

The Henderson Family History Part 1 – The Suffragette

This month's family history which celebrates the Henderson family would not be possible without the contributions of Elise Harding Davis, Curator Emeritus of the North American Black Historical Museum, now the Amherstburg Freedom Museum. Elise shared photographs and memories which have enriched this family history. The Henderson family begins with George Henderson who was married to Catherine Owens. Elise mentioned that George was previously married before Catherine, but Elise and I are unaware of George's first wife's name. Catherine and George were Freedom Seekers who escaped enslavement in Virginia. According to the article "Jesse's Story" which appeared in *The Windsor Star* on August 4, 1987, the Wigle family in Kingsville helped George's son Thomas Jesse get an education at the McMaster Divinity School in Hamilton, Ontario, and gave George a 20-hectaire farm.

George and Catherine's son Thomas Jesse will be the focus of this family history, but the 1901 Census also records Thomas' sister Viola who is listed as 15 years old. I could not find Viola on the next Census for 1911, but it is possible that she married considering she would have been 25 years old by 1911. Because I do not know the name of her husband (if she did marry), I have not been able to find any other information for her.

According to *The Evening Record* (November 19, 1898), George and Catherine's son The Reverend Thomas Jesse Henderson "of North Buxton will be here to take the pastoral charge of the First Baptist church, McDougall st., on Sunday Nov. 20th, 1898. All are invited and made welcome." The following year, on December 1, 1899, *The Evening Record* printed "IN AID OF THE POOR – Successful Concert in the McDougall st. Baptist Church – One of the most successful and enjoyable concerts of the season was that given last evening in the First Baptist church, McDougall st. The concert was given under the auspices of the Helping Hand society

and the proceeds will be expended in helping the poor. The programme consisted of vocal and instrumental music, recitations and readings. Two very spirited and eloquent addresses were delivered by Ald. McConnell and the pastor, Rev. T. Jesse Henderson.”

The Rev. T. Jesse Henderson married Bertha Ann Talbot, the daughter of Benjamin Talbot and Maria Washington. They married on July 11, 1900 in Windsor. *The Evening Record* printed a brief announcement of their marriage which says, “Rev. T. Jesse Henderson, pastor of the First Baptist church, and Miss Bertha Talbert were united in marriage at the residence of Ada Cook, Goyeau st., Wednesday night.” According to Elise, Thomas and Bertha lived in Amherstburg just after they married. They worshiped at The Queen Street Baptist Church but did not remain there long. Elise adds that Bertha was a prolific reader and had every *National Geographic* from the time it started until the 1966 edition. Bertha was also a piano teacher and a phenomenal seamstress who could look at an article of clothing and then go home and make it without a pattern. Bertha’s daughters Rena and granddaughter Ruth were always impeccably dressed. Elise also mentioned that Bertha was a member of the Suffragettes for Windsor and Detroit and, as a young woman, had flaming red hair.

Elise shared that Bertha and Thomas Jesse had at least ten children including Roland, Oscar, Earl, William, Edward, Jesse, and Rena. Neither Elise, nor I, could identify the remaining three children. I will begin with their first child Roland. He was born on April 15, 1901 in Gosfield South (Kingsville). Roland Henderson married Euphemia Moxley, the daughter of George Moxley and Euphemia Jackson, on June 16, 1920 in Sandwich. Their marriage record lists Roland as a Labourer and Euphemia was a Seamstress. According to Elise, Roland was a tenor and Euphemia was a trained concert pianist, and the two met at a performance. Euphemia was the accompanist while Roland was a member of the choir.

Elise also shared that Roland was the first Black person hired at Seagram's (Crown Royal) in Amherstburg, in addition to being the first Black inside worker hired by Canada Post in Windsor (Sandwich) in 1921. Roland was an 'inside postal worker' at the front desk. Elise added that Roland was very 'proper' and taught his grandkids about the constellations and nature. He also loved listening to opera music. In an interview with Elise, she also shared details about Euphemia. She said that Euphemia was the recording secretary for the Hour-A-Day-Study Club which was formed in 1934 by fifteen Black women from Windsor-Essex and is the longest running, non-profit, Black female driven organization in Canada. Additionally, Euphemia's family assisted in the building of the Sandwich First Baptist Church in Windsor. The Moxley/Thorntons lived on Lot St. which is now Watkins. Elise also mentioned that Euphemia played the piano for all the Black Churches in Windsor and Amherstburg. In fact, at one point, Bertha, Euphemia, Euphemia's daughter Ruth, and Elise (Ruth's daughter) all played the piano in the Nazrey AME Church (located on the Amherstburg Freedom Museum's property).

