

## THE PROBLEM WITH 60 SECOND NATION BUILDING VIDEOS

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Heritage Minutes are a series of 60-second films portraying a significant person, event, or story in Canadian history. They have become embedded in Canadian popular culture through regular broadcast on major Canadian television networks, screened before feature films in cinemas, and are being used in classrooms across the country.

The story of black sleeping car porters is the story of racial segregation, white supremacist employment practices in Canada, and the black community politically organizing to become their own agents of change. But you wouldn't know that after watching Historica Canada's Heritage Minute "Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters". The fifty-five second film perpetuates and cements a long history of denial, omission, and erasure of how white supremacy is foundational to Canada. In contrast, Sarah-Jane Mathieu's article "North of the Colour Line: Sleeping Car Porters and the Battle Against Jim Crow on Canadian Rails, 1880-1920" published eighteen years prior to the film details the plight of black sleeping car porters and how white supremacy structures Canada's past and present.

### **Becoming Sleeping Car Porters:**

- Canadian railway companies thrived between 1880-1914 and, as a result, experienced chronic labour shortages.
- Through targeted recruitment and previous experience in the transportation industry "black Haligonians enthusiastically joined the rails...the railroad promised steady employment and a respectable wage for those fortunate enough to land full-time employment." (Mathieu, p.13-14)
- With the introduction of luxury sleeping cars, Canadian railway companies actively recruited black railroaders for their sleeping car service. "In 1930, journalist Murray Kempton reflected that for many white travellers, porters seemed like "a domestic apparently unaltered by the passage of time or the Emancipation Proclamation". (Mathieu, p.16)
- According to the film, porters lives were challenging because they were away from their families for long periods of time with little sleep and demanding jobs. However, the article suggests this work fulfilled a wanderlust and as previous mariners they were accustomed to the transnational lifestyle. Mathieu explains that the challenges had more to do with racism and unfair labour practices (e.g.: relegated to lower wage jobs) experienced in their work environment. (Mathieu, p.17)

**What's in a name?** Without providing context, the film mentions that porters were called 'George' by their passengers. This act "enabled white passengers to cling to an Antebellum racial ideal, while black workers understood that their livelihood – and at times their very lives – depended on acting out the part of this offensively racialized construction...Required to smile and act submissively, they did so hiding their thoughts, their dreams, and sometimes their rage." (Mathieu, p. 16)

## White Supremacy and How it Structures Canada's Past:

- By the end of the 19th century a symbiotic relationship existed between black railway men and Canadian railway companies. “The railroad needed workers just as African Canadians needed stable employment... Best of all, black railroaders did not belong to any unions.” (Mathieu, p. 17)
- This harmony didn't last, by 1898 Canadian railway companies replaced black workers with inexperienced white workers (Mathieu, p.17). “Disillusioned, black Haligonians questioned whether the rails were indeed a wise investment in their future when white supremacy – more than industriousness – determined their fate.” (Mathieu, p. 18)
- In 1908 the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees and Other Transportation Workers (CBRE) was created. The union was meant to benefit and protect all railway workers....except Sleeping Car Porters.” (Mathieu, p. 22). “The CBRE's exclusion of sleeping car porters clearly implied black railway roaders given that cooks, waiters, and other railwaymen who were black were likewise denied membership.” (Mathieu, p.22).

## Agents of Change:

- Participation in unionized employment didn't just passively evolve as the film suggests. It came about in response to white supremacist employment practices and because of “African Canadians' swift mobilization of national advocates demonstrated their political sophistication and understanding of local and national institutions”. (Mathieu, p. 20)
- In the early 20th century, African Canadians knew that equal justice would only be attained through political mobilization (Mathieu, p. 18). Led by Reverend Robinson, the black community mobilized using the national press, contacting federal members of Parliament, and informing them that they were prepared to organize in numbers that would sway the balance of power at the next election to ensure “their voices and vote would be respected” (Mathieu, p.19)

Significant editing is required to tell a story in sixty-seconds, but by not centring and honouring historical subjects, like Reverend Robinson, the film has less to do with the experience of black railway men at the turn of the century and is more about reinforcing a false narrative of Canada as a tolerant, racism free nation. How does the historical minute make it sound like Canada is a tolerant racist free nation? Because it never mentions racism of the railway workers and unions.

**Who's Story is Missing?** Both the film and the article lack acknowledgement of the intersection between Indigenous land dispossession and nation building projects such as the railroad. The ripple effect of this silence continues to impact society today



### References:

*Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkYJKL5yd0U>  
(Historica Canada , 2019)

Mathieu, Sara-Jane (Saga). “North of the Colour Line: Sleeping Car Porters and the Battle against Jim Crow on Canadian Rails, 1880-1920.” *Labour/ Le Travail*, 47 (April 2001) 9-41