

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County



Viola Irene Desmond

(July 6, 1914 – February 7, 1965)

"Civil Rights Icon and The First Black Person To Appear On Canadian Money"



Viola Irene Desmond was born on July 6, 1914, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to a black father, James Albert and a white mother, Gwendolin Irene Davis. Her father's work as a barber, influenced her early interest in the art of black hair care. After Viola graduated from a teaching program, she taught in two segregated schools. Later, pursuing her real passion, she enrolled in the Field Beauty Culture School in Montreal, one of the few schools in Canada that accepted black applicants. She also attended training courses in the U.S., in New Jersey and New York. She returned to Halifax and opened Vi's Studio of Beauty Culture, catering to the black community.

With changing hairstyles that required special products and maintenance, black beauty parlors were in high demand. Answering the call, Viola opened the

Desmond School of Beauty Culture, so black women wouldn't have to travel as far as she did to receive proper training. She had as many as 15 students graduate from the school each year.

Viola was in route to a business meeting on the evening of November 8, 1946, when her car broke down in the small town of New Glasgow. Told that the repair would take several hours, Viola checked into a hotel and decided to catch a movie at the Roseland Theatre that evening. She requested a ticket for main floor seating, but was given a balcony ticket instead. As she headed down to find a seat on the main floor, she was stopped and told that her 20 cent ticket was for a balcony seat only. Viola returned to the cashier and attempted to pay an additional 20 cents for the 40 cent main floor ticket. The cashier refused, saying, "I'm sorry, but I'm not permitted to sell downstairs tickets to *you* people." Offended when she realized that the cashier was referring to her skin color, Viola left the 20 cents on the counter and returned to a seat on the main floor. This time, when she was asked to move to the balcony, she refused. Soon after, a police officer appeared and dragged Viola, a petite woman dressed in her business best, from the theater, injuring her hip. She was arrested and taken to jail where she was left, injured and frightened, for 12 hours. The next morning she appeared in court, charged with attempting to defraud the government, based on the difference in tax for the 40 cent movie ticket. Tax on the 20 cent ticket was two cents, which she paid, but the tax on the 40 cent ticket, was three cents. Viola was officially charged with defrauding the Canadian government of one cent in tax. At no point in her "trial" was race mentioned as the reason she was asked to change seats. Without representation, she was found guilty and ordered to pay a \$26 fine. Seeking to clear her name, Viola fought the conviction. Her lawyer asked the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia to overturn the lower court's decision, but the suit never made it to trial. On January 20, 1947, they ruled against Viola on the grounds that the original magistrate court's decision should have been appealed to the County Court. And since the 10-day deadline for filing an appeal to the original conviction had passed, the conviction stood. The physical stress of the violent arrest and subsequent legal action took a heavy toll on Viola. Her case, however, was a key element for the Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NSAACP) to further their fight against segregation. Seven years later, in 1954, segregation ended in Nova Scotia. In the years that followed, Viola went through a divorce, shut down her businesses and moved, first to Montreal, and then New York City, for a fresh start. However, her health continued to decline, and on February 7, 1965, Viola Irene Desmond died in New York City. She was 50 years old.



Sisters, Wanda Robson and Viola Desmond



Sister, Wanda Robson and Lt. Governor Mayann Francis

In 2009, Wanda Robson, Viola's younger sister, wrote a letter to the mayor of New Glasgow and asked for a pardon of Viola's conviction. Sixty-three years later, on April 15, 2010, Mayann Francis, Nova Scotia's first black lieutenant-governor, posthumously awarded an official apology and pardon for Viola Irene Desmond. The same year, The Viola Desmond Chair in Social Justice was established at Cape Breton University. (Side note: Wanda Robson graduated from Cape Breton University in 2004 with a B.A. degree, at the age of 76!) In 2012, the Canada Post Office issued a Irene Desmond postage stamp.

Viola's vindication culminated when, in 2018, she was selected to appear on the Canadian \$10 banknote. The new bills went into circulation in November, making Viola Desmond the first nonroyal woman to appear alone, and the first black person, to be depicted on Canadian currency. Her devoted sister Wanda, (pictured right) proudly revealed the new design to the world.

Desmond Case Heard; Decision Is Reserved

Original Trial Convicted Woman Defrauding Government One Cent