Elise added that Euphemia's mother Euphemia Jackson was Indigenous (Potawatomi) and was born in Kettle Point. I was able to find an obituary for Euphemia's mother Euphemia Jackson Moxley in *The Border Cities' Star* on January 7, 1935. It says "Mrs. Euphemia Moxley – Funeral services for Mrs. Euphemia Moxley, one of the oldest members of the Border colored community, who died Saturday at the home of her daughter, Mrs. Roland Henderson, 549 Bloomfield road, Sandwich, will be at 2 o'clock tomorrow afternoon in the First Baptist Church Sandwich. Interment will be in St. John's Cemetery. Mrs. Moxley, who was 76 years of age, was a native of Sarnia but came to Sandwich 50 years ago and lived there ever since. She was one of the oldest members of the First Baptist Church, president of the Women's Missionary Society of that church, and a member of Victoria W.C.T.U. Surviving besides her daughter, Mrs. Henderson,

are 11 grandchildren. She was the widow of the late George Moxley.” Elise adds “Son Harry (Henry Moxley and wife Clara and three grandchildren Elnore, Bradly and Waunita (later Howe).”

Euphemia Moxley Henderson’s obituary appeared in *The Windsor Daily Star* on December 11, 1958 and says “Mrs. Roland Henderson – A resident of Windsor and district all her life, Mrs. Euphemia Henderson, 61, of 319 Assumption St., died Wednesday at Hotel Dieu after a lengthy illness. She was a member of the Hour-A-Day Study Club and attended British Methodist Episcopal Church. She is survived by her husband Roland; five sons, Robert and George of Windsor; Roland of Toronto; Warren and Wallace at home; four daughters, Mrs. Morris Harding (Ruth), of Sandwich West; Mrs. James Williams (Ruby) of Detroit, and Joyce and Gloria at home.”

Something not mentioned in Euphemia’s obituary is that she was the President of the Peter Street Baptist Church Mission Circle as was reported in *The Windsor Daily Star* on March 17, 1951 when they hosted their annual pew rally on Palm Sunday.

Euphemia’s husband Roland Percy Henderson’s obituary appeared in *The Windsor Star* on April 30, 1963 and says “HENDERSON, Roland Percy, 63, of 747 Windsor Ave., died at his home. Born in Kingsville, he lived in Windsor 43 years. He was employed as a postal clerk and was a member and trustee of Sandwich Baptist Church. Surviving are his widow, Catherine, his mother, Mrs. Bertha Henderson, Amherstburg; sons, Robert E. and Warren P. Henderson, Windsor; Roland E., Toronto; Wallace Q. and George M., both of Windsor; daughters, Mrs. Morris Harding (Ruth), of Sandwich West, Mrs. James Williams (Ruby), Detroit and Miss Gloria Jean Henderson, of New Jersey; brothers, Oscar, Mount Clemens, Mich; William, New York, and Jesse, Amherstburg; half-brothers, Isaac and Howard Henderson, New Jersey; a sister, Mrs.

Luther Evans (Rena), of Detroit, and a half sisters, Mrs. Thelma White, of New Jersey; 13 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.” Rolands’s obituary mentions that his wife Catherine survives, meaning that he married a second time. I could not find documentation to confirm this.

Roland and Euphemia had ten children named Ruth, Robert, Edward Guyon, Warren, Roland, Wallace Q., George, Ruby, Gloria Jean, and Euphemia Joyce. I will start by sharing information about Ruth. She married Morris Harding who was the son of Rachel Madison and William Harding. According to Elise, her parents Ruth and Morris were married by Aretha Franklin’s father The Rev. C.L. Franklin in Detroit. Shortly after their marriage, Morris was shipped out to fight in WWII and served as a Private in the Royal Canadian Regiment at Camp Borden near London, Ontario. Morris was a sharpshooter.

According to Elise, “After shipping out from Pier 21, NS., Private Harding fought on the European frontier in England, France, Belgium, Germany and Holland. Harding worked in Stores while serving. During his tour of duty Harding was wounded; had a short stay in hospital then returned to the front. He took part in liberating Jewish prisoners at Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp. During a raid in the Black Forest Pvt. Harding confiscated a Persian rug from a castle. Many years later, a wild coincidence took place. A former German resident recognized the rug on display in the family room of Harding’s home; it belonged to his family, left behind when they fled from the Allies.”

