

## PAMA Spotlight on History

### Black Porters in Canada Grades 8 & 10 History

**BLACK PORTERS**

Racial discrimination has a long history in the railway service. Railways were one of the first industries to provide employment for Black Canadians. However, segregation within railway companies prevented employment and promotional opportunities.

Black porters worked in the dining and sleeping cars to provide a comfortable journey for passengers. Passengers could call upon porters day or night to carry luggage, dust, sweep, mop, fluff pillows and clean washrooms. They were often the first and last railway employees passengers saw on their journey.



Interior of a dining car, Canadian Pacific Railway, circa 1910. Photographed by the author.



Canadian Pacific Railway (1910). Black porters, around 1910.



Around 1945, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) union was established in Canada. The organization created job security, reduced work hours and increased wages for Black railway porters.

"Canada, from 1867, was built around the railways. But Canada was intended to be a 'White Man's Country,' meaning even the sleeping car porters - as diplomats of the railways - were not recognized as Canadians because they were primarily Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples."  
- *Shared: The History of Black Railway Porters in Canada*, Museum of Toronto in collaboration with Cecil Foster



The image shows a Black man in a railway porter's uniform standing next to a train car. He is wearing a dark jacket and a hat. The train car is visible in the background.

## Introduction

"Few things have transformed Peel so completely as the construction of railways. In PAMA's exhibit [All Aboard! The Railways of Peel](#) we explore Peel's first railways in the 1850s, and their rise to importance in the life of local communities well into the 20th Century. With a slow decline following World War II, as they competed with highways and motor traffic. And today, we recognize how railways are once again central elements in the life and commerce of Peel." ("All Aboard! The Railways of Peel | PAMA")

The history of Black railway porters in Canada is a rich and important topic that sheds light on the experiences and contributions of Black Canadians, especially in the context of labour history and the fight for civil rights.

In this Learning Resource we dive a bit deeper into the story of Black porters who worked on the railways in Canada in the 1900's. We have pulled some resource links from the [Museum of Toronto](#) for a deeper dive into their history.

## Let's Get Started

Ontario Curriculum Expectations and Big Ideas to keep in mind when reading through the resource links:

### Big Ideas:

- Not all people in Canada enjoyed the same rights and privileges in the new nation
- The struggles of individuals and groups in Canada at this time laid the groundwork for some of the rights we have today
- Social changes that occurred at this time have had a lasting impact on Canada
- Canadian society experienced major changes during this period, because of a variety of national and international social, cultural, and political factors
- National and international events, trends, and developments during this period affected various groups and communities in Canada in different ways

## Curriculum

### Grade 8 – History

#### A1. Application: Peoples in the New Nation

#### A2. Inquiry: Perspectives in the New Nation

use the historical inquiry process to investigate perspectives of different groups and communities, including First Nations, Métis, and/or Inuit communities, on some significant events, developments, and/or issues that affected Canada and/or people in Canada

#### B. Canada, 1890–1914: A Changing Society

#### B1. Application: Canada – Past & Present

##### B1.1

analyse key similarities and differences in the experiences of various groups and communities, including First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, in present-day Canada and the same groups/communities in Canada between 1890 and 1914

##### B1.3

analyse some of the challenges facing various non-Indigenous individual, groups, and/or communities in Canada between 1890 and 1914

## **B1.4**

analyse actions taken by various individuals, groups, and/or communities, and Inuit individuals and/or communities, in Canada between 1890 and 1914 to improve their lives

## **Grade 10 - Civics**

### **C. Civic Engagement, Service, and Action**

#### **C2. Engaged Citizenship and Creating Change through Action**

analyse a civic issue of personal interest, and propose and assess methods of creating positive change in their community

## **Grade 10 – Canadian History Since World War 1**

### **A. Historical Inquiry and Skill Development**

A1. Use the historical inquiry process and concepts of historical thinking when investigating aspects of Canadian history since 1914

A1.2 select and organize relevant evidence and information on aspects of Canadian history since 1914 from a variety of primary and secondary sources

A1.3 assess the credibility of sources and information relevant to their investigations

A1.4 interpret and analyse evidence and information relevant to their investigations, using various tools, strategies, and approaches appropriate for historical inquiry

A1.6 evaluate and synthesize their findings to formulate conclusions and/or make informed judgements or predictions about the issues, events, and/or developments they are investigating

### **B. CANADA, 1914–1929**

B3. Identity, Citizenship, and Heritage: explain how various individuals, organizations, and specific social changes between 1914 and 1929 contributed to the development of identities, citizenship, and heritage in Canada

B3.1 explain how some individuals, groups, and/or organizations contributed to Canadian society and politics during this period and to the development of identities, citizenship, and/or heritage in Canada

## Closer Look

By using a combination of these resources and The Social Studies Inquiry Process, students can gain a well-rounded understanding of the history and significance of Black railway porters in Canada.

*Museum of Toronto:* [Derailed: The History of Black Railway Porters in Canada - Museum of Toronto](#)

Summary: The history of Black porters in Canada is a story of hardship, resistance, and eventual recognition. These workers, who faced racial discrimination and challenging working conditions, played an essential role in the development of Canada's railway system and laid the foundation for future generations in the struggle for civil rights and labour equality.

*Museum of Toronto:* [An Introduction to Canada's Black Railway Porters and Their Lasting Legacy - Museum of Toronto](#)

Summary: Employed primarily in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, these workers, many of whom were Black Canadians from the Caribbean, were responsible for maintaining and assisting passengers on trains, particularly in the sleeper cars. They formed a close-knit community fighting for better wages and working conditions.

*Museum of Toronto:* [The Working Conditions & Segregation of Black Railway Porters - Museum of Toronto](#)

Summary: The Museum of Toronto highlights the legacy of the Black railway porters, emphasizing their contributions to Canada's social and economic development. The porters' struggles and resilience helped pave the way for future labor rights advancements, and their story is a significant part of Canada's broader history of social justice.

*National Film Board of Canada:* [The Road Taken - NFB](#)

Summary: "This 1996 documentary takes a nostalgic ride through history to present the experiences of Black sleeping-car porters who worked on Canada's railways from the early 1900s through the 1960s. There was a strong sense of pride among these men, and they were well-respected by their community. Yet, harsh working conditions prevented them from being promoted to other railway jobs until finally, in 1955, porter Lee Williams took his fight to the union." ("The Road Taken - NFB")

## **Inquiry Process**

Using the key components of the Inquiry process, students will be guided through the steps of inquiry-based learning.

### Formulating Questions

- A question that sparks curiosity. It can be a broad, “Big Idea” question that encourages students to explore and think critically.

### Gathering and Organizing Information and Evidence and/or Data

- Once the question has been established, students research and collect information from the sources included in this Learning Resource as well as others they may find. They should be encouraged to think critically about where they find their sources.

### Interpreting and Analyzing Information and Evidence and/or Data

- After gathering information, students should analyse it and look for connections, patterns and key ideas. This step may cause them to alter their original viewpoints.

### Evaluating Information, Evidence and/or Data and Drawing Conclusions

- This step should work to answer the initial question. The step may involve creating an argument or statement supporting the evidence.

### Communicating Findings

- Students can share their conclusions through written reports or presentations. The goal is to explain their evidence clearly to others to demonstrate their understanding.

## **Extension Activity Questions:**

Part One: How Black railway porters contributed to shaping the development of Canadian society.

Part two: Explain the ways in which the legacy of these workers impacts current discussions on race and labour right in Canada.