

Lessons from Africville

Aspects of racism; the case for reparations. In this address by Denise Allen to the Plenary Assembly, un wcar on September 6, 2001, the Africville Genealogy Society presents its case to the world for the first time in history.

Madame Chairperson,

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

The United Nations has provided the world with a unique opportunity to hear about the heroic struggles of the people of Africa and African descendants in Canada.

In addition to demanding reparations for the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, we urge member states to remember the voices of the people of Africville, Nova Scotia, Canada, and ensure that the valid injustice of Africville is addressed within the UN Declaration and Plan of Action documents.

Africville is a stark reminder of the ways in which racism operates within and permeates Canadian society. In Africville, Nova Scotia, what is now Sea-view Park, about 80 families lived and worked in a self-reliant community. After having been enslaved, Africvillians had purchased property with deeds by 1848.

- On December 6, 1917, a collision between a Belgian and a French ammunition carrier virtually levelled a considerable part of northern Halifax, leaving 1,600 people dead, 9,000 injured and another 6,000 homeless. Tens of thousands of city residents were left with badly damaged and destroyed homes. Immediately the international community responded. An international relief commission, tasked with the restoration of Halifax was established.
- The Halifax Relief Commission was entrusted with the task of distributing upwards of thirty million dollars of donations as well as critical medical aid, food, clothing and building materials financial aide and all other supplies that would safe guard the health and safety of Halifax residents. The commission's work has been described as an incredible example of efficiency and community responsibility.
- At the same time as \$500,000 remained in surplus restorative funding, Africville residents, though they were hardest hit, saw another dimension of this "heroic" effort. We were denied access to the relief funding.
- We experienced full brunt of the explosion, yet the commission deliberately denied our community the necessary financial aide or compensation. We knew then we were on our own and rebuilt our community independently.

By 1965, however, the city of Halifax embarked on an urban renewal campaign, which forcibly displaced the residents of Africville in order to make room for industrial expansion. In this, the people of Africville were faced with a formidable adversary and after 150 years, our community was finally destroyed.

The destruction of Africville was part of an agenda that placed the accumulation of capital before people. The hopes and needs of Black citizens were apparently insignificant to government officials.

During the entire history of African Canadians, we resisted all attempts to take our land, our culture and our heritage away from us. Compiled from two recent conferences, the Black World Response Symposium and "Lesson From Africville", held in Halifax, participants identified several components of institutional racism: displacement, denial of essential services, environmental degradation, health, segregation, denial of justice in the courts, unemployment / underemployment, economic inequality, cultural assimilation and denial of education.

Today, I will address the following:

First: The systemic denial of services and human rights. For example Africville residents were subject to the same taxation mechanisms as citizens of Halifax. However, they were never provided with basic amenities. Petitions for public education, water, recreational and play ground facilities, ambulance services, firefighters, paved roads, social assistance, garbage pick-up and removal, and even a cemetery were all denied.

Second: Environmental Degradation. In this case city officials permitted the following to be established within walking distance of Africville homes and play areas: three systems of railway tracks; an open city dump; disposal pits for Halifax toxic waste; a hospital for infectious diseases; a stone and coal crushing plant; a toxic waste dump; a bone-meal plant; a cotton factory; a rolling mill / nail factory; a slaughterhouse; sewage disposal units; a prison; and a port facility for handling coal.

Third: Racist Hiring Practices. For the municipal authorities of Halifax, Africville was used to host a fleet of toxic industries but its residents were to be denied access to well-paying jobs. In fact, employers reserved and hired whites for the better paying jobs. It was this practice that gave birth to nepotism and tokenism. This created an additional obstacle that only exacerbated the economic situation in Africville.

In conjunction with the World Black Response Symposium, Africville delegates worked hard and identified appropriate corrective measures, sustainable, beneficial community economic – developmental solutions that address outstanding, current and predictable legitimate grievances.

The Halifax-based Africville Genealogy Society has been fighting for over 30 years for reparations for the onslaught of blatant human rights violations endured by Africville residents and their children, for more than 150 years.

Undeniably our experience in Canada concludes that governing authorities failed in their responsibility to safeguard the well being of Africvillians. Their discriminatory actions prevented us from access to full and equitable entitlement to share in the

complete enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedom on the same basis as other citizens and peoples, without discrimination.

These rights are defined as international law in such basic United Nations instruments as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976).

Clearly Africville was a community slowly strangled by the denial of basic services and human rights that most Canadians take for granted. Why were we treated with such disdain? Could it be, that the ocean frontage and natural port-property in question was too valuable for black ownership? You be the judge.

In closing I urge you to support us by encouraging the official Canadian delegation to correct this injustice by entering into serious and constructive negotiations for settlement with the former residents of Africville to heal this historic open wound that continues to have a detrimental effect on Canada.

On behalf of the Africville people, who have been dispersed throughout the world, I would like to thank you for your attention.

Back to the land

More than 50 years after residents first asked for it, Africville may finally get running water. But the proposed pipes will service a museum, not the living, breathing community that once populated Seaview Park and the surrounding area. No one has lived in Africville since January 2, 1970, when Aaron Carvery, the community's last holdout, vacated his home. The demolition of Carvery's house a few days later marked the end of a decade-long expropriation and relocation saga that left the century-old community of Africville flattened, and its former residents dispersed. Since then, former residents have been struggling with various city governments seeking reparations for the destruction of their community.

In mid-May, the latest chapter in the struggle started when NDP MLA Maureen MacDonald introduced the Africville Act to the provincial legislature, "to address the historic injustice committed against the people of Africville." The bill calls for a formal apology from the provincial government, a series of public hearings on the destruction of Africville, and the establishment of a development fund to go towards historical preservation of Africville lands and social development in benefit of former residents and their descendants.

A day after MacDonald's bill was tabled at Province House, mayor Peter Kelly re-announced HRM's intended participation in an Africville solution. Kelly offered to contribute land, water services and seed money towards the construction of a replica of the old Seaview African United Baptist Church. The offer was a repeat of one made in

2002, shortly after Africville was declared a national historic site by then heritage minister Sheila Copps.

“It’s the same thing,” says Irvine Carvery, president of the Africville Genealogy Society. “Their position hasn’t changed. That’s where we’re at a crossroads.” After the 2002 city offer, the AGS responded with its own offer, including more land. “We’re not asking for the world,” says Carvery. “All the society is asking is for HRM to give us back a portion of the land that was once ours to allow us the opportunity to develop our national historic site and to be able to do some development on our own.” The city is putting the former church site on the table, but Carvery and the AGS are interested in two other parcels of land, the current Seaview Park, which would remain a public park, and an undeveloped portion called Seaview Lookoff, on which the society hopes to build. “We would like to look into, for example, a senior citizens’ complex,” says Carvery. “Affordable housing is another option.”

Although the proposed Africville Act includes provincial support social development, HRM’s offer excludes dwellings on the land and funding for entrepreneurial purposes, which could limit the type of social development that happens there. MacDonald is open to a range of possibilities, including a scholarship fund and housing for senior citizens. “That’s one of the things the community itself needs to define,” says MacDonald. “How do you make investments to offset any harm you might have done? I don’t want to predetermine that.”

The Africville Act won’t be back for a second reading until the provincial legislature reconvenes in September. In the meantime, the mayor’s office has promised to present a potential budget for the Seaview church replica project to both provincial and federal governments by mid-June.

“We’re going to wait and see what the three levels of government can work out,” says Carvery. “But we’re not going to give them forever.”