

Arenson, Adam

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Mobility and Opportunity: Black Business Owners and Inventors Cross the US-Canada Borders

Adam Arenson, Manhattan College, adam.arenson@manhattan.edu

Abstract

In the decades after the Civil War and before the Great Migration, a set of remarkable Black business leaders and inventors emerged, including Elijah McCoy, noted inventor and innovator in engine lubrication; John Sullivan Deas, the first person canning salmon near Vancouver; Rev. Charles Spencer Smith, founder of the Sunday School Union of the AME Church; Georgina Mingo Whetsel, who employed a hundred men in her ice harvesting business; May B. Mason, who made the first Black fortune in the Klondike Gold Rush; William Harvey McCurdy, founder of the Hercules Buggy Company; and Jesse Binga, who founded the first privately owned African American bank in Chicago. Each of these remarkable Black business leaders has received some biographical attention, but they have not been considered together, nor by what linked them: each of these men and women (or, in a few cases, their parents) spent time in both the United States and Canada. Cross-border family mobility affected their business choices, opening opportunities not available to those not on the move. While we do not have enough evidence for a strong causal claim, it is clear this mobility correlates to opportunities which led to unusually successful business careers.

Keywords: Black entrepreneurs; border-crossers; mobility; gender comparison; prosopography.

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Introduction

In the decades after the Civil War and before the Great Migration, a set of remarkable Black business leaders and inventors emerged. Those featured here spent time in both the United States and Canada: Elijah McCoy, noted inventor and innovator in engine lubrication in Ypsilanti, Michigan; John Sullivan Deas, the first person canning salmon near Vancouver, British Columbia; Rev. Charles Spencer Smith, founder of the Sunday School Union of the AME Church in Nashville, the first steam printing business owned and run by an African American; Georgina Mingo Whetsel, who employed a hundred men in her ice harvesting and delivery business in St. John, New Brunswick; May B. Mason, who made the first Black fortune in the Klondike Gold Rush; William Harvey McCurdy, founder of the Hercules Buggy Company in Evansville, Indiana; and Jesse Binga, who founded the first privately-owned African-American bank in Chicago. For these men and women, mobility and opportunity went hand in hand: they found business successes through an unusual degree of mobility, including crossing the US-Canada borders, often multiple times.

The paths of the African Diaspora were made and unmade in “unfinished migrations”, historian Rashauna Johnson (2017, 427) has noted, and “the history of Black modernity is a series of circulations”. While historians of the Black experience, including Ira Berlin (2014), Kendra Field (2017), and Carter Woodson (1918), have noted the centrality of movement—from the generations forced into enslavement to those who have moved to seek freedom—most of these studies have focused on the vast majority of Black Americans who stayed within the national boundaries. In studies by Robert Higgs (1977), on the decades after the Civil War, and Leah Platt Boustan (2017), on the Great Black Migration of the twentieth century, the chance for Black families to prosper through migration are laid plain, through extensive studies of large cohorts moving from South to North, and from rural to urban communities. Yet those discussed here crossed national borders and they achieved significant economic achievements. While Malia McAndrew’s (2010) history of Black entrepreneurs selling beauty products across the United States, Europe, and Africa exists for a later period, and Nora Faires (2001) wrote about poorer Black migrants, “pushed” from Canada to the United States in search of work, the successful entrepreneurs discussed here have not been considered as a group. In this essay, cross-border mobility was directly correlated to their business successes.

This essay focuses on remarkable entrepreneurs and their cross-border mobility, in a period of Black history often under-emphasized in both the United States and Canada, as Field (2017) and I have argued elsewhere (Arenson 2022). In the years after slavery, Black Americans and Black Canadians created a way out of no way—opening new careers, going new places, setting up new institutions, rebuilding and growing their networks based in family ties, church affiliations, and fraternal organizations. Such a transformative moment leads to a lot of firsts. Given the long history of enslavement and restriction in the centuries before emancipation, the Black firsts of the emancipation era represented the long-delayed recognition, the long-delayed accomplishments, of Black people who had not received the opportunity to be recognized for their efforts and ingenuity. These firsts are worth noting as the most striking among many examples of Black leadership, Black talent, and Black ingenuity in the face of obstacles. As my larger book-project-in-progress argues, these border-crossing Black North Americans seem to represent a leadership cohort that has not been noticed in Black history to date.

While there are Black North Americans who became political leaders while also running a business—the newspaper work of Mary Ann Shadd Cary is a prominent example—this essay will focus on individuals whose primary fame can be linked to their businesses and inventions. Using a prosopographic approach to put the lived experiences of these business leaders into comparison, it notes how cross-border migrants created and seized opportunities not otherwise available. Lawrence Stone (1971, 46 and 47) described this work as “collective

biography (as the modern historians call it), multiple career-line analysis (as the social scientists call it), or prosopography (as the ancient historians call it)", as an "investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives. The method employed is to establish a universe to be studied". But this should not be interpreted as essentializing—about the experience of border-crossers generally or of Black North Americans in particular. As the work of the late historian of labor and migration Faires (2005) has demonstrated, there are migrants, white and Black, for whom the move to the United States was not successful, and in some cases impoverishing. There are also many examples of Black innovation and business owning in the United States in this era that have no connection to crossing the US-Canada borders, as the *Encyclopedia of African American Business* (Jessie Carney Smith 2017) documents. This essay is not proposing a secret formula, but rather noting how the ability to cross borders was correlated with successes for these Black businesspeople, and to propose a few common threads in their experiences.

Elijah McCoy

One of the most obvious advantages offered by time in British North America (the proper name of Canada before Confederation of the provinces and colonies began in 1867) was education. While some Black residents of northern US states were able to go to school, public or private, segregated or not, the opportunities for education reached far more of the Black Canadian families. They advocated for school funding, for integration, and for educational opportunities, from primary school to admission to law school, medical school, and other advanced opportunities for training, as Adrienne Shadd (2007) has documented. Having already succeeded in making a break from enslavement in the US, these families continued to create new opportunities for the children they brought to Canada or who were born on British soil.

