in Africville in 1883. It was to serve the community's children until the 1950s. In later years penny stores and even a postal outlet came into being while Africville, tucked away in the outer reaches of the City, remained quite rural. Goats, chickens and horses plus various fish species from the Bedford Basin supplemented labour wages to provide residents with the wherewithal to maintain an independent and

acceptable lifestyle. Writing in the 1890s a leading black educator noted the beauty of the Africville setting, commenting that the residents were "a community of intelligent young people" and that much was expected of them.

As Africville was developing, growth was also occurring in and around Halifax. The burgeoning industrial complex gravitated toward the Bedford Basin and reduced Africville's potential as a superior residential area; railroad tracks were laid and subsequently expanded through the community. Moreover racism and residents' lack of economic and political influence made the area a choice site for City service facilities which were unwanted elsewhere. "Night-soil" disposal pits for the City were located on the edge of the community in 1858, and the Infectious Diseases Hospital was built on the hill overlooking Africville in the 1870s. Such developments continued into the twentieth century including a stone-crushing plant and an abattoir on the edges of the settlement, and culminated in the mid-1950s with the move of the large open city dump (labelled a health menace by City Council and resisted by residents of other areas) to a site just 350' from the westernmost group of Africville homes.

Africville residents gained little direct benefit from any of these developments; few obtained employment in the industries or service facilities. As the area became designated as industrial, residential building plans of Africville residents received short shrift. Indeed proposals for their relocation were frequently aired in City Council. In fact on at least three occasions some residents were forced to relocate within the general area as a result of railway expropriations. Over time negative attitudes became firmly established between

Africville and City officialdom. Complaints and petitions by the former for police services, building permits, garbage pickup or whatever fell on deaf ears. By demanding little in the way of adherence to building codes or tax payment and by tolerating some squatting on City property, some bootlegging and the like, the City reinforced a racist, non-caring attitude toward Africville.

Increasingly Africville became vulnerable and ripe for relocation. Most residents continued to press for changes and coped as best they could. Frustrated, some ambitious and regularly-employed residents either moved out of the community to obtain modern services and other opportunities or encouraged their children to do so. At the same time poor blacks and whites, who were displaced by developments in the City core, moved into Africville. Usually these people were renters on Africville land, but sometimes they were squatters on City property. When combined with this modest influx of renters and squatters, the growth of the Africville population and the informal pattern of land inheritance and division created a chaotic image. The influence of church leaders began to wane; it was clear they could effect no progressive action by the City. Africville's social problems grew and the community acquired a poor reputation among both blacks and whites in the Halifax area. Increasingly Africville became stereotyped as a slum, a hazardous place, a community of "drifters". This was a terrible exaggeration that weighed heavily on the many six-generation residents who had keen memories of past struggles and past glories. Africville produced George Dixon, a world champion boxer; Reverend E. Dixon, an ordained minister; and Portia White, an internationally recognized singer. One writer aptly

described the true history of the community as “the story of many persons who have managed to keep their pride despite circumstances that would have ground many of us under.”

In the early 1960s total relocation finally occurred. At that time Africville was home for eighty families, some four-hundred persons (all but a handful of whom were black). Compared to other Haligonians, black and white, the Africville residents had very low incomes and were very underemployed. Sewerage, piped water, paved roads and public lighting were conspicuously absent. Cliques and radically different lifestyles presented a social mix which, in conjunction with the community’s long history, attested to a rich human tapestry. This diversity, however, also limited concerted action by the Africville residents. There was still enough community spirit to initially reject the idea of relocation as it had been rejected in the past in favour of community development approaches. But City officials were adamant: Africville had to go. Equally important was the fact that local, and even national, community and civil rights leaders concurred with that assessment. Believing the stereotypes of Africville, they decried segregation and poor living conditions.

The actual relocation took place between 1964 and 1967. The City spent about \$400,000 for the lands and the homes; another \$200,000 were budgeted for welfare assistance, furniture allowances and the waiving of unpaid taxes and hospital bills. Relocation planning had called for education and training programs and, in general, the creation of new and better opportunities for the relocatees. In actuality, virtually none of these programs ever happened. Many Africville residents, especially young adults with families and those with no community roots, were initially satisfied with the deal they received from the City. As time went on, however, dissatisfaction increased and became widespread. Several of the score of families who became homeowners elsewhere lost their homes. A large number of families became dependent on welfare. Grief for the lost community mounted. One relocatee noted, “The freedom and the

home is what got me . . . I could always sit out on my steps and give out with a good morning but can’t do that here.” Another lamented that he no longer had anything to pass on to his children.

Since the relocation there have been sporadic efforts by the former Africville residents to mobilize and secure redress from the City, but they have had only very modest success. Their efforts and the changing times, however, brought about a major reassessment of the community and the relocation. The negative stereotype of Africville has been laid to rest, and the initial City claims of a progressive relocation have been debunked. Africville lives on as an indictment against racism, as a critique of imposed technocratic approaches to change, and as a celebration of community and the human spirit.

Twenty-five years ago the local newspaper noted, “Soon Africville will be but a name. And in the not too distant future that too mercifully will be forgotten.” Africville hasn’t been forgotten. It shouldn’t be. It won’t be.

#### Don Clairmont

Dr. Donald Clairmont is Professor of Sociology at Dalhousie University, Halifax. He is co-author of the book *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community*.

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Africville, 1965  
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Last day of Vacation Bible School, 1958  
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The following chronology, compiled by Bridglal Pachai, shows highlights of the black presence in Nova Scotia before, as well as contemporaneous with, the founding of the Africville settlement:

1605 - 1781: Sailors, Slaves, New England free Blacks

1782: Pioneer Black Loyalist immigrants (including David George)

1783 - 1784: Major Black Loyalist immigrants (including Thomas Peters) as well as slaves of the White Loyalists

1792: Black Loyalist emigration to Sierra Leone, West Africa

1796: Arrival of Jamaican Maroons

1800: Departure of Jamaican Maroons

1813 - 1816: Black Refugee immigrants (including Richard Preston)

1821: Emigration of 95 Black Refugees to Trinidad

1832: Founding of Cornwallis Street African Baptist Church

1832 - 1853: Founding of 12 Black Baptist Churches by Father Richard Preston

1854: Formation of the African United Baptist Association by Richard Preston

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