

BLACK HISTORY MONTH | CELEBRATING ROBERT SUTHERLAND

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Category: [News](#)

Robert Sutherland (c. 1830–1878) | Agent of Change | Remembered as one of Queen’s University’s most important benefactors, its first student and graduate of colour, and British North America’s first known Black lawyer.

Born in Jamaica, Robert Sutherland began his studies at Queen’s in 1849, just eight years after the university was founded. He was a stellar student, winning 14 academic awards.

In 1855, Sutherland became British North America’s first known Black lawyer, practising first in Berlin, Ontario (now Kitchener) and then moving to Walkerton, where he practised for more than 20 years.

After contracting pneumonia, Sutherland died without heirs in 1878, leaving his entire estate to Queen’s. The university had lost most of its endowment as the result of bank collapse a few years earlier. Sutherland’s bequest, the largest donation any single person had yet made to the university, was used to launch a fundraising campaign that helped save Queen’s from being annexed by the University of Toronto.

In 2009, Queen’s Board of Trustees approved the renaming of the Policy Studies Building as Robert Sutherland Hall. The building houses a number of departments and institutes dedicated to the study of politics and governmental issues.

The university also honours Sutherland through the annual Robert Sutherland Prize awarded to a graduating and self-defined student of colour who shows leadership in fostering diversity, the Robert Sutherland Award for Excellence in Debating and other awards bearing his name.