One such example is Elijah McCoy (Figure 1). The *Encyclopedia of Detroit* relates how Elijah McCoy was born in Colchester, Ontario, where his parents had settled after escaping slavery in Kentucky and having been aided along the Underground Railroad through Detroit. Schools were segregated in Colchester, so McCoy attended with the town's other Black children; at the age of 15, McCoy was sent to Scotland to advance his studies in mechanical engineering, demonstrating the opportunities the British Empire could offer, even for those kept apart.



Sources: Ypsilanti Historical Society; Copyright: Creative Commons (Attribution, Non-Commercial, Share-alike); via WikiCommons.

Figure 1
Elijah McCoy

In 1859, McCoy's family moved to Ypsilanti, Michigan, joining a growing community of Black North Americans who had crossed back into the United States and established themselves in that community, adjoining Ann Arbor and the growing state university (1860 and 1870 US Census). When Elijah McCoy returned from Scotland in 1866, he could find work only as an oiler and fireman for the Michigan Central Railroad—messy, smelly work to keep the rail engine fires burning and the parts well lubricated (*Encyclopedia of Detroit*).

But Elijah McCoy established a machine shop in his home in Ypsilanti, and he began to tinker. Keeping the engine oiled meant stopping the train to ensure all the pieces were moving properly. What if a system of continuous lubrication could keep the trains running? McCoy experimented with various designs as he created a lubricating oil cup that would distribute oil to the axles and bearings, allowing lubrication while the train was still in motion. McCoy filed the patent for his first automatic lubricator in 1872; continuing to work on the design, as well as to create other inventions including a folding laundry board and a lawn sprinkler, McCoy continued to file patents for his inventions, and to license them to businesses who could produce his inventions (*Encyclopedia of Detroit*). Decade after decade, McCoy is listed in the census as “engineer” (1870, 1880, 1900 US Census). McCoy filed close to 60 patents in his half-century of inventing—filing more patents than any other Black inventor in his time (Francis Herbert Warren, John M. Green, and Michigan Freedmen's Progress Commission 1915, 276). In 1920, at the age of 76, he finally was able to establish the Elijah McCoy Manufacturing Company, taking control of production of many of his inventions, before his death in 1929 (Patricia Carter Sluby 2004).

John Sullivan Deas

In the case of John Sullivan Deas, border-crossing created an opportunity in the rivers of British Columbia. The cold, fast-moving streams that reached from mountain lakes to the ocean have, for millennia, been the habitat for a number of salmon species. This remarkable bounty of healthy, tasty swimming protein attracted dozens of Native nations, who built their societies around the salmon ecosystems (Coll-Peter Thrush 2007; Richard White, 1995). Much later, settlers began salting and preserving salmon, often to supply fellow newcomers in mining and timber (H. Keith Ralston, 2003). In 1867, along the Fraser River, the first local effort at salmon canning was established. Though the initial salmon cannery could not make the business profitable, others purchased the equipment and succeeded (Ralston, 2003).

John Sullivan Deas was among them. Deas had been born into a free Black family in South Carolina around 1838; while a teenager there, he was advertising his skill as a tinsmith (Ralston 1976-1977, 67). The gold rush brought Deas west to San Francisco; his work for a dealer in stoves and tinware who had stores in both San Francisco and Victoria may have motivated his move north (Ralston 1976-1977).

Having worked in Cariboo and then again back in Victoria as a tinmaker, Deas entered the salmon canning business in 1871 (Ralston 1976-1977, 69-70). In 1873, Deas staked a claim on an island in the Fraser River—it is still known as Deas Island today—and he built large cannery buildings and a wharf, emerging as the site manager and visionary while keeping in the good graces of his financiers (Ralston 1976-1977, 70).

Records for the Fraser River fishery for 1872, 1873, 1874, and 1876 show that Deas was able to can more salmon than any of his competitors in all of these years—and likely for 1875 as well, though the records are missing (Ralston 1976-1977, 72-73). Deas's records showed that he had 300,000 cans prepared, but that the Fraser River proved a less than ideal fishing ground. Prospective salmon cannery owners should invest elsewhere, Deas wrote in the *Victoria Colonist* in 1874, for “on this river the run is short and irregular” and there are “not three good drifts”. Deas recommended the Columbia River, where “the season and run are

twice as long, and the drifts extend for miles" (Deas letter in *Victoria Colonist*, May 6, 1874, 3, as quoted in Ralston 1976-1977, 73).

In 1877, new competing fishing and canning interests banded together to out-compete Deas in the Fraser River (Ralston 1976-1977, 73-74). Frustrated at the encroachment on drifts he had cleared, Deas got into a confrontation with some of the other companies and was charged with using "violent and threatening" language. Arrested and brought across the river to New Westminster to face charges, Deas made bail and eventually had the charge dismissed, but the level of distraction at the height of the season had done its work. Deas's cannery fell to third in volume, and the following year his attempt to have exclusive rights granted on the waterway was defeated in both the provincial and the national Canadian legislatures (Ralston 1976-1977, 74-75).

On August 19, 1878, after another disappointing canning season, Deas announced in the newspaper that he had "sold all right, title, and interest in the fishery on Deas' Island, Fraser River ... my connection with the same ceases from this date" (Deas letter August 19, 1878, in *Mainland Guardian*, August 21, 1878, 2, as quoted in Ralston, 1976-1977, 76). Two years later, Deas was dead at the age of 42, after a long illness—possibly from the metal poisoning that claimed the life of many tinsmiths.

