



“THESE STORIES HOPEFULLY ... GET AT PEOPLES’ HEARTS TO BETTER UNDERSTAND WHAT RACIALIZED PEOPLE MIGHT HAVE FACED AND ARE FACING TODAY.”

# When Curiosity Unveils Compelling Stories

Hidden Histories Society Yukon uncovers, commemorates, and celebrates the territory’s racialized voices

By Paige Galette

Racialized people have lived on Turtle Island (North America) since colonization and were among those who moved north in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (According to the Yukon Archives, there were 99 Black people in the territory in 1901.) Racialized people made the long trek, motivated, like others, by adventure and the possibility of finding gold and other financial gains. But many were fleeing the discrimination and racism they faced elsewhere in Canada and the U.S. for a place with fewer race-based restrictions. These hardy adventurers became business owners, prospectors, and contributors to their community. But where are their achievements shared, commemorated, and celebrated? Until not that long ago, they weren’t really.

The Hidden Histories Society Yukon (HHSY) is one reason perceptions about the territory and its history are changing. The group formed in 2001 after one of its founders, Charlotte Hrenchuk, struggled to find material that would be relatable to her three children from Sierra Leone. Since then, the non-profit has been uncovering and sharing under-represented stories of the Yukon, with

When people outside the territory find out I live in the Yukon, they always ask if there are Black people here. This seemingly ill-informed question may be blamed, in part, by the lack of representation of Black and other racialized people in the Yukon’s history and stories.

**Clockwise from left:** HHSY volunteers Lillian Nakamura Maguire and Paul Gowdie say telling the stories of others isn’t easy; Reverend Joshua Phillpotts when he arrived in the Yukon with his wife Yvonne, a midwife, and their children; Phillpotts at a Black History Month presentation in 2015, shortly before his death.

a focus on Black and Asian Yukon histories. It’s not an easy job, particularly for a wholly volunteer-run organization, but a crucial one.

Paul Gowdie, a Black Yukoner, got involved with the society after attending an HHSY presentation in 2009. At the time, Gowdie was feeling alienated. He was fascinated with the history of the Klondike Gold Rush and caught up in the “spell of the Yukon,” but he didn’t see himself anywhere. “At one point I started to look inward. ‘What was my place; what was I doing?’” he says. At the presentation, he learned about George T. Harper, who after moving to Anchorage, Alaska, in 1981, began documenting Black history in the North and eventually founded the Blacks in Alaska History Project. Hearing Harper’s story and about the work HHSY was doing in the territory

struck a chord with Gowdie. “I thought, *Wow! I never knew of any other Black people in the North,*” he recalls.

HHSY plays the vital role of archivist, storyteller, and event coordinator by researching and sharing the stories of racialized voices through exhibitions, its website, and a speaker series. To date, the society has created 12 portable exhibits—six on Black history and six on Asian history—which are available for loan from the Yukon Archives for researchers, educators, and the public.

Documenting history is a big responsibility. Gowdie says the group faces numerous challenges in accurately recounting peoples’ stories. “Any type of history that’s somewhat related to the gold rush or pre gold rush is challenging to find. There’s not much documentation in terms of ethnicities.... That narrative was predominantly one-sided, which creates information gaps.”

Often, primary sources are lacking because people who bore witness to the stories are no longer alive. So, society members sift through interviews, news clippings, and photos, not unlike trying to put together the pieces of a puzzle.

HHSY doesn’t just focus on gold-rush-era stories. For more recent history, they can sometimes gather material straight from the source. Such is the case for Reverend Joshua Phillpotts (1929–2015), who moved to Watson Lake from Jamaica in the ’60s. In interviews with Phillpotts and his family, the society gleaned anecdotal information and clues as to where they could find other documentation. Little by little, the story came together.

HHSY also interviewed Socorro (Cory) Alfonso (1950–2017), a Filipina woman who came to the Yukon in 1986, as well as the families she cared for as a nanny. “She was a wonderful woman,” says Lillian Nakamura Maguire, a HHSY board member. “From her employers to the Filipino community, she was really respected.” The society created an exhibit on Alfonso’s journey from the Philippines to the Yukon, which was displayed publicly in 2017 and later served as a commemoration for friends, family, and the community.

Nakamura Maguire was introduced to HHSY while working for the Yukon Human Rights Commission. In that capacity, she educated others about the impact racialized people had on the development of the territory, as well as the hardships they endured. “I used those stories to help people appreciate those contributions of [racialized] people to our communities,” she says. What started as a work assignment for Nakamura Maguire developed into a passion, and she started volunteering for HHSY in 2002.





**Left:** Nakamura Maguire has been volunteering with HHSY since 2002. **Right:** A gathering to honour Socorro Alfonso.

Telling someone else's story isn't easy, and Nakamura Maguire says sometimes sharing facts can be sensitive. "You want to be respectful to the people who you're trying to tell their stories and also sensitive to their family that are still alive. It's a fine balance," she says. Gowdie adds it's important to understand the context. "We have to present information from the lens of that person's experience."

Two things these hidden histories don't lack is intrigue and grit. Resiliency is a common theme for racialized Yukoners during their time getting to and living in the territory, which almost always provides the foundation for a compelling story.

For Nakamura Maguire, giving a voice to people who might otherwise be forgotten can be a form of public education. "The stories are a way to get people interested in seeing how human rights are really a part of our daily lives. These rights don't come easily for many

people," she explains. "These stories hopefully ... get at peoples' hearts to better understand what racialized people might have faced and are facing today."

The stories of racialized Yukoners, past and future, are worthy of commemoration. And so, to answer the question, yes, there are definitely Black people in Yukon, as well as other racialized people whose stories have also been glossed over by history. I hope one day people stop enquiring because they know better. And that will be thanks, in part, to the hard work of groups like the Hidden Histories Society Yukon. **Y**

### HIDDEN HISTORIES SOCIETY YUKON

**Mandate:** HHSY fosters and increases understanding of ethno-cultural history in the Yukon. It works year-around but ramps up its outreach during Black History Month in February, International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in March, and Asian History Month in May. **Current projects:** The society is updating its website to make research materials more accessible to educators, researchers, historians, and anyone interested in Black and Asian Yukon histories. **Members/volunteers:** Between 15 and 20. **Did you know?** Canadian writer Lawrence Hill used HHSY resources for his research on Black History in the Yukon • George T. Harper's research and exhibit materials are accessible at the Consortium Library's Archives and Special Collections, in Anchorage, Alaska.

Learn more: [hhsy.org](http://hhsy.org)

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