Before serving in the military, Morris worked at Ford Motor Company. Ruth worked in Detroit as a Lens Grinder in the Penobscot Building. After the war, Morris applied to become an electrician at the St. Luke Road Barracks and within 1 ½ years he was a master electrician. Elise shared that “In March 1947 possessing only a silver dollar, a horse and buggy Harding and his

wife Ruth (Henderson) opened Harding Electric. The company operated for over forty one years. In 1957, under the VA Bill, the Harding's built a home in Sandwich West. They raised six children who learned the business. Harding trained fourteen apprentices including his daughter Shelley who became Canada's first Black female Electrician and first Black female Master Electrician. Hundreds of the homes and businesses in Windsor and Essex/Kent Counties were upgraded to 100- and 200-amp services by Harding Electric including the homes of many brother Veterans. Morris was president of the Ontario Electrical Association in 1955 and president of the Remington Park Legion in the early 1970s. Harding worked on the electrical banks of ocean-going ship while they were docked for repairs on the Detroit River traveling the St. Lawrence Seaway. Harding Electric had a contract with the City of Windsor and provided electrical services for Windsor's famous Emancipation Celebrations for many years. And, in 1961, he repaired lighting in the Parliament Building in Ottawa, ON." It is also important to note that Ruth did all the books and ordered materials for Harding Electric.

Elise also shared that her "father, Morris, Uncle Warren and Ron Smith, owner of The Walker House and the Frontier Club, sponsored a group of young Black men in the 1950s. They had a basketball team which played in Windsor and Detroit (uncle George was a team member). These men created a fund to bail Black youthful offenders out of jail, purchase proper clothing for court appearances and assist them in retaining and paying a lawyer. They once paid for the Harlem Globetrotters to put on an exhibition game."

On June 25, 1988 *The Windsor Star* printed a lengthy article titled "He attributes his success to their electric marriage" about Morris and Ruth which says "Electrician Morris Harding kids around so much with good-natured grumbling and growling that he's called Archie Bunker in the family circle. But he leaves no doubt he's proud of the fact his daughter, Shelley

Smith, became the first black female electrician in Canada, 13 years ago. He is also quick to give most of the credit to his wife, Ruth, for the success of Harding Electric he operated for 37 years in home-town-boy-makes-good fashion. 'My wife is a gentle person. The way she talked on the phone to people made it easy for me. A lot called up just to chat with Ruth,' he said. Then the 75-year-old Second World War veteran will josh about the battle-axe he married. 'That old biddy is hard to deal with,' he said of his wife. 'I never knew what a mop and pail and broom were until that old biddy got sick.' Ruth interjected 'I call him Hazel.' It was a daughter, Jaynelle Harding-Thomas, who nicknamed them Edith and Archie Bunker and Flo and Andy Capp. Sitting at the kitchen table in his Mark Avenue home, smoking seven cigarettes an hour, Morris volunteers non-stop thoughts. Some samples.

'I've run into the nicest people in the world. Others I can forget with ease. They're the people who say I am the best and I can do as I want and they don't care who they hurt.'

'I wouldn't want to raise a family today. It's all a gimme and a take. I'd be going at the world backwards. The young kids can't even speak to you. I think these kids know too much.'

'MOTHERS USED to stay home with their children. The government wasn't satisfied so it had women go out to work so they could be taxed. Kids are put in a day care centre. It's no life without mother in the house.'

'I was a good Christian boy. My life has been good to me, I always figured.'

'You can't live without respect. You've got to give it to get it.'

'I wouldn't want pure children. I'd have to watch them all the time.'

‘In Windsor, we have the smartest black kids in Canada, and they can’t get work. But they’re fighting. The other generations used to hang back.’

The article continues with “Name it and Morris will talk about it. Morris, son of William Harding and Rachel Madison, was born in a home at Mercer and Erie Streets, and attended Mercer Street Public School and Patterson Collegiate with his brothers, George and William, both deceased. His birthplace and both schools have been demolished. His early jobs after becoming a high school dropout were shining shoes and running errands for the Wickens Cigar Store and shoe shine parlor, in the stock department of Kresge’s, and driving a truck for Auto Specialties Ltd. He described the Auto Specialties president, Henry Cantelon, as ‘one of the nicest people you could ever meet. He treated every man in that plant like a gentleman. You could talk to him. The union ruined that plant.