As it happens, the oldest extant salmon label for any of the British Columbian fisheries has Deas's name on it: an artist's concept, and then an altered label in printed form, proudly displaying a large fish at the center, a title of FRESH SALMON emblazoned at the top (Figure 2). Both announce "Packed by John S. Deas, Fraser River, British Columbia", creating a trademark that could be recognized around the world, in a bright reddish hue that we can generously call salmon in color. Like citrus labels, the salmon labels in the decades that followed would follow Deas's pattern, using bright reds and showing lively fish, all while announcing the company name and the salmon's place of origin. In collector albums and exhibitions, this original label—commissioned by Deas, completed by Grafton Tyler Brown—holds pride of place. And only in recent articles have historians begun to mention that both men were Black North Americans (John Lutz 2015).



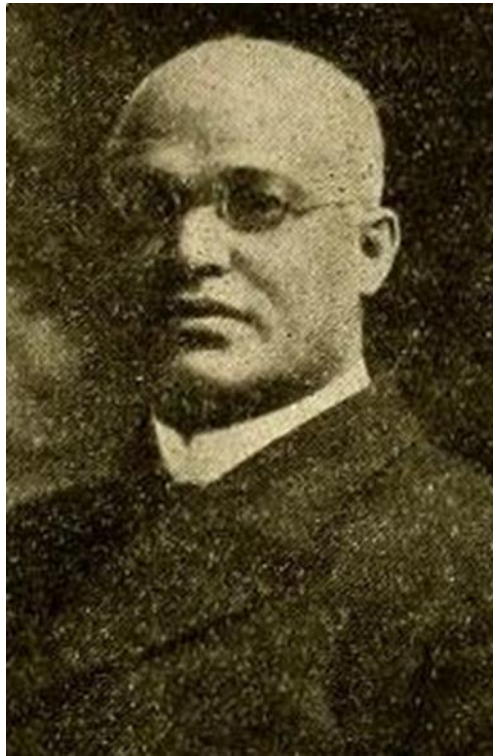
Source: Deas Cannery Label, Image I-61591, courtesy of the Royal BC Museum

Figure 2
Deas Cannery Label, c.1873

Charles Spencer Smith

For Charles Spencer Smith (Figure 3), it took decades of travel to find the opportunity that led to his prominence in business and in the A.M.E. Church.

Born on March 16, 1852, on the northern shore of Lake Ontario, in Colborne, about halfway between Kingston and Toronto, his family moved to Bowmanville, half again closer to Toronto, when he was very young. Smith attended public school in Bowmanville, all through the US Civil War, and he was apprenticed at age twelve in a factory finishing furniture, until the factory burned down (Wright 1916, 205).



Source: Wright 1916, 205, public domain, via WikiCommons.

Figure 3
Charles Spencer Smith

At the age of fourteen, Smith crossed into the United States, and spent 1868 seeking out proper employment, first in Buffalo, working for his keep in a boarding house, and then in Chicago, as a porter in a barber shop, and then as a deckhand, cook, and waiter on lumber cargo ship out of Detroit. When winter came, Smith journeyed on, to Louisville, Kentucky, to seek a spot as a teacher for a Freedmen's Bureau school, at the ripe age of fifteen (Wright 1916, 205).

Smith was granted a teaching position, and he continued to move, as conditions warranted: Smith and the Freedmen's Bureau sought to uphold the work of government's commitment to education and civil rights, in the midst of the ongoing ex-Confederate opposition, in both words and deeds, to the promise of Reconstruction. Freedmen's Bureau schools were important levers for economic progress, both for their Black students and their Black teachers (William T. Alderson Jr. 1952 and Alton Hornsby Jr. 1973). Smith's first posting, in Lexington, Kentucky, was very short, as Ku Klux Klan members warned him to leave town within forty-eight hours; he was then assigned to Hopkinsville, Kentucky, for the 1869-1870 school year (Wright 1916, 205). At the end of his term in Kentucky, Charles Spencer Smith

spent the 1870-1871 year traveling hundreds of miles at a time, teaching brief spates in a number of Mississippi cities, including Greenwood, Meridian, West Point, and Kemper (Wright 1916, 205). The year 1871 saw a bit more stability, with Charles Spencer Smith staying in Jackson, Mississippi, and bringing his passion for teaching into the church; he ran a Bible panorama and he was licensed as a local preacher by an AME Church in the city. After more than a year of successful preaching there, Smith was made a deacon in an AME Church in Mobile, Alabama, and soon after sent out, more than two hundred miles to Union Springs, near the Georgia-Alabama border (Wright 1916, 206).

From teaching to preaching to politics: in Union Springs, in the year 1874, after less than a year in town, Charles Spencer Smith was elected to the Alabama House of Representatives (Wright 1916, 206). After two years, and in the face of growing ex-Confederate power, Smith left the legislature, but he served as a leader in the 1876 Colored Men's National convention, in Nashville (Wright 1916, 206).

In Nashville, Charles Spencer Smith was ordained an elder in the Methodist Episcopal Church, worked as a pastor, and enrolled at Central Tennessee College, studying medicine. After all this movement, one final connection turned all of Charles Spencer Smith's ventures into a coherent mission: while working as a pastor, he was hired as an agent for David C. Cook's publishing house, which produced Christian books and Sunday School materials (Wright 1916, 206). Smith's years with David C. Cook, and his many roles in teaching and ministering to congregations, all over the country, led Charles Spencer Smith to his goal, of creating an AME Sunday School Union.

After years of proposals and advocacy, Smith's Sunday School Union was approved by the AME bishops' conference in 1882, and Smith served as its steady leader and visionary until 1900. Smith purchased a building for the press, at 206 Public Square, in the center of Nashville; it was four stories tall and 120 feet deep, albeit only 20 feet wide (Jean Roseman, before 2015). Smith became the first Black owner of a steam press anywhere in the United States. For eighteen years, Smith edited and published the *Sunday School Review* and *The Child's Recorder*; materials for students, teachers, and pastors; AME Church handbooks and conference proceedings; and books by church leaders. Materials published for the Church were sent to congregations around the world. But, for the first seven years of its existence, the Nashville City Directory, published by white businessmen in town, refused to list the publishing house (Roseman, before 2015). But Charles Spencer Smith had created a dominant business, known throughout Black North American communities.

