

## African Heritage Month Matters

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African Heritage Month is a time for learning, reflection, and connection. In Nova Scotia, it invites us to pause and acknowledge that people of African descent have been part of this landscape for more than 400 years. African Nova Scotians are deeply rooted here, with over 50 historic Black communities located throughout Mi'kma'ki. It is also a time to celebrate the wide span of cultures that the African diaspora has to offer, each contributing to the cultural and social fabric of this place.

It is an opportunity to disrupt the idea that Black people are a monolith. We are not. People of African descent are diverse, shaped by different histories, cultures, languages, and lived experiences. This includes families that have been here for generations, as well as those who have arrived more recently and work diligently to preserve culture and build community as well as a sense of belonging. It is important to see people as they are, rather than through stereotypes, assumptions, or limited narratives. Everyone deserves to be seen fully, without feeling the need to hide parts of who they are, due to the consequences that are often felt when expressing themselves racially and/or culturally.

For many people of African descent, African Heritage Month can feel like the one time of year when our histories and cultures are intentionally acknowledged. Levels of observation and participation can fluctuate greatly during the month. In some spaces it is embraced with enthusiasm, in others it is quiet, and in some it is overlooked entirely. Still, its purpose remains meaningful: to create space for understanding, cultural recognition and appreciation. The need to affirm Black culture, history, and humanity does not disappear on March 1<sup>st</sup>.

Being seen and heard matters immensely. Giving voice and visibility to those who often go unseen and unheard is important. It was the driving force behind the creation of the African Nova Scotian flag. The flag represents culture, belonging, and recognition. Its official launch in 2021 was also important. It made its debut on the MacDonald Bridge, the old bridge overlooking my childhood neighbourhood in one of our historic Black communities. It was

the first time a cultural flag had ever flown on either of the two bridges. It displayed boldly that we matter. For African Nova Scotians, it was a powerful affirmation that we are here and recognized as a unique and vibrant cultural group.

African Heritage Month encourages us to learn more about Black history and culture. It allows space, voice and attention to be rightfully given to the history of Black presence in this province and throughout Canada. Understanding this history helps make sense of present-day realities for people of African descent and reminds us why equity and inclusion continue to be important.

During this month and beyond, we do right by giving time and attention to learning about Black people and their contributions

to this land. Learning works best when it is self-initiated. Taking time to listen, read, attend community events, or engage with Black voices and stories can be meaningful starting points. Bringing community into educational spaces, and education into community, helps build relationships rooted in respect and shared understanding.

African Heritage month can be used as a springboard to launch the idea of cultural exploration and respectful

engagement. Small, thoughtful actions throughout the year can make a big difference, from supporting Black-led organizations to welcoming diverse perspectives in everyday spaces. Being open to learning, asking questions from a place of sincerity, and being willing to adjust when gaining new understandings are all part of the process. Humility also plays a key role in continuing the work even after what we thought to be true has been dispelled. This work can be humbling and is not meant to be taken personally by those who are learning.

African Heritage Month can also remind us that growth may not always be comfortable, but it can be deeply rewarding. When culture is valued and diversity is truly welcomed, communities become stronger. We all benefit when we take the time to learn from one another and move forward together. This month matters because being recognized, seen, and valued matters.