In 1943, the Royal Regiment of Canada in Toronto accepted the volunteer for army service and in three months he was overseas, serving in England, France, Belgium, Holland and Germany. When I came back after the war I took an electrical course at the St. Luke Road barracks, worked for Ace Brown and then decided to work for myself. I did industrial and residential work and did work for some of my old school teachers.”

The article ends with “Harding Electric was in operation from 1947 until 1989. His daughter Shelley and his son, Morris Jr., who died five years ago of [sickle cell] anemia at age 39, worked with him. ‘Word of mouth kept me busy. I never looked for a job. I’ve trained about 15 men in this town. He continues to help his old customers. Morris encouraged Shelley to become an electrician, she was apprentice to her father and now works in electronics at Wickes Manufacturing. ‘My mother made me go to Sunday school at the BME Church. I didn’t go to church much. And I belong to the Masonic Lodge.’ When Harding pursued Ruth, daughter of

Roland Henderson and the former Euphemia Moxley, his would-be mother-in-law was opposed to him but Morris persisted and won. ‘She gave him a good benediction. She said ‘Ruth was in good hands with Morris,’ recalled Ruth. The Hardings’ five daughters, Maureen Mulder, Elise Davis, Shelley Smith, Jaynelle Harding-Thomas and Velma Harding, all reside in the Windsor area. There are 13 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Of his wife, he declared: ‘She and I have had a good life. I wouldn’t have had as happy a life and wouldn’t have had the business I have today without her. And Ruth declared: I’m getting my flowers before I’m gone.’”

Sadly, Private Morris Harding’s passing was reported in *The Windsor Star* on September 11, 1989 and says “HARDING – Morris Howard, 76 years, on September 11, 1989 at Grace Hospital. Beloved husband of Ruth. Dearest father to Mrs. Maureen Mulder and her husband Wilbert, Mrs. Elise Davis and her husband Garland all of Harrow, Mrs. Shelley Smith and her husband Steven, Mrs. Jaynelle Harding and Miss Velma Harding, all of Windsor. Dear father-in-law to Mrs. Toni Harding. Predeceased by 2 sons, Morris (1983) and Robert (1950). Dear grandfather to 13 and great-grandfather to 2. Predeceased by 2 brothers and 1 sister Cathleen. Mr. Harding was the owner and operator of Harding Electric and a Veteran of WWII.”

A writeup which appeared in *The Windsor Star* on November 11, 2010, years after Private Harding’s passing, includes a tribute to his life. It says “Private Morris Harding was born in Windsor, Ontario. During World War II he served in England, France, Belgium, Germany and Holland. He was a brave soldier who served his country loyally. Morris was a liberator of Holocaust victims. Post-War he took training under the VA bill and became a master electrical contractor. He and his wife Ruth owned and operated Harding Electric here in Windsor for over forty years. He had many children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren plus other family members and friends who will always miss his wit and wisdom.”

Just a few years after Morris' passing (1989), on December 10, 1991, Ruth passed away as was shared in *The Windsor Star*. Her obituary says "HARDING – Ruth (nee Henderson), 70 years, December 12, 1991. Beloved wife of the late Morris (1989). Dear mother of Mrs. Garland Davis (Elise), Harrow, Mrs. Steve Smith (Shelley), Windsor, Jaynelle Harding, Courtice, Ont. And the late Velma (1990), Morris (1983) and Robert (1950). Dear mother-in-law of Mrs. Toni Harding, Windsor. Also survived by her stepmother Mrs. Catherine Henderson, Union, New Jersey, 11 grandchildren and 1 great grandchild. Dear sister of Robert Henderson and wife Anne, Warren and wife Judy, Wallace, George and wife Barbara, all of Windsor, Roland and wife Dolores, Brampton, Ruby Buckner and husband James, Belleville, Michigan and Gloria Jean Brantly and husband James, Newark, New Jersey. Predeceased by Guyon Edward and Joyce Travers. Dear sister-in-law of Mrs. William Harding, Owen Sound, Mrs. George Harding, Windsor, also survived by several nieces and nephews and many dear friends."

What we publish is not a complete history of any family and is based on the documents that are available. We welcome photos and information to fill in the gaps. See you next week for part 2.