Georgina Mingo Whetsel Moore

In the 1893 compendium *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities*, among the 250 Black women profiled, there were only a handful of women highlighted for their business acumen. And Georgina Mingo Whetsel (Figure 4) came in for the highest praise, as "an example of what a woman may achieve in the world, when energy and genius are not wanting" (Monroe A. Majors 1893, 282). The 1893 account noted that her ice business was "started by Mr. and Mrs. Wetzel"—the spelling varied—but that she "was left in an almost destitute condition on the death of her husband", and only after his death was the business "brought to its present magnitude through her energies, and business capability" (Majors 1893, 282). In a remarkable mix of sexism and praise, the male author of *Noted Negro Women* concluded that "Today she employs a hundred men, does her household duties, has the care and responsibility of a large family, and by virtue of her strict attention to her business, she has crushed the competitors, who predicted her failure, and poses as a monopolist in St Johns [sic] and vicinity" (Majors 1893, 282). He added that "Woman has a most formidable foe to antagonize at every turn, and that foe is man. When we see such women forging their way successfully, despite the obstacles engendered by her sex, she is worth forty men in business,

war, politics, bar and pulpit, [and] she should be admitted on this portrayal of her worth, to vote, to do whatever men have a right to do" (Majors 1893, 282).



Source: "An Ice Merchant", Boston Woman's Era, June 1895, public domain.

Figure 4
Georgina Mingo Whetsel

The archivist-historian Roger P. Nason (2021) and the literary historian Jennifer Harris (forthcoming) have recovered the history of Georgina Mingo Whetsel, with Harris noting first that her "origins are not particularly remarkable", as the second generation of her family born in Pictou, Nova Scotia, which remains a small town with a rather constant population in the low thousands (Statistics Canada 1910). In 1857, the family moved to Bedford, just across the harbor from Halifax; after the Civil War, Georgina followed her sisters to Boston, and in 1865 she was a live-in servant for Dr. William Palmer Wesselhoeft, a friend of Transcendentalists and social reformers including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Julia Ward Howe, William Lloyd Garrison, Bronson and Louisa May Alcott, and William Dean Howells (Harris forthcoming). By 1870, she was listed as a dressmaker, and living with the Black barber William Hopkins, his wife, and his teenage daughter, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins (1870 US Census in Harris forthcoming).

In 1872, Georgina Mingo married Robert Whetsel in Boston—a widowed, Virginia-born Black resident of St John, New Brunswick, twice her age and father of four, who had arrived in New Brunswick from Chicago in 1852 and had been a barber before selling oysters and then entering the ice business in 1866 (Census records; Harris forthcoming). By 1881, Robert and Georgina Whetsel had four children of their own; in 1888, the 64-year-old Robert Whetsel died, and the next year Georgina also lost her youngest children, twin girls, within a few months of one another (Census records; 1889 St. John city directory; Harris forthcoming).

Ice harvesting and delivery had long been a profitable, if labor-intensive, business: Frederic Tudor, the "Ice King" of Boston, had gained fame and fortune as early as 1806, shipping New England pond ice to the Caribbean, the US South, and then India and China, and providing a year-round supply to breweries, butchers, grocers restaurants, and doctors in the Boston area as well (Massachusetts Historical Society 2003). The Whetsels had a similar enterprise, with 30 teams cutting and hauling the ice and five warehouses to store it in St

John—and a delivery service that would bring ice to homes and businesses throughout the city (Nason 2021).

In 1889, St John held its first winter carnival, which included a parade of local dignitaries, four marching bands, and 75 floats. Unbeknownst to Georgina Whetsel, one depicted “Ice House Delegates”—and all of those aboard were in blackface. In response, Georgina wrote a firm letter to the editor, objecting to how others “represent my business with all blackened faces, ... African caricatures, and always in the lowest and most degraded state” (*Saint John Daily Telegraph*, March 1, 1889, article reproduced in Nason 2021). She insisted that “all of the intelligent people of St John will agree with me that I do my ice business in a way that ought not to be ridiculed”, and noted that “I hire as many poor white men as I do poor colored men. It makes no difference to me as long as they can do their work what color they are” (*Saint John Daily Telegraph*, March 1, 1889, article reproduced in Nason 2021). Georgina Whetsel wrote to shame the racist depiction of her neighbors who were, likely, customers who relied on her business.

But Georgina Whetsel’s fame was in her business might, not her political activism. Her prominence in the 1893 *Notable Negro Women* followed a number of mentions of her business in newspapers across the United States. “A colored woman, Mrs. Georgina Whetsel, of St. John, N.B., controls the ice trade of that city, employing fifty or sixty men and ten horses”, read the small news item that ran in newspapers from Buffalo to Los Angeles, from Washington, D.C., to Owensboro, Kentucky, from August 1891 until December 31, 1892—perhaps as a space filler (see for example *The Evening Republican* (1892).

In 1895, Georgina Whetsel was featured in the *Woman’s Era*, under a refined portrait:

Among those who are making names and reputations for business capacity there is probably no woman in the country who is a more striking example of pluck and intelligent perseverance than Mrs. Georgina Whetsel, whose portrait appears with this article. Doubtless many of our readers have heard of Mrs. Whetsel as the only known woman ice merchant. She conducts the largest ice business in New Brunswick. She is a young woman and a widow. Her husband carried on the business during his life with the aid of three partners, three wagons and four horses. A year after his death she took over matters in her own hands and managed so well that she now owns the entire business and has increased her work force by doubling the number of horses and wagons [I]n Mrs. Whetsel the race has one of its most brilliant examples of business capacity. (“An Ice Merchant”, *Boston Woman’s Era*, June 1895, as quoted in Harris, forthcoming.)

