

EMANCIPATION DAY

EMANCIPATION DAY IS AUG. 1 – THE DATE IN 1834 THAT THE SLAVERY ABOLITION ACT CAME INTO EFFECT ACROSS THE BRITISH EMPIRE.¹ The act would eventually lead to the freeing of more than 800,000 enslaved people and their descendants globally.² Recognizing Emancipation Day offers an important opportunity to reflect and hold meaningful conversations around race relations and the history and impact of enslavement in Canada. The day also celebrates Canada's diverse heritage and re-energizes the fight against anti-Black racism and discrimination.

Canada's history of slavery

Many Canadians take pride in our nation's role in the Underground Railroad and celebrate our national identity as a destination for freedom-seeking enslaved people. Some people may not be aware that Canada has its own centuries-long history of enslavement of both Black and Indigenous Peoples. European explorers in the 15th century were notorious for enslaving Indigenous Peoples.² Prior to British colonial settlement, two-thirds of enslaved people in Canada were Indigenous, the majority of whom were girls as young as 14.² Buying, selling and enslavement of Black people were practised in what is now Canada starting in the early 1600s until the abolition of slavery in 1834.³ While slavery was outlawed officially in 1834, the act resulted in only partial liberation, as it applied solely to children under the age of six.²

Chattel slavery was a dehumanizing and violent system of abuse and subjugation that was fundamentally racist – white supremacy justified the exploitation of Indigenous and African peoples.⁴ These harmful biases live on and contribute to socio-economic and health outcome disparities today.

Broken promises

Thousands of Black Loyalists immigrated to Canada after being promised land and their freedom for supporting the British during the American Revolutionary War. Despite these promises of prosperity, cultivable land often never materialized. Black settlers faced racism, inequality, and a lack of food and clothing that often forced them back into bonded servitude under conditions virtually identical to the slavery from which they had escaped.⁵ Indenture was also a common legal punishment, applied indiscriminately to free Black people for such crimes as "frolicking" or "eyeing a white man's potato patch too hungrily."⁶

Despite this prejudice and hardship, Black people continued to persevere, establishing free communities rooted in faith and collective values.

Connection to Doctors Nova Scotia's work

The slave trade inflicted unimaginable suffering and created enduring racist stereotypes and inequities. Historical inequities distressingly map onto health outcome disparities today. Commemorating Emancipation Day affirms Doctors Nova Scotia's commitment to learning, reflecting, and taking meaningful action to address these disparities. To adequately address systemic barriers and advance health outcomes, it is important to acknowledge the legacy of slavery and its impacts on the health and well-being of communities of colour.

1 [Emancipation Day | Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission](#)

2 <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/emancipation-day.html>

3 [Black Enslavement in Canada | The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

4 [The story of Black slavery in Canadian history | CMHR](#)

5 [Slavery in Nova Scotia](#)

6 [Frolicking and Other Crimes](#)

