

# The Colored Inhabitants of Vancouver Island

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In 1864 Samuel Gridley Howe, the distinguished American reformer and friend of the Negro, published an analysis of the position of the Negro in Canada. Howe wrote:

The Canadians constantly boast that their laws know no difference of color; that they make blacks eligible to offices, and protect all their rights; and the refugees constantly admit that it is so. The very frequency of the assertion and of the admission, proves that it is not considered a matter of course that simple justice should be done. People do not boast that the law protects white men.

The truth of the matter seems to be that, as long as the colored people form a very small proportion of the population, and are dependent, they receive protection and favors; but when they increase, and compete with the labouring class for a living; and especially when they begin to aspire to social equality, they cease to be "interesting negroes," and become "niggers."<sup>1</sup>

Howe's experience was mainly with Negroes concentrated in the south-western part of the present province of Ontario. But that same year, 1864, an article by a Negro (whose name we do not know), entitled "The Colored Inhabitants of Vancouver Island," appeared in *The Liberator*, the anti-slavery weekly published in Boston by William Lloyd Garrison, which revealed that Howe's analysis could easily be transferred to Canada's Pacific Coast. In his study, "Negro Settlement in British Columbia," James W. Pilton does not cite this article, but he substantiates, through other sources, the conditions it describes.<sup>2</sup>

Negro migration to British Columbia was the result of two influences

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Gridley Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West*, Report to the Freeman's Inquiry Commission, Boston, 1864, p. 11. See also Robin W. Winks, "The Canadian Negro: A Historical Assessment," *Journal of Negro History*, vol. LIII, October 1968, pp. 293-95.

<sup>2</sup> James W. Pilton, "Negro Settlement in British Columbia," unpublished M.A. thesis, University of British Columbia, 1951.

operating simultaneously. One was the Fraser River Gold Rush of the late 1850's which produced a demand for a large group of laborers. Notices of a severe labor shortage in Victoria began to appear in the California press, and the Negro community of San Francisco began to show interest in migrating to Canada.<sup>3</sup> This interest grew rapidly in April 1858 when Negro mass meetings in San Francisco received information that "they would be welcomed in Victoria and that there was employment and land."<sup>4</sup>

Another influence was the intensification of proscription against California Negroes precisely at this time. With many white miners in the late 1850's seeking work, attempts to bar Negro immigration into California increased while the efforts of those already in the state to eliminate discriminatory practices met new rebuffs. Efforts of the militant California Negro convention movement to obtain the right of Negroes to testify in civil and criminal cases where white men were also involved, and to secure the opportunity for education for their children in the state's all-white school system were insultingly denied by the legislature.<sup>5</sup> Under these circumstances an exodus of several hundred California Negroes to British Columbia occurred.

Among those who left were several leaders of the movement for Negro rights in California, and it is, therefore, not surprising to find them active in the same cause in Victoria when they discovered that a change of nations had not produced a complete alteration in the pattern of their lives. Peter Lester, Mifflin Wistar Gibbs, and Jacob Francis, who are mentioned in the report published in *The Liberator*, had been leaders of the Negro Convention movement in California.<sup>6</sup> Gibbs and Lester had been partners in a boot and shoe shop in San Francisco, and they had

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Rudolph M. Lapp, "Negro Rights Activities in Gold Rush California," *California Historical Society Quarterly*, vol. XLV, March 1966, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-12.

<sup>6</sup> Mifflin Wistar Gibbs was probably the outstanding figure among California Negroes in the 1850's, and was a publisher of the *Mirror of the Times*, the first paper devoted to the interests of the Negro on the Coast. He had met Frederick Douglass and shortly afterwards became one of the founders of the Negro Convention movement in California. In Victoria he established one of the first general merchandise houses, and was elected Councilman from the James Bay district. In 1867 he contracted to build a railroad from Queen Charlotte coal mine to Skidgate harbor, and was made superintendent of the road when it was completed. Gibbs studied law with an English barrister while in Victoria, and remained in British Columbia until 1869, when he left for Little Rock, Arkansas. Here he occupied a number of official positions including the post of municipal judge. He was the author of an autobiography, *Shadow and Light*. For a biographical sketch, see Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California*, Los Angeles, California, 1919, pp. 54, 110-13.

suffered the humiliation of being robbed and beaten by a white man without the possibility of obtaining justice because of the testimony laws. Moreover, a few weeks before he decided to emigrate to Victoria, Lester's daughter, who was very light-skinned, had been expelled from an all-white public school when it was discovered who her parents were. Other Negro parents whose children had been rejected by the schools joined the Victoria exodus.<sup>7</sup>

The "celebrated Archie Lee" mentioned in the article was the person in the famous Archy fugitive slave case of 1858 in California. Although the state legislature had passed a fugitive slave law in 1852 which gave white men the power to return Negroes whom they claimed as slaves in southern states, it was largely a dead letter by 1858. However, Archy's owner brought him to California in that year, and when his slave escaped, he sought redress in the courts. The state Supreme Court, in a decision remarkable for its ridiculousness, ruled that while Archy deserved his freedom, his master merited being treated kindly by the state and, therefore, Archy must return to slavery. The decision caused such an uproar that Archy obtained his freedom and migrated to Victoria.<sup>8</sup>

In his perceptive study, "Negro Rights Activities in Gold Rush California," Rudolph M. Lapp says of those Negroes who left for British Columbia: "For many this was a vast improvement in their situation."<sup>9</sup> But the anonymous Negro reporter in *The Liberator*, on the basis of first-hand knowledge, reached a different conclusion. Here are his observations.