Georgina Whetsel maintained the business until 1900, when she sold it to the former premier of New Brunswick. Some accounts of the sale placed the price at \$33,000, and argued that she was “the most successful business woman of color the race has yet produced”, in the words of the *Colored American Magazine*. She purchased a large house on a hill in Bedford, Nova Scotia; she visited Boston, and married again, to Edgerton T. Moore of Bermuda, but they returned after a season of travel to Nova Scotia, where Georgina Mingo Whetsel Moore died in 1919 (Harris forthcoming; Nason 2021).

Born in Canada, making her fortune in Canada, and retiring in Canada, Georgina Mingo Whetsel Moore’s business history does not seem to turn on her time crossing the border into the United States. On the other hand, her ability to participate in the intellectual life and social activism of Black women was reliant on her connections in the United States, and both of her marriages occurred in Boston, where her siblings lived and where her network of connections opened up new opportunities. Thus, Georgina’s time in the United States does seem to be a catalyst in her business successes—even if, at first glance, her success seems local to New Brunswick.

May B. Mason

The high point of May B. Mason's history has been cited as a moment of triumph—though a more complete history of her life is most definitely a tragedy. Younger than the other Black North Americans discussed in this article, May B. Mason (Figure 5) seems to have been born in Iowa in 1875, to parents from Virginia (1910 US Census). Mason seems to have been her first husband's surname, and together they had a daughter, Pearl Mason, in Topeka, Kansas, in 1879 (Conrad Rideout passport application filed December 15, 1903, in Cape Town, Cape Colony, South Africa, via Ancestry.com). In 1896, May Mason arrived in Seattle and opened a restaurant with a boarding house. "Mr. Rideout became her star boarder and finally became smitten with her charms", a newspaper article announced (*The Seattle Republican* 1902). This is Conrad A. Rideout, a local Black lawyer with a reputation of a father from Anguilla, a grandfather who was supposedly an African prince, and Rideout claiming education at the University of Michigan and time, during Reconstruction, as a state legislator in Arkansas (William H. Pruden III 2020).



Source: From Esther Hall Mumford (1980), permissions investigation ongoing.

Figure 5
May B. Mason

When news of the Klondike Gold Rush reached the city in 1897, May B. Mason was among those who took up the call. She has been hailed as the first Black woman in that gold rush, who "ran a laundry, did baking and other such things, and in twelve months' time managed to save up a snug fortune, which has been variously estimated all the way from five to ten thousand dollars", *The Seattle Republican* (1902) reported. In the summer of 1898, Mason returned with \$5,000 in gold dust and an active claim being worked on her behalf on Hunter Creek (Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson 1999, 179; Mumford, 1980, 209).

Mason and Rideout were soon married. Their wedding was covered in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (YEAR), which noted that "her ears and fingers sparkled with diamonds" on that occasion. Mason was seen as a prominent Black socialite, producing concerts and productions of Shakespeare, as well as outings on yachts (*The Seattle Republican* 1902; Hine and Thompson 1999, 179). The May B. Mason of 1898 is celebrated, her picture displayed: an elegantly dressed Black woman, in a hand-painted silk with a confident look. She was rich,

owned her house, and had a modest business besides, running a boarding-house and cooking meals for guests and events (Mumford 1980, 209).

Rideout tried to gain election as a Democrat in Seattle, but, failing this and in his businesses, decided to embark on a voyage to South Africa; he listed “myself, accompanied by my wife and minor daughter (16 y. of age)” on his 1899 passport application (Conrad Rideout passport application, New York, October 16, 1899, via Ancestry.com). To finance the trip, May sold “most of her effects in this city”, which included a number of properties and her business *The Seattle Republican* 1902). It seemed like another glorious and elegant adventure.

When May B. Mason Rideout returned to Seattle in 1902, she had quite a tale—and a filing to sue for divorce. “After a long sea voyage they finally arrived in South Africa, and soon thereafter Mrs. Rideout discovered that her husband was only her husband in name, and that he had married her for no other purpose than to work her for the money that she had earned while in the Klondike”, the *Seattle* newspaper now reported. He deserted her, and, to make things worse, “on her return voyage she was shipwrecked and lost most of her valuable effects”, the newspaper explained *The Seattle Republican* 1902).

But 1903 brought yet another phase of the scandal, as May B. Mason Rideout sought to reestablish herself with “a prosperous restaurant business” in Seattle (*The Seattle Republican*, 1903). She advertised multicourse, three-hour dinner offerings, with roast duck, chicken dumplings, lettuce salad, sugar corn, and many other offerings—including four desserts. She listed phone numbers for both her business and her home—a sign that she continued to maintain some wealth. But Conrad Rideout sent word to the *Black Seattle* newspaper that “he and his ‘daughter’ (Miss Pearl Mason) are now in New York city”—and a later account reported that Pearl Mason and Conrad Rideout had eloped (*The Seattle Republican*, 1903, and 1906).

While such a betrayal must have been devastating, May B. Mason Rideout seems to have landed somewhat on her feet. In 1904, she remarried a John Purnell in Seattle, with the wedding held at the “bride’s residence”—indicating she still had a property, possibly a restaurant or catering hall (Marriage certificate for Mrs. May Bell [Mason] Rideout and John Purnell, Seattle, April 26, 1904, via Ancestry.com.) A later newspaper account claimed they moved to California, though there is a mixed-race May Mason listed in the 1910 census with her “own income” as profession, suggesting her landholding there may have continued to be her primary business (1910 US Census and *The Seattle Republican* 1906).

Frustratingly, there are no more newspaper or government records that we can conclusively connect with May B. Mason Rideout Purnell. Women are simply harder to track in these records. But, like Georgina Mingo Whetsel Moore, it also seems that women had more obstacles in maintaining their wealth, from family members as well as economic competitors.

William Perry and William Harvey McCurdy

In 1914, at the age of 61, the border-crossing William Perry, born in Amherstburg, Ontario, became Ford Motor Company’s first known Black employee. He worked for the company as a janitor until his death at the age of 87, in 1940 (Henry Ford Museum).

