

“among the early settlers of Amherstburg” - The Thomas Family – Part 5

Interestingly, it is through Mabel McCurdy Simpson that we find a connection to one of Windsor’s most celebrated basketball players, Fred Thomas. Mabel’s husband Jerome is the son of Matilda Brooks (born c. 1840 in Colchester North to Edmund and Susan Brooks) and James Simpson (born in Mt. Pleasant, Ohio and came to Amherstburg in 1855), who is Fred’s great uncle. James’ sister Mahala Simpson was married to George Thomas (a different George Thomas than discussed above) and they were Fred’s grandparents. Fred was the son of Charles Fred Thomas and Edith Mae Jones (daughter of Fred and Jane), who were residents of Windsor, where Charles worked for the City of Windsor for 40 years before retiring. In addition to Fred, they had five daughters and another son: Helen, Freida, Dorothy, Edith, Hazel and George. Of their children, Fred is the most well-known. Born in Windsor on 26 December 1923, Fred was a fifth generation Canadian who could trace his history back to both fugitive slaves in North Carolina and immigrants from Barbados. Fred Thomas became known as “one of Canada’s finest ever basketball players,” and was able to deliver the perfect hook shot with either hand. Fred attended Patterson Collegiate, playing a big role in the school winning the All-Ontario Basketball championship during his senior year. Following graduation, he joined the Royal Canadian Air Force as a pilot in 1943, earning his wings and serving until 1945. It was then that he enrolled at Assumption College. He first played for Assumption College and is responsible for leading them to the Canadian Senior Men’s Finals in 1949. In fact, during the 1948-49 season, he set a record by scoring 639 points in a single season. Thomas also scored 2,059 points throughout his four-year basketball career at Assumption and remains the only player to score 2,000 points for Assumption or the University of Windsor. On February 23, 1945, Fred led Assumption to a victory over the Harlem Globetrotters with a score of 49-45, which must have

impressed the Globetrotter organization because they invited him to join their organization. Following his time with Assumption, Thomas played professional basketball with the Harlem Globetrotters for two seasons and, later, played for the Toronto Tri-Bells. His biggest disappointment was not being chosen for Canada's Olympic basketball team in 1952 but, over and over again, Thomas proved himself to be a multi-talented athlete, expanding into baseball and football. Thomas became the first Black player to compete in the professional Eastern League (baseball). Not only did he make his debut on July 4, 1948 for the Wilkes-Barre Barons, which was a minor-league affiliate of the Cleveland Indians, he also played for the Kitchener Panthers, where he was the League Batting Champion with an average of .383. If that was not enough, Thomas also had a brief career as a football player with the Toronto Argonauts in 1949, but a knee injury ended his football career. Fred Thomas was such a well-rounded athlete, who could achieve success in many sports. Among his numerous acknowledgements, Thomas was also inducted into the Windsor/Essex County Sports Hall of Fame in 1981; the University of Windsor Alumni Sports Hall of Fame in 1986; the Afro-American Hall of Fame in 1994, and the Canadian Basketball Hall of Fame in 1995. Following his sports career, Fred transferred his athletic skills to teaching where he became a physical education teacher in Toronto, where he taught for over 20 years. Fred Thomas passed away on May 20, 1981. **Thank you for joining us for the Thomas Family History. Stay tuned for next month where we will feature another amazing family.**