

Historica Canada Education Portal

Rose Fortune

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Rose Fortune biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Rose Fortune is not a well-known Canadian, but as a self appointed policewoman she became somewhat of a legend in her own time. Fortune came to Canada after the American Revolution with her slave owners, who were loyalist refugees.

Aims

Studying the life of Rose Fortune is an excellent way for students to gain an understanding of the economic and social challenges that former slaves encountered upon arriving in Canada from the United States. Fortune's story also illustrates the challenges that historians face in attempting to reconstruct an accurate account of historical events from documents and other public sources.

Background

Rose Fortune was born into slavery in the Southern United States in 1774. She was owned by the Devone family, who eventually made their way to Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, as loyalist refugees following the

American Revolution. It was in Annapolis Royal that Rose Fortune gained her freedom.

In the latter part of the 1700's, Fortune appointed herself policewoman for the area. She worked in the Port of Annapolis Royal and she was known as a dedicated officer who kept the town's youth very much in line. No one seemed to object to Fortune's self-appointed status since she was well known about the town as the founder of one of Annapolis Royal's first cartage companies. Thus, it was believed that Rose Fortune was Canada's first female law enforcer.

A physically strong woman, Fortune was often seen in the company of her wheelbarrow. It seemed she was never quite able to fully dissociate herself from her thriving cartage company. Rose Fortune was welcomed by rich and poor and was well known for spanking local mischief makers and rousing local dignitaries from their beds.

Fortune died in 1884 at the age of 90.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

Studying the life of Rose Fortune is an excellent way for students to gain an understanding of the economic and social challenges that former slaves encountered upon arriving in Canada from the United States. In this video you see Rose Fortune as an extraordinary black woman who broke loose from the conventions of her time. On many occasions, she

crossed the accepted racial and gender barriers, opening the door for others to follow. Through watching this video, students will discover that those Canadians who were the most interesting and important, are not always the best known today.

Group Projects

1. *The Life and Times of Rose Fortune:*

The video has divided the life of Rose Fortune into five distinct sections by using breaks in the tape approximately every ten minutes. Organize the class into 5 groups and assign each group a section of the video to show. They are responsible for creating a timeline showing the significant events in Rose Fortune's life during this period. Timelines may be created on a bulletin board, or they may be a three dimensional timeline hanging from a cord across your classroom. However, choose one consistent form of presentation so that the different groups may connect their timelines as each section of the video is shown.

The key to this exercise is to have the students discuss the important themes and issues from the video. By having the finished timeline as a visual aid for the discussion, students can make connections between important events. The final stage of this activity would be to consider Rose Fortune's contributions to her community and the Underground Railway. How significant were her contributions? Assess Rose Fortune's standing as an "important Canadian."

2. *The Underground Railroad:*

The Underground Railroad was instrumental in bringing many black slaves from the American south to freedom in Canada. Using the video

as a springboard, explore the experiences of escaped slaves who used the Underground Railroad. Ask your students to tell the story of the journey of a black family who has escaped from slavery. They can re-enact their journey to freedom through the use of storytelling, by creating a play, or through a series of tableaux. Your students may choose to focus on the family's escape, the journey by ship or over land, the dangers of the Underground Railroad, their arrival in Canada, or their life in a new nation.

3. The Fugitive Slave Act Simulation:

Rose played a very important part in the Underground Railroad in later years. The Fugitive Slave Act passed in the southern United States made slave hunting "big business." The passing of this Act meant that the Underground Railroad had to be better organized. Before you begin this exercise, be certain that your students understand the history behind the Fugitive Slave Act and the purpose of the Underground Railroad.

During this time, the blacks in Canada (both free blacks and those who escaped from slavery) were in considerable danger. The British government did allow American slave owners to come to Canada to recover their slaves. They simply had to prove orally or by affidavit that they owned the slave in question.

Create a class simulation and mock trial in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia. Have your students pretend that a slave owner has come to town and is claiming that he "owns" Rose Fortune and her two daughters. Set up a mock hearing where the slave owner attempts to prove to the court orally that Rose Fortune is his property. He has no documentation.

Have Rose Fortune defend herself, using the information from the video.

For example, she may argue that this man was not her owner because she had belonged to the Devone family. They were Loyalist refugees following the American Revolution. When Rose came to Canada she was eventually granted her freedom. Rose was also well known in the community. Consider the people who might come to her defence in such a situation. What would they say? Have the students consider these questions first, and then set up the simulation using props and costumes.

4. Create a [*Heritage Minute*](#) for Rose Fortune:

Ask your students to select what they think is one of the most important and dramatic moments in Rose Fortune's life. Based on this, create Heritage Minutes about Rose Fortune. Have the students create a storyboard for a video about Rose. If you have the necessary equipment and time, your students could actually produce the video.