A few years before Perry began working at the Ford plant, the Hercules company of Evansville, Indiana, had developed a truck body to fit over the chassis of the Model T. Ford itself was not regularly producing truck bodies, so Hercules did. The company had begun as Hercules Buggy in 1902, manufacturing traditional horse-drawn vehicles for Sears, Roebuck. In the decade that followed, the company created a number of new enterprises: Hercules Surrey and Wagon Co., for larger vehicles; Hercules Warehouse Co., for parts and assembly; Hercules Body Co., for the truck bodies and woodie wagons; Hercules Paint Co., where

products were finished; and Hercules Gas Engine Co., in the years Hercules tried to compete with their own full cars and trucks, rather than just supplying add-on parts. The brick buildings still fill a campus of industrial concerns the size of ten regular blocks, along the railroad tracks, less than a mile from the Ohio River (Theobald 2004).

In 1920, the various Hercules companies produced 84,000 buggies, 62,000 gas engines and 40,000 truck and auto bodies, and employed 7,500, all under the control of the president and owner, William Harvey McCurdy (McCurdy n.d.). Hercules's main client was Sears, Roebuck, and McCurdy worked closely with Julius Rosenwald, the part-owner and then full owner of Sears who in later years financed the building of close to five thousand school buildings for Black children in the US South (Stephanie Deutsch 2011). Even after Hercules failed to capture the automobile business, in the 1920s McCurdy and Rosenwald worked together on the next industrial innovation that McCurdy would manufacture and Sears would sell: a gas-powered rotary compressor that would serve as the basis for the Coldspot refrigerator, in partnership with another Evansville company, Sunbeam Electric, that had manufactured headlights for Hercules's cars (McCurdy n.d.).

The portraits of McCurdy show a man with pale skin, wavy-to-straight hair, and huge mutton-chop sideburns surrounding a bare chin; an image from decades later show a clean-shaven man in a straw hat, wearing glasses and a ribbon from the day's festivities (Klingler 2013 and Theobald 2004). Born in Pennsylvania and having lived in Missouri and Michigan, having worked first in milling wood and then in real-estate and insurances sales, McCurdy settled in Cincinnati in 1889 and took a job with the Favorite Buggy Company, where he gained the experience to branch out on his own, and found his own companies, with Rosenwald's backing, beginning in 1894. He was well-regarded in Evansville, becoming a 32nd-degree Mason; president of the board of trustees of Evansville College; president of the city's interurban Evansville Railway Company; and president of the Old National Bank (Theobald 2004).



Sources: Courtesy of Mark Theobald (2004), Henry Ford Museum, Copy and Reuse Restrictions Apply, THF82794, see web use policy at <http://www.TheHenryFord.org>, rights pending.

Figure 6

William Harvey McCurdy; William Perry and other employees at Ford Motor Company

Interesting, sure, but how does this relate to our attempt to track Black North Americans? The answer begins farther back in the McCurdy family line. William Harvey McCurdy's father was Joseph; his grandfather was Nasa McCurdy Sr., emancipated by his enslaver Rachel Kennedy of Montgomery, Pennsylvania, in 1795 (McCurdy n.d.). The children of Nasa McCurdy Jr., William Harvey McCurdy's cousins, moved between Windsor, Ontario, and Conneaut, Ohio. In the mid-twentieth century, they included Merle McCurdy, US Attorney for the Northern District of Ohio; Howard Douglass McCurdy, who founded the NAACP chapter at Michigan State and became the first Black Canadian to hold a tenure-track position and to earn tenure at a Canadian university; and Alvin McCurdy, who worked as a carpenter and rose to prominence among Black Masons in Windsor and who amassed the largest collection of Black Canadian records in existence (Canada Commission for UNESCO 2021; Kent State University).

But William Harvey McCurdy and his siblings stayed in the United States—though they crossed another border. They were listed as mulatto when they were living with their parents in Pennsylvania in 1860; by 1870, when they were listed as living together in St. Louis, after their father's death, they were listed as white (1860 and 1870 US Census). William Harvey McCurdy sought an advantage not by moving back and forth to Canada, as their cousins had done, but by crossing the racial borders and prospering through the advantages that conferred, as Emily Nix and Nancy Qian (2015) have found. The family tells me that William Harvey McCurdy did help supply coal to his Ontario cousins, even though he would not otherwise risk direct contact and having his racial background being unmasked.¹

And so it was that William Perry was the first *known* Black employee of Ford, even while one of Ford's key suppliers likely was the first person of Black descent to work with Ford.

Jesse Binga

Black North Americans might move as individuals, but across the US-Canada borders we can find family networks, brothers and sisters and uncles and cousins who helped each other seek prosperity and build community. For the Bingas, it continued with movements into the United States, with religious ministry and political rights motivating some members, and economic opportunities motivating others.

William W. Binga was born enslaved in Kentucky in 1817; in 1836, he escaped with his cousins and neighbors, and he settled in Windsor, where he joined Josiah Henson and other Black North Americans who fought on the side of the Crown in the Rebellion of 1837. By 1844, Binga had settled in Detroit, where he married Adelpia Seymour-Powers and had a large number of children (C. Rae White 2018).

Binga worked as a barber—an intimate, high-status job, cutting hair, shaving beards, and doing what we would now consider primary healthcare and minor medical procedures. Going to the barbershop meant entering into the conversation among prosperous men in the community—white and Black, young and old. The mixture of health, appearances, and conversation were key to why barbers were influential community members, often turning their profits into other ventures. Often housed in hotels, barbers served locals and visitors, and hence they were often the first to know about news and gossip that might shape the community, as Douglas Walter Bristol (2009) has explained.

