

Exhibition Reviews

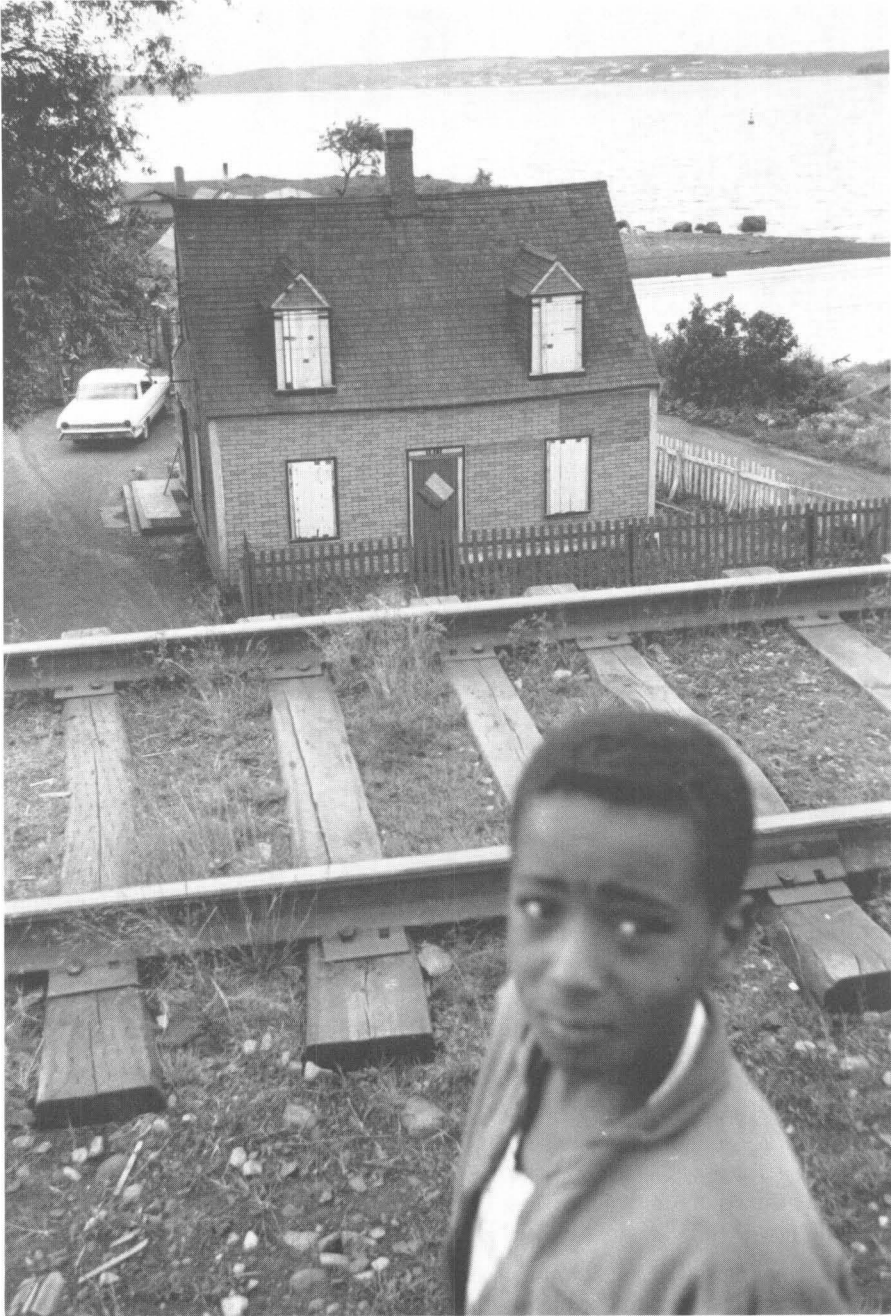
Africville: A Spirit That Lives On. Mounted at the Vancouver Museum, Vancouver, B.C. 6 November 1990 — 6 January 1991. 24 p. catalogue.

To urban planners and civil rights activists, Africville was a depressing slum, a blight on the Halifax cityscape and an embarrassingly segregated black neighbourhood. Africville's inhabitants, however, many of whom were descendants of the first families who settled there in the 1840s, viewed it in a different light. This community was home. In the late 1960s the City of Halifax ordered the demolition of Africville. It was consequently razed to the ground and its 400 residents relocated. All that physically remains today of Africville is a memorial cairn in Seaview Park, the former site of the community.

"Africville: A Spirit That Lives On," which opened in 1989, is a collaborative exhibition of the Art Gallery, Mount Saint Vincent University; the Africville Genealogy Society; the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia and the National Film Board of Canada, Atlantic Centre. It commemorates the community and many of its individual residents. But the exhibition also does much more. It denounces racism and the oppression of the less powerful people in our society. Although it is about Africville, it speaks for the many communities across North America which have been destroyed in the name of progress.