#### THE COLORED INHABITANTS OF VANCOUVER ISLAND

A correspondent (colored man) of the *Pacific Appeal* (organ of the colored people at San Francisco) says, in *Notes of a Trip to Victoria, V.I.*:

There is as much prejudice, and nearly as much isolation, in Victoria as in San Francisco. In some cases, the social and political position of the colored people is more favorable there than here; but the Americans and Jews from California, who have settled here, have formed a public opinion unfavorable to us. Happily, they have not succeeded in all cases. Churches and schools are exceptions, although our leading men had to fight hard to

<sup>7</sup> Lapp, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Lucille Eaves, *A History of California Labor Legislation*, Berkeley, California, 1922, pp. 99-103.

<sup>9</sup> Lapp, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

obtain their rights in both. Messrs. Lester, Gibbs, J. Francis and others, battled manfully to keep churches and schools free from caste; and to their exertions is due the equality which exists in those institutions. It was grudgingly and unwillingly awarded; but they claimed it as their rights as British subjects, and finally succeeded.

I went to the theatre with some ladies when the Marsh children were performing. When I said I wanted box tickets, the man hesitated, and said he believed the boxes were full; but as I insisted, he gave me them, and we found very eligible seats.

Colored men are never summoned as jurors on trials; I believe they have occasionally sat on coroners' juries. When they were organizing fire companies, Jacob Francis endeavored to have the colored inhabitants represented, but he was voted down. In some places of public accommodation, such as barber-shops, bar-rooms, restaurants and hotels, colored persons are denied the usual privileges; but such places are invariably kept by Americans or foreigners. In many of the finest establishments, where the proprietors are Englishmen, there is no distinction; they are free from the prejudices which Americans have introduced. There are, however, many Englishmen who are as full of prejudice as the lowest secesh American among them. They all, moreover, receive you with an aristocratic, patronizing air.

Among the notables of Victoria is the celebrated Archie Lee, upon whose fate once hung the destinies of the colored people of California. Archie is a sober, honest, hard-working man, a respectable citizen of Victoria, and a loyal subject of Her Majesty. It affords me much pleasure to be able to contradict the reports which have been circulated prejudicial to the character of Archie Lee; he follows the lucrative occupation of draying, and has accumulated some property, and is much respected by the community.

The colored inhabitants of Vancouver Island are in advance of the colored people of San Francisco in point of wealth. They nearly all own real estate, and are in comfortable circumstances. They went to Victoria during the Fraser river excitement of 1858 — some to engage in mining, some to live under the fancied liberality of British laws, and some to engage in speculation, for which a new settlement always offers facilities to the enterprising. Fraser river proving a failure, they invested their money in real estate, which has risen rapidly, and made many of them comparatively wealthy. As regards intelligence and acquirements, they present an average of the colored people of this and Eastern cities.

Victoria is much like all cities which have grown from adventitious

circumstances. The lower, or first settled part of the town, presents the same aspect which is characteristic of New York and San Francisco — a few wide streets, intersected by narrow lanes and crooked alleys — this comprises the business portion of the city. The upper part is well laid out in straight, broad streets and long avenues, extending far beyond the environs. From Beacon Hill you have a fine view of the city, which looks picturesque and interesting. The thrifty farms, the bays and estuaries, which almost surround the peninsula on which the city is built, add to the beauty of the scene.

The lower part of the city is lighted with gas, and a company of capitalists are laying water-pipes to furnish pure and wholesome water from a small lake, a few miles distant.

Victoria, having assumed municipal proportions, has a municipal government, which institution works about as well there as elsewhere. When I left, they were quarreling among themselves about lighting the upper part of the town with gas; some of the city fathers contending that gas was useless, and if it was better each man should carry his lantern o' nights, like Doberry's watchmen.

I referred to the political position of the colored people. They have the elective franchise, and that is all the political privilege they do possess. The naturalized subjects are eligible to seats in the city counsel, but not in the provincial parliament, a law being passed to exclude from that body all except subjects of the British Empire by birth. This law was evidently passed to exclude colored persons, for since 1858 only 4 white persons have become naturalized; whereas, about 150 colored persons have taken the oath of allegiance. It is not very probable a colored person will ever be elected to either body. Two attempts have been made; and although, in each case, the candidates were as capable and as worthy as any in the colony, they were both defeated. Prejudice is too strong in Vancouver Island. We have brighter prospects of political elevation under our own Government, than in any British colony on this coast.

*The Liberator*, April 15, 1864.