

Recognizing Black history in the Yukon

[Gabrielle Plonka](#)



Reita, Dudley and Rodney Morgan at their Whitehorse home in 2002. (P. Gowdie/Courtesy Yukon Hidden Histories Society)

Yukon's Hidden Histories Society is entering its twentieth year of researching Black history in the territory.

"When we started, nobody knew anything ... I began poking around a bit, and it was done as I tripped over things,

basically," said Peggy D'Orsay, founding member of the society.

The Hidden Histories Society was founded in 2001 with a mission to identify the Asian, Black and other ethno-cultural people who contributed to the Yukon over the last 100 years.

"Our goal is to enlarge the representation of these diverse individuals," the society's website says.

D'Orsay said she was struck by how "hidden" knowledge of Black people in the Yukon was when she began her research. She began digging through the Yukon's archives and old newspapers, following threads of information from old photographs and clippings.

"Sometimes it was sheer luck," D'Orsay said, explaining she learned of the Phillpotts family after stumbling across an announcement of a new minister coming to the territory.

The society has now compiled a 43-page inventory on the history of Black Yukoners, and posted broader biographies on the society's website.

D'Orsay said more archival information is available prior to 1960. Now, she's working to fill in the gaps after that.

"It's very sparse," she said. "The populations here have always been tiny."

According to Canadian Census data, 99 Black people lived in the Yukon in 1901. That number dropped to 31 in 1911 and then to less than 10 up until 1960. D'Orsay said she believes the census numbers may underestimate the Black community in certain years, as the people polled may have identified themselves as Caribbean or African, not Black.

D'Orsay said she is committed to continuing her research to identify more people.

"The value is knowing your neighbour, the background behind anything that had gone on in the Yukon. It helps people identify and maybe help them feel at home," D'Orsay said.

D'Orsay explained that Charlotte Hrenchuk, a fellow Hidden Histories historian, had adopted three Black children and raised them in the Klondike area.

"She wanted them to feel that they belonged here, they had a history here, and I think that's important to any child to have a feeling of belonging and maybe understanding new neighbours."

The Hidden Histories Society has published biographies of three prominent Black Yukon families stemming from its many years of research.

The Hunter Family



Lucille Hunter "always found some way to make ends meet" during her long life in the Yukon. She is seen here in her 80s at Shipyards Park, circa 1964. (Roloff Beny/Courtesy Yukon Hidden Histories Society)

Lucille and Charles Hunter stamped to the Klondike in 1897. Lucille was 19, pregnant, and among few Black women in the territory at the time.

"We don't know why they came up, it could have been that they wanted a better life for themselves or they thought they could come up and make a buck," D'Orsay said.

They traveled north along the Stikine Route, which was infamously more challenging, because they believed it would

be cheaper and easier.

Once they reached Teslin Lake, Lucille gave birth to a daughter whom they named Teslin.

They continued to Grand Forks, where they operated a restaurant and staked claims in Bonanza Creek. After the First World War, they mined silver claims near Mayo and gold claims at Black Hills. Lucille worked as a nanny in Dawson, a cook in Keno Hill, and walked between Dawson and Mayo to manage their claims.

In 1939, Charles died, but Lucille continued to manage the claims for several decades with the help of hired staff.

"She was absolutely committed to mining, I was always amazed at that, it's a hard life," D'Orsay said.

During the Second World War, Lucille moved to Whitehorse and opened a laundry, where she remained for the rest of her life.

"She seemed to go from rags to riches down to rags again, and it didn't seem to bother her, she always found some way to make ends meet and she was quite happy to do it," D'Orsay said.

When failing eyesight eventually necessitated surgery and the closure of her laundry, her neighbours supplied food and

care, and provided an apartment when her home was destroyed by fire.

"She was very well-liked ... people always kept an eye on her, and helped her out, and didn't care that she was Black. They just saw an older woman that needed some help," D'Orsay said.

"Anybody I talked to over the years all had good memories of her — she liked children immensely, and the kids in the evenings would play with her."

She died in 1972 at 94. The Yukon Order of Pioneers granted her an honorary membership for her lifelong commitment to mining, making her the first female member, and she is buried in the pioneer section of the Grey Mountain Cemetery.

The Phillipotts Family



Reverend Joshua Phillpotts, his wife Yvonne, twins Margaret and Kathleen and baby Andrew soon after they arrived in the Yukon in 1965. (Courtesy of Yukon Archives)

Joshua and Yvonne Philpotts were born in Jamaica in 1929 and 1934, respectively. They were married in 1954 and Yvonne had three children — twin daughters and a son.

Joshua was ordained in 1958 and accepted an offer to serve as a minister in the Yukon in 1965. The family of five moved from Jamaica to Watson Lake that July.

"I don't think they told anybody in Watson Lake he was Black, but he managed to settle in and work his parish, and he had some very interesting adventures," D'Orsay said.

Joshua served as minister to the St. John the Baptist Church, while Yvonne worked as a midwife at the community hospital.

"He told me 40 below was a little bit of a shock to him, when the family came from Jamaica," D'Orsay said.

Joshua became president of the Home and School Association in Watson Lake, and he promoted the integration of First Nations children into schools. He often travelled to distant communities for ministerial and volunteer work.

In 1970, Joshua was appointed Associate Priest at the Christ Church Cathedral in Whitehorse. He was the Yukon Commissioner for the Boy Scouts of Canada and a volunteer teacher. In 1973, Joshua became a social worker for the Yukon government. The family left the Yukon for Alberta in 1975, after which he received the Alberta Centennial Medal for his volunteer services.

He returned to the Yukon in 2015 to give a presentation about his life during Black History Month. He passed away later that year.

"He was so excited to be up here and connect with a lot of his older friends," D'Orsay said.

The Morgan Family

Reita and Dudley Morgan both moved to Kingston, Ont., from Jamaica. They met while studying and both graduated from the Bellevue Hospital School of Nursing. They were married in 1968 and followed work to the Yukon in the early 1980s.

Reita was "dismayed at first sight of dusty Whitehorse," says the archives, but quickly found work at Social Services. Dudley "thrived in the Yukon" and began work developing Yukon College's rural campuses in 1986.

Both Dudley and Reita achieved master's degrees while in the Yukon in Educational Administration and Child Welfare, respectively. The couple volunteered for numerous organizations and adopted a son, Rodney, in Jamaica in 1985. Reita and Dudley moved to Calgary in 2006. Dudley launched an organization offering post-secondary education in Africa, and received the 2013 Governor General's Jamaica Diaspora Award of Excellence.

Contact Gabrielle Plonka at gabrielle.plonka@yukon-news.com

[Black History Month Yukon](#)

Get local stories you won't find anywhere else right to your inbox.

[Sign up here](#)