The exhibition opens with a colour aerial photograph of Africville, a plan of the community and three maps, 1840s to 1860s, which locate it at the north end of Halifax on the shore of Bedford Basin. Modern-day instant colour photographs of smiling individuals introduce us to former residents of Africville. A display panel provides background information about the origins of the show and gives acknowledgements.

The exhibition proceeds in sections which flow easily into one other. The importance of family and tradition is brought out through the display of furniture, and of cherished and valuable objects belonging to families who once lived in Africville. Many of the family members were long-time Africville residents such as Ruth Johnson, creator of the linocut that adorns the catalogue. China pieces, a set of fine silver carvers, oil paintings that hung on the walls of her home, a mantle clock and daily household and cooking objects — a washboard, a bean pot, a meat grinder, "Surprise Soap" — are artfully displayed, many in glass museum show-cases. Original early twentieth-century studio portraits, an open album of snapshot photographs, black and white photographs (by



Deacon Ralph Jones' house, boarded up during relocation. Bob Brooks fonds: courtesy Photograph Collection, Public Archives of Nova Scotia.



A meeting in the Seaview African Baptist Church during relocation. Bob Brooks fonds: courtesy Photograph Collection, Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

Bob Brooks) from the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, and modern colour photographs (by Ted Grant) from the National Archives of Canada depict residents as well as interiors and exteriors of houses in order to illustrate Africville's home and community spirit.

Other thematic display cases feature artifacts and mementos, original and copy photographs, clippings, letters and documents from a variety of sources including the Black Cultural Centre and Africville families. These are proud reminders of the community's contributions to the World War effort, railway work, and involvement in community sports, music and education. A reconstructed interior with pews and the pulpit from Seaview Baptist Church, Africville, reminds the visitor of the importance of religion to this community. All of these sections reinforce one's impression that this was a community that had a sense of itself and where its inhabitants cared for each other.

The second part of the exhibition places the viewer in Seaview Park, which was built on the site of Africville. A replica of the memorial cairn to Africville stands out. Several rows of chairs set back from a television screen showing segments of the Reverend Donald Skeir's sermon at the 1988 Africville Reunion encourage the visitor to sit down and listen to what Rev. Skeir has to say. He urges the crowd to be proud of their

birthplace, Africville. Black communities are warned to be on their guard against losing what they already have. Snapshots of the first Africville Reunion, now a yearly event, are on display in this section. Newspaper clippings and copies of newspaper headlines, quotes from and pictures of speakers at "The Africville Experience Conference: Africville Relocation" remind us of the shame of the demolition of Africville and the injustice done to relocated black communities across North America.

This is a simple and well-designed show that gets its point across. The sequence of the displays allows for several ways to follow the story, and the various sections run together though not necessarily consecutively. Explanatory notes and captions are easy to find, succinct and legible in French and English. The exhibition area is well illuminated. Seating in front of the video presentation and in the simulated church interior allows time and space for listening and contemplation. The variety of media used enhances the visual interest of the show, despite the relative dearth of artistic images or valuable artifacts.

An illustrated catalogue (\$5.00) providing commentaries by former Africville residents on what it was like to live in Africville, their dislocation and a brief history of Africville and the Black presence in Nova Scotia accompanies the exhibit. "Africville: A Spirit That Lives On," will be touring across the Maritimes, central Canada and the West until December 1992.

Ann Carroll
University of British Columbia
Archives

A Place in History: Twenty Years of Acquiring Paintings, Drawings and Prints at the National Archives of Canada. JIM BURANT, JENNIFER DEVINE, LUCIE DORAIS, LYDIA FOY, EVA MAJOR-MAROTHY, MARTHA MARLEAU, TERRESA McINTOSH, SUSAN NORTH, DOUGLAS E. SCHOENHERR, and ALLISON THOMPSON. NAC. 30 October 1990 — 31 March 1991. 300 p. catalogue.

As part of its mandate to preserve "all public records, documents, and other historical material of every kind, nature, and description," the National Archives of Canada has built up a large collection of documentary art (some 200,000 items) chronicling aspects of Canadian life before the era of photography, as well as selected themes from the modern period. "A Place in History," formerly on view at the Archives building in Ottawa, displayed the most important acquisitions of the last twenty years, including no fewer than seventy-eight works by fifty-seven different artists. Of these, twenty-six items had been purchased under the terms of the *Cultural Property Export and Import Act* (1977), legislation that restricts the export of cultural property and funds repatriation from abroad. Most if not all of the examples postdate the mid-eighteenth century, because works from the earlier period of settlement are now very rare. Such exhibitions, of which there have been several in the past two decades, offer scholars an opportunity to learn about recent discoveries, and provide the general public with an insight into how the Archives records our national heritage.

Because art museums tend to focus attention on the aesthetic aspects of art, the documentary area often receives less recognition. But holdings of the latter type actually involve a very broad investigative approach intended to determine the circumstances