

BLACK HISTORY MONTH | CELEBRATING PORTIA WHITE

Posted on February 18, 2021

Category: [News](#)

Portia May White (1911–1968) | Agent of Change | Remembered as the first Black Canadian concert singer to achieve international fame and vocal instructor to some of Canada’s most famous performers.

William Andrew White, the son of former slaves in Virginia, moved to Canada in 1900. He earned a bachelor degree in theology three years later from Acadia University as its second Black graduate. In 1906, while working as a minister in Truro, Nova Scotia, he married Izie Dora White (no relation) with whom he would raise 13 children.

Many of William’s children and descendants grew up to become highly accomplished figures in music, literature and politics, not the least of which was his third daughter, Portia.

From the age of six, Portia White was a member of the choir at the Cornwallis Street Baptist Church in Halifax (now the New Horizons Baptist Church) where her mother was musical director and her father was minister. When White was older, she became director of the choir and raised money for the church by singing in her father’s radio show.

In 1929, White began studies at Dalhousie University with the goal of becoming a teacher. She taught primary school in two small, predominantly black Halifax communities, Africville and Lucasville, earning enough to pay for weekly vocal lessons a 10-mile walk away. Winning a scholarship in 1939, she continued her musical training at the Halifax Conservatory of Music.

As her national debut, White performed at the Eaton Auditorium in Toronto in 1941 at age 30. That year, the Nova Scotia Talent Trust was established to support her in her singing career. She went on to perform at concerts across the country, singing European classical music as well as African-American spirituals.

In 1944, White was the first Canadian to perform at the legendary New York’s Town Hall performance space, earning her the accolade “remarkable” in the *New York Times*. Numerous performances in the United States followed, and in 1945, White embarked on a tour of Central and South America. She performed in the Caribbean in 1946, and two years later in France and Switzerland.

White’s early retirement from performing was the product of her strenuous itinerary and a cancer diagnosis. In

1952, she moved to Toronto where she provided vocal instruction to some of Canada's most famous performers, including Lorne Greene, Dinah Christie, Don Francks and Robert Goulet.

Over the fifties and sixties, White sang only a few concerts including one before Queen Elizabeth II at Charlottetown's confederation Centre of the Arts in 1964. White died in Toronto in 1968.

In 1995, White was named a person of historical significance by the government of Canada and a stamp was issued in her honour four years later as part of Canada Post's Millennium Collection – Extraordinary Entertainers.