William Binga bought his family a house, and he bought other property to develop; in the 1880s, he built the first of two seven-unit rowhouses, available for Black residents to rent, that became known as Binga's Row (Carl R. Osthaus 1973; White 2018; White 2011). The story-and-a-half slant-roof buildings, clad in wood boards, were tenements—crowded and extremely modest dwellings, with windows only in the front and three or four rooms inside, but a space

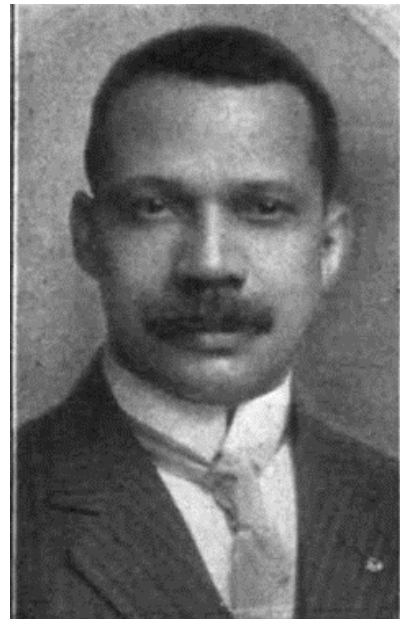
¹ Marlene Bransom comment to me at the Buxton History and Genealogy Conference, Buxton, Ontario, Labour Day 2019.

of first (or last) opportunity for Black residents unable to afford more elaborate dwellings and shut out of some neighborhoods by racial discrimination (White 2011). “I used to own a good deal of property”, Adelpia Binga proclaimed in 1889; “I owned and rented houses in Detroit & Windsor” (*St. Paul Daily Globe*, February 10, 1889, 12, as reproduced in White 2011). Adelpia worked as a midwife and herb doctor as well as managing the family’s real estate holdings, in both ways complementing her husband’s businesses (White 2011).

The Binga children extended their parents’ economic ventures in many directions.

Moses William Binga was the eldest of William Binga’s children. Born in Detroit in 1851, he worked as a barber like his father as well as a hostler, moving locomotives in the railyard. But M. William Binga, as he fashioned himself, soon had more in common with Elijah McCoy, keeping a shed on St Antoine Street for his mechanical tinkering. After Binga married and moved to Cincinnati, he invented a combination street sprinkler, which he patented in 1879 (White 2018).

Martha Binga, his sister, worked first as a seamstress in Detroit and St. Paul, while living with her parents; with her second husband, John Randolph Winchester, she moved to Chicago, where she worked as a fortune teller and published a book and magazine with recipes, household tips, and horoscopes (White 2018). Though John worked initially as a janitor, together they established a real estate brokerage firm and a loan office, and Martha became the first Black woman to found an establishment agency in Chicago, assisting more than seven thousand job seekers in 1900. Martha maintained her fortune-telling business above the real-estate offices; she preserved in the work for close to thirty years (White 2018). And she had the chance to work closely with her brother, Jesse (Figure 7)—the most famous Binga of his generation.



Sources: *The Broad Ax* (1910), public domain; and *Era of Progress and Promise, 1863-1910* (1910), 420, public domain.

Figure 7
Binga State Bank and Jesse Binga

Jesse Binga, the youngest child of William and Adelpia Binga, was born in 1865 in Detroit. Later accounts made it clear his successes were specifically *not* because of any educational advantages: even when he became “the richest man in the town”, he was “exposed”—in a public speech about a great “man who has did”—as someone who “didn’t

know his verbs” (P.L. Prattis 1950). After a few years assisting his parents and trying out work as a barber, Binga spent two years in the offices of Black attorney Thomas R. Crisup before traveling in the US West, trying to find a secure place first as a barber and then as a real estate speculator (Osthaus 1973, 40; White 2018). In 1893, drawn by the World’s Fair, he settled in Chicago with only \$10 in assets, but he quickly established a string of businesses, hawking wares through his skill at sales: a shoeshine stand; gourmet fruits and vegetables; then a realty practice (Ron Grossman, 2018; Don Hayner 2019; John N. Ingham and Lynne B. Feldman 1994, 74-81; Osthaus 1973, 41).

Starting out, “his capital at that time consisted of half a month’s rent, three old rickety chairs, a small flat-top table, an old worn-out stove resting on two legs, and a brick”, the *Broad Ax*, a Black newspaper, later recounted (*Broad Ax*, December 25, 1909, cited in Osthaus 1973, 41). As his family had done in Detroit, Binga purchased real estate, fixed it up, and rented it to white and Black tenants, creating new opportunities for newly arrived Chicagoans. “I could do the repair work myself”, Binga later explained; “Many a night I’ve worked all night on boilers and plumbing, and wiping joints, and mending stairs, and hanging paper” (James O’Donnell Bennett, “Plans, Work, Binga’s Secret for Success.” *Chicago Tribune* LXXXVI (19), May 8, 1927, 1, as quoted in Osthaus 1973, 41, and Grossman 2018) By 1907, Binga was a dominant real-estate force in Chicago, working with loans, insurance, property management, and rentals. His name was advertised on the sides of buildings—“JESSE BINGA. REAL ESTATE. RENTING.”—painted onto the bricks high above the street, and his name serving as a brand helped to cement his reputation (Osthaus 1973; White 2018).

But Jesse Binga wanted to bring his financial power to the next level, and in 1908 he founded Jesse Binga Bank, the first Black-owned bank in the northern United States. In 1910, he leased an entire block of storefronts with apartments above, on State Street, between 47th and 48th streets, on south side of Chicago. The building had white tenants and businesses, but many objected to having a Black landlord, so they left—an early example of “white flight” that led to segregated neighborhoods in the North. With twenty-six stores and fifty-four apartments in the “Binga Block”, Jesse was an economic powerhouse in Black Chicago (Osthaus 1973, 42-43; White 2018).

