

Viola Desmond

Activist, Trailblazer &
BUSINESS WOMAN

Viola Desmond will likely always be remembered as a forward-looking civil rights pioneer during Nova Scotia's backward, racial segregation era.

Viola Desmond, in her studio, circa 1938.
(Wanda Robson Collection, Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University)



But before her principled stand against a discriminatory seating arrangement in a New Glasgow movie theatre, the businesswoman was a busy entrepreneur focusing on growing her commercial cosmetics and hair-care enterprises.

Desmond received her 'beauty' training outside the province and upon her return she sold her own line of hair and skin products across Nova Scotia, and later ran a beauty school and beauty parlour in Halifax. She was a successful beautician, hairstylist and mentor to many young Black women seeking to emulate her business savvy.

Entrepreneur Tracey L. Crawley says Desmond's business legacy is one that "set such a high standard" for those who followed in her footsteps.



"The beauty of it all is that she shared her knowledge and skills with young Black women, training them up, which expanded her business and offered opportunities of employment and entrepreneurship for these ladies," says Crawley, owner of Crowning Glory Hair Studio Plus in Dartmouth.

"She broke boundaries and empowered women of all ages, while persevering in the challenging times of that period in history."

Prior to the now-famous incident inside the theatre in 1946, which happened during a business trip derailed by car trouble, Desmond showed entrepreneurial leadership that, according to the Nova Scotia Archives, inspired other Black women in the province.



Tracey Crawley, Crowing Glory Hair Studio Plus. (photo: Paul Adams)

Crawley says Desmond not only possessed business acumen, she was a visionary.

"Clearly, she was strategic in planning her achievements," Crawley says. *"How do you know when you arrive at your destination, if you don't know where you're going?"*

Wanda Robson, who remembers her late sister as polite and dignified, feels Desmond was a trailblazer not only in the field of human rights, but in the business world, too. The hard-working woman was ahead of her time, Robson has told reporters over the years.

"She was a successful businesswoman," Robson told a TV interviewer in Halifax in 2010. *"She bought a car, made her own products," sold them and ran her beauty salon. Seventy years ago, it was rare for a Black woman to own her own vehicle,* Robson has said.

She said during the television broadcast that Black women in Halifax in the 1940s "had no place to go for (face) powder, for hair – even getting their hair done. There was no place except Viola's."

Wanda Robson, Viola Desmond's sister.
(©Cape Breton Post)



"At a time when few women owned and operated independent businesses, she was admired as outstanding for her time," an online entry from the archives says. *"Her eager graduates began their own careers and joined the distribution network for Viola Desmond's brand of beauty products."*

Graduates of the Desmond School of Beauty Culture were given the opportunity to acquire marketable skills they couldn't learn elsewhere: Black women were denied access back then to whites-only training schools that provided similar instruction to their students. (Desmond had to get her own career training in Montreal, Atlantic City, N.J., and New York.)

Robson said Desmond decided to show other women in the community interested in business that *"they can do this, even if it isn't in beauty culture. It could be something else, but they could do it."*

Entrepreneurship was her strong suit and her cosmetology business prospered. A small newspaper advertisement from 1947 shows Desmond prudently used a key customer-service tool of the day. **"MAIL ORDERS PROMPTLY FILLED!"** it says.



Desmond didn't start out as a business operator, Robson recalls in the 2016 book, *Viola Desmond's Canada: A History of Blacks and Racial Segregation in the Promised Land*. She earned her teacher's certificate and taught at a segregated school in Upper Hammonds Plains, outside Halifax.



Madam C.J. Walker
(A'Leia Bundles/Madam Walker Family Archives)

"At about this same time, Viola read an article about Madam C.J. Walker who was a pioneer (in the United States) in developing beauty products for Black women," Robson says in the book, co-authored by Graham Reynolds, a professor emeritus from Cape Breton University.

"The success of Madam Walker inspired Viola, and (in the 1930s) she began saving her teaching salary so she could pay for the training she needed to become a beautician," she says. Later, Desmond's clients included Truro-born Portia White, an international opera singer, and Gwen Jenkins, who was the first Black nurse in Nova Scotia, Robson, a North Sydney resident, says in the book.

Walker, born Sarah Breedlove in Louisiana in 1867, had parents and siblings who'd been slaves in the U.S. South. She became a self-made millionaire.

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Desmond modelled herself after Walker, who died in 1919, and was determined to cover similar ground north of the border. She envisioned a beauty business empire stretching across Canada.

"She said: 'That's what I want to do. That's who I want to be,'" Robson told a CBS-TV presenter, in a nationally-televised broadcast that aired on Feb. 28, about Walker's influence on her sister. "This lady was way before (Desmond's) time," Robson added.



Ann Divine, founder and chief executive officer of Ashanti Leadership and Professional Development Services.

At a public appearance in January in Montreal, where decades earlier Desmond had studied at Field Beauty Culture School, Robson said her sister was "always driven for her goal."

Consultant Ann Divine, founder and chief executive officer of Ashanti Leadership and Professional Development Services in Halifax, said Desmond's ability as a businesswoman was superior on several levels.

She said Desmond would have to have been an excellent researcher, networker, and negotiator and a scientist, as well. Also, like many entrepreneurs, she was a risk-taker.

Divine, who provides leadership development and other professional skills advice to clients, called Desmond "one of those rare gems" who carried a lot of weight with succeeding generations.

"Viola Desmond broke the mold. She shattered the glass ceiling," she said. "So, therefore, she will always be prominently featured in my training sessions from now on."



Viola Desmond speaking at graduation, circa 1945. (Wanda Robson Collection, Beaton Institute)

An example of determination and perseverance, Desmond grew up in a large, middle-class family in which the father was black and her mother was white. She "developed a strong independent character," Reynolds notes in the non-fiction book he worked on with Robson.

Her future, he says in the book, lay outside the conventional employment opportunities for women during that period.

And the Rest is History...



Desmond died in 1965 at age 50. Her brave opposition to racist seating rules in the Roseland Theatre in post-war New Glasgow, and subsequent unjust legal trouble, went unrecognized for many years (after initially garnering public attention), but have now reached iconic status in Canada.



Among other things, she was given a posthumous pardon by the province of Nova Scotia and issued a public apology.

Desmond's image graces a Canadian postage stamp, a Halifax Transit ferry is named in her honour, she's among six bigotry fighters profiled in a National

Film Board documentary and the federal government announced last year the \$10 bill featuring Desmond is to make its debut in 2018.

She'll become the first Canadian woman to be feted on the face of this country's currency.

In February 2015, Desmond was the inaugural honouree marking Nova Scotia Heritage Day, a holiday that takes place during African Heritage Month. ☘