5. *Rose Fortune In The News*:

Write an article describing Rose as one of the following characters:

- a) As Rose's Anglican minister write a church newsletter about helping the community.
- b) As a woman journalist for the Underground Railway write a secret article along with a map detailing an escape route.
- c) As an English journalist, describe your encounter and conversation with Rose as she carries your bags to the hotel.

When your students have completed this, put them in groups of three composed of a, b and c. Have them compare articles and complete a set of questions regarding: class perspective, racial/ethnic perspective and gender perspective. Debrief the results of the discussion as a class.

Class Discussion

6. Traditional Gender Roles:

Discuss whether or not Rose Fortune's position in the community and the fact that she did not pursue the traditional domestic role expected of her as a woman, makes her a role model for black women. Did she open doors for black women of future generations? With your class, examine the traditional roles of white women and black women during this time period. How did the two differ? Contrast Rose Fortune's active role in the community and numerous careers with these traditional expectations. Were her careers as a dock worker, owner of a cartage company, and as a policewoman typical jobs for women at the time?

You may want to discuss what opportunities enabled Rose Fortune to disregard prescribed gender roles, and the significance of this for the time period.

7. The True Meaning of Freedom:

As a class, create a chart comparing the experiences of Black women and children in Annapolis, N.S. with other Black women and children in Canada, and the United States. Although Rose Fortune and her family were free upon arrival in Canada, the video states "slavery continued in other forms." Compare her freedom in Canada with her life as a slave. Were they really "free" or were there some elements of continuity with their previous lives as slaves? You may want to begin by exploring your students' definitions of freedom. How do your students think that Rose's experience with the "freedom" of living in Canada may differ from their own experiences today?

Individual Projects

8. *The Notoriety of Rose Fortune:*

While watching the video have your students identify the various sources of information used to tell the story. Individually, have each student list the different types of information they can identify and rank the information according to what they found most interesting, most effective, and most reliable. Afterwards have students create their own fictional source of primary information. This may be a poster or painting of Rose Fortune, a diary entry, a poem, a song or short story. Make certain it is a source of information that could be used by other historians to help tell them about her life.

As a class, discuss the validity of certain sources of information. For example, is a primary or secondary source more reliable? What are the inherent biases associated with certain sources of information? As historians, what should they be looking for in the sources they choose?

During her lifetime, Rose Fortune became known through "word of mouth". Even in England newspapers were telling the tale of a black woman who walked the streets as a law enforcer. Have your students pretend that they are writing a newspaper article on Rose in one of these English papers. As reporters what kind of information would they have to rely upon? In their articles they should answer the questions of who, what, where, when, why, and how. Remember when writing a newspaper story that you need to say the interesting things in the first few paragraphs and provide the details later in the story. Look for this in your local newspaper and see if you can detect a pattern. Have the students create a name and front page for their newspaper. Some may choose to

include illustrations.

9. *The Symbolism of the Stick and the Wheelbarrow:*

The two objects in the video that were symbolic of the secret life of Rose Fortune were the wheelbarrow and the "Rhythmic Stick of Freedom." After showing the video to your students you may want to present them with these two symbols. You can use models, pictures, or real objects for visual impact. Have the students write down the events from the film with which they associate these symbols. Additionally, you may want them to record the feelings that are evoked by these items.

A great approach for this exercise would be to use mind mapping. The students may begin with the object as the focus of the mind map. For example, the "Rhythmic Stick of Freedom" may help the students make connections to the ideas of freedom, the presence of authority, the Underground Railroad, the fugitive slave laws, danger, secrecy, etc.

10. *Rose Fortune – An Unsung Hero:*

Throughout the video, many dynamic words are used to describe Rose Fortune. Historians describe her as an unsung hero and an influential Black woman in the community. She was a legend in her own time, a woman of strength, a trailblazer, and a continuing source of inspiration. During the video have your students listen carefully for such descriptive words and make a list of them. With your class construct a list of the types of characteristics you would use to describe a "Great Canadian." Does Rose Fortune fit any or all of these criteria? Assess her importance in Canadian history. Would you include her in a "Canadian Hall of Fame?"

Resources

[Rose Fortune Worksheet](#)

[Rose Fortune - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Loyalists - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Black Canadians - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Underground Railroad - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Fugitive Slave Act - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Brand, Dionne. *No Burden to Carry: narratives of black working women in Ontario, 1920's-1950's*. Toronto: Women's Press, 1991.

Cahill, Barry. *Stephen Bluke: The Peril of Being a 'White Negro' in Loyalist Nova Scotia*. Nova Scotia Historical Review. Vol. 11,1.

Clark, George Elliot, editor. *Fire on the Water: An anthology of Black Nova Scotia Writing*. Porter's Lake, NS: Pottersfield, 1991-1992.

Grant, John N. *Black Nova Scotians*. Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Museum, 1980.