

## **AFRICVILLE**

**Don Clairmont, Dalhousie University**

Africville has correctly been called Canada's most famous Black community. It was settled in the 1840s by descendants of the Black Refugees of the War of 1812-14 who purchased lands at the then-outer perimeter of Halifax in the face of serious challenges to all but basic survival on the barren, scrubby land that had been granted them. By the last decade of that century the name Africville had become widespread and the community was deemed by Black leaders in Nova Scotia to be a fine community with much promise. Seventy years later, in the 1960s, the small community of roughly 400 persons, was relocated by Halifax authorities and with the reluctant approval of community leaders, local Black and White progressives, and social housing and human rights experts called in from Ontario. What happened and why? It has been the subject of books, scholarly and fiction, award winning documentaries, hundreds of newspaper articles (local, national and international), dozens of graduate student theses, poems, songs, a jazz suite, symposia, and an exhibition which traveled across Canada and is now housed permanently at the Black Cultural Centre in Halifax Regional Municipality, Nova Scotia. There remains a continuing negotiation over compensation for Africville people and proper recognition of the community (and acknowledgement of the failed responsibility on the part of Halifax officials and society in general) between the City of Halifax and the Africville Genealogical Society which speaks for the former residents of Africville and their descendants. A United Nations committee has also weighed in on the significance of Africville, the importance of its history, the racism and neglect that eventually made its people vulnerable to the urban renewal process and relocation, and the validity of the Genealogical Society's claims for compensation and recognition. Most of the public attention, certainly most of the positive characterizations of Africville, has occurred in the thirty-six years since the community buildings were bull-dozed out of existence and the residents scattered, largely into neighbouring areas of the former seashore site. Africville no longer exists in a physical sense though surviving members and their descendants and friends usually gather each summer at the former site, now the Seaview Memorial Park, to renew ties, remember, and enjoy themselves.

The Black settlers of the community that became known as Africville moved to the Halifax was driven by economic need and taking up a new life in the city, at its outer peninsular edge, made possible both a bucolic life style and opportunities for paid employment. The small community took hold over the next few decades with a church and a school. By the last decade of the century the name Africville had become widespread and the community was deemed by Black leaders in Nova Scotia to be a fine community with much promise. Unfortunately, as researchers have documented,

From the beginning of the Africville settlement, the community was constantly encroached upon by developments in the larger society. Land was expropriated for railway construction and various facilities such as sewage disposal pits and an infectious diseases hospital were established on the edges of the community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

reducing the community's residential attractiveness and signaling future intrusions. By the end of the WW1, Africville was ringed by facilities rejected by other residential areas of the city and was largely left to fend for itself with respect to housing standards, bylaw enforcement and policing. Residents petitioned for services but mostly to no avail. City officials claimed there was a minimal tax base there and in any event the Africville area might be better utilized for non-residential development. Africville evolved as a small community with considerable social diversity but increasingly its reputation suffered as small numbers of squatters and transients (often White) moved into the community from the 1930s on. The establishment of an open dump on its doorstep in the 1950s in addition to its sometimes condemned wells and lack of paved roads sealed its public image as "the slum by the dump". It was a label that belied the community's strengths and core respectable life style but one that was widely held in the larger society among both Whites and Blacks and that made it impossible to resist the pressures of urban renewal, liberal welfare relocation policy and integrationist civil rights that emerged after WW2 throughout Canada and the United States.

**When Africville residents were relocated in 1964 to 1967, the community's population consisted of 80 households and about 400 people.** The relocation was hailed as a fine example of liberal welfare policy, guided by proposals made by a leading Canadian social housing expert, with Black and White representatives of an independent Human Rights Commission involved in each relocatee's settlement, and a social worker responsible for working with the residents and developing educational and employment programs. Within a few years however the relocation's alleged success began to be sharply challenged as the promised benefits for many Africvilleans and their families were not realized. The educational and employment programs were minimal and ineffective; the housing conditions for many relocatees – public housing and housing in areas scheduled for redevelopment – left much to be desired, and the loss of community was much grieved. Africville became a symbol of the need for Black communities to appreciate their communal culture, build on their strengths and resist similar pressures, and also of the hubris of a liberal welfare ideology that focused on individuals rather than communities and neglected the significance of social power in ensuring that promises became actualities. Africville became a symbol for the Black community's experiences in Nova Scotia and the lessons learned perhaps a hope for its future.

Published in the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, 2007

#### Suggested Bibliography

Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis William Magill, Africville: the life and death of a Canadian black community. Canadian Scholars Press, Toronto. Third Edition, 1999

Africville Genealogical Society (ed.), The Spirit of Africville. Halifax: Formac Publishing Limited, 1992

James W. Walker and Patricia Thorvaldson, The Black Experience in Canada.  
Toronto: Gage Educational Publishing, 1979