



HALIFAX WOMEN'S  
HISTORY ♦ SOCIETY

# Halifax Women's History Society Monthly Newsletter

*Issue no. 11, May 2017*

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## Woman of the Month: Portia White (1911-1958)

Portia White stands out as a giant of Nova Scotian history. She was born in 1911 to William (whose parents had been enslaved in Virginia and served in the famous Nova Scotian First World War all black No. 2 Construction Battalion) and Izie Dora White. Portia sang in the Cornwallis Street Baptists Church, where her father was pastor, for most of her childhood. She quickly showed herself to be a gifted singer and musician.

In 1929 she began attending Dalhousie University and became a schoolteacher in black communities such as Africville upon graduation. She continued to sing and perform locally, winning many awards, and eventually received a scholarship to take lessons at the Halifax Conservatory of Music.

It was in the early 1940s that Portia made her big debut and started performing across the country to huge critical acclaim despite the obstacle of people refusing to book her due to her race. Undeterred, she went on to be the first Canadian to perform in New York's Town Hall in 1944 and after some return performances she signed with North America's biggest artist agency in 1945. With this agency she toured North and South America and parts of Europe but returned to Nova Scotia due to vocal difficulties. In the 1950s she transitioned to mostly giving private lessons, but continued to sing for special occasions until her death in 1968 from cancer.

Like many musicians of that era, Portia often performed for the troops in the Second World War in Nova Scotia and abroad while she was at the height of her fame. She used her stunning voice not only to raise morale and sell victory bonds but to break barriers of discrimination and segregation - I imagine the

Government of Canada officially named her "a person of national historic significance" and in 1999 she was on a Canadian stamp for the millenium. There is a 2004 life-size sculpture of her in Truro and every year the Nova Scotia Arts Council awards the Portia White Prize to an outstanding Nova Scotian artist. The first person to receive the prize was her great-nephew George Elliot Clarke who was Toronto's poet laureat in 2012. There are countless other awards and accolades in her memory to celebrate the arts in Nova Scotia and her contribution to it. She is remembered and honoured for being the first internationally renowned black Canadian concert singer who reached fame and success even in a pre-civil rights world.



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## Society News!

### Message from the Chair

Happy spring to all our members! We are now entering the final phase of the Woman on the Waterfront Project with a little over six months to go before we unveil the monument, *The Volunteers/Les Bénévoles*, on the Halifax waterfront. There is still a great deal of work to complete.

*Emigrant*, on the busy waterfront boardwalk. This is an excellent location and one which will give our monument major exposure to everyone passing by, including a large number of cruise ship visitors. We owe this site to the Port of Halifax and thank its executive for its continuing assistance.

Preparing the site is costly. Equipment must dig and level the site and pilings must be driven into the ground to support the monument. So I am pleased to announce that the Halifax Women's History Society has secured \$125,000 from the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA).

ACOA, when informing us of the grant, said it is for "the renovation of public lands to accommodate a monument to commemorate World War Two volunteer women." This means we soon will have the money to cover the cost of preparing the site. The paperwork for this grant is being finalized and, after that, we are expecting an announcement by Andy Fillmore, MP for Halifax.

This month, we also will begin planning for an event for the official unveiling in November. We will keep you up to date as we move closer and closer to the achievement of this historic monument — the first full-size, bronze monument to honor women's contribution to Halifax history.



*"The Volunteers/Les Bénévoles"*

### **Contribute to the Woman on the Waterfront!**

While we are well on our way to erecting the first historical monument celebrating women in Halifax, we still have much to do. If you would like to be a part of this groundbreaking endeavour, consider making a donation to the society.

Any amount helps, and we are always appreciative of community support.

**To donate via Pay Pal, please follow this link to our website:**  
<http://halifaxwomenshistory.ca/donations/>

### About the Society

Founded in 2013, the Halifax Women's History Society (HWHS) researches and makes known the untold story of the remarkable contributions that women have made to the history of Halifax. "A Woman on the Waterfront" is the Society's first project.

Membership is available for anyone who wishes to support us. Lifetime membership is \$25 for adults and \$5 for students, purchasable by paypal on our [website](#).

Women's work is too often invisible to the public, especially in the history of the Second World War, which focuses on men and rarely mentions women's volunteer work. Without the work of countless volunteers, Halifax would not have been able to meet the needs of the huge influx of people into the city or support the military personnel and their families who made Halifax home during the war. There are more than 100 cairns, steles, sculptures and plaques in Halifax. Less than a dozen are of female figures and most of these are from mythology or are symbolic. A monument — The Volunteers/Les Bénévoles — to women volunteers would honour them and provide public acknowledgement of their numerous contributions.



### Newsletter Submissions

Have something you would like to see in our next newsletter? An event, news story, picture, piece of writing or historical figure that is relevant to our cause? Please send us the information and we would be delighted to consider it for next month. We ask that submissions be consistent with our mission of sharing the untold stories of women in the history of Nova Scotia and Halifax - any that do not will not be included.



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