With a new marriage to Black socialite Eudora Johnson, Binga expanded his financial reach by creating a state-chartered public bank, Binga State Bank, in 1921. The Bingas purchased an electric car, upholstered in blue, and Mrs. Eudora Johnson Binga’s driving (and racing) skills were noted in the newspaper (*Chicago Defender* July 6, 1912, quoted in White 2018). (The fact that she was a cousin to John “Mushmouth” Johnson, the Black kingpin of Chicago gambling dens, was often noted in the gossip as well.) They purchased a large house at 5922 South Park Avenue, in an all-white neighborhood; the house was bombed at least five times, and the *Chicago Tribune* reported how “White men have said Binga ‘has rented too many flats to Negroes in high-class residential districts.’” After repeated bombings, Binga hired an armed guard; when, in 1919, Chicago and much of the country saw racially motivated attacks, the local police urged Binga to leave, but he told a reporter that “I will not run. The race is at stake and not myself” (Bennett, *Chicago Tribune* 1927 as quoted in Grossman 2018; see also Osthaus 1973, 48-49).

As World War I and the increasing number of factory jobs attracted immigrants to Chicago—including Black immigrants from the South, as part of the Great Migration—Jesse Binga was instrumental to welcoming new arrivals. His rental properties could provide a first place to live; his bank was the pride of the Black community, and it could be a place for any savings; and Binga’s bank invested in Black community institutions, underwriting loans to churches and fraternal organizations, and recruiting more Black businesses to Chicago’s South Side. As Binga told a newspaper reporter, “the average white man... underestimate[s] my knowledge of real estate values. They wouldn’t believe that a colored man could take almost any old building and whip it into shape” (Bennett, *Chicago Tribune* 1927, as quoted in

Grossman 2018). A later account praised how Binga “reasoned that if Negroes marshalled and organized their financial resources, the bank would serve as a means of promoting other enterprises such as small factories, retail stores, finance corporations and service establishments”. It was estimated that, at the height of his economic power, Binga “owned more State Street frontage than any other Chicagoan, white or colored” (William A. Occomy 1950).

Binga built a prominent Binga State Bank building and a commercial arcade to join his set of properties in the city. And his advertisements drew on the tenor of the age: “Building Up Somebody’s Civilization—WHY NOT YOURS?” asked a Binga State Bank advertisement from 1922. The copy boldly declared that “The difference between savagery and civilization is THRIFT”, and that “small sums” saved could become “CAPITAL. Money that goes to build up large churches, hotels, apartment buildings, factories, etc.” (Binga Bank advertisement, *Chicago Defender*, October 28, 1922, reproduced in White 2018) Binga did not speak of race or region, but did note that “THE BINGA STATE BANK is educating the masses of its community in thrift and economic morality by protecting property during this period of prosperity”. Binga founded the Associated Business Club & Exchange to connect his fellow Black entrepreneurs (Osthaus 1973, 48).

After opening in a corner shop in 1921 at 3633 S. State Street, Binga built the bank its own white neoclassical temple of finance, ribbed with columns and topped with a flag in 1924. Binga worked with a board of directors—many of whom had far more formal education and training than he did, including William Alfred Robinson, one of his Binga cousins who had graduated from Howard University Law School—but Binga understood his successes as linked to his bold bets and his own hard work. Detractors found Binga’s bravado overbearing. But, in the 1920s, nothing succeeded like success, and Binga was riding high. For their 1922 Christmas party, the Bingas invited 300 guests, and the *Broad Ax* gushed that “it is reasonably safe to state that at no time in the history of Chicago have so many elegantly gowned ladies assembled together as were present at the twilight party” (*Broad Ax* in Grossman 2018; see also Osthaus 1973; White 2018).

A 1927 article described Binga in his office, “as quietly dressed as he is quietly spoken, with close to two million dollars’ worth of deposits on his mind”. And Binga gave the reporter a tour, introducing the Black tellers and cashiers and reciting their educational achievements: graduates of Oberlin, Michigan, and Northwestern. “I get a big thrill”, Binga told the reporter, “out of the thought of these educated young people making a career with permanency in it—not condemned to hit or miss occupations”. In 1929, construction of the Binga Arcade was complete: five stories tall, filling the block, with the double-height windows on the top floor to serve as a ballroom (Grossman 2018; Illinois Institute of Technology; Osthaus 1973, 45-46). The extant photographs show the imposing space as newly finished, but empty—a haunting portent of what would happen after that year’s stock market crash ushered in the Great Depression.

In prosperous times, being the underwriter of community endeavors means holding a key place of authority, with your approval essential to what would get built, who would find employment, and where people would live, work, and worship. But the sudden collapse of a financial panic—especially before any of the federal guarantees and safeguards were in place—meant that a financial downturn could sink personal and communal fortunes.

In 1929, not only was Jesse Binga completing the Binga Arcade, he was also trying to launch yet another bank, the South Park National Bank. Binga was trying to put up the necessary capital to make loans from the new bank just as the Great Depression was causing a financial panic; when state regulators asked for \$400,000 in cash to undergird the new bank, Binga turned to the local banking association in Chicago, where Binga Bank was a member, but its membership refused; it was too risky, and Binga was overextended. Many of the Binga Bank assets were illiquid, tied up in mortgages to Black churches and fraternal organizations;

Binga refused to call in the loans just as these community members were being thrown out of work. But it also was revealed that Binga had overextended his credit to line his own pockets, and to embellish the bank offices with extravagant furnishings. When, on July 31, 1930, the Auditor of the State of Illinois seized the new bank, it was Binga's own personal fortune that was taken, to pay off as many depositors and investors as possible (Osthaus 1973, 54-56).

After financial ruin came recriminations. Binga was charged with embezzlement for his maneuvers to save his banks: moving money that was not his into his accounts, to shore up and pay off creditors with the hope of replacing all the funds before things collapsed. The charges included improper valuation for loans—loaning too much, with too little collateral or too small a down payment—which was mostly a factor of the drastically changed economic prospects. The first trial ended with a hung jury, but in 1933 he was found guilty. Jesse Binga went to prison, with his entire world in Chicago gone—his bank failed, his fortune gone, his wife dead, and his businesses seized and sold. The man who shaped Black Chicago in the crucial decades at the start of the Great Migration had been humbled by the financial crash and its aftermath (Osthaus 1973).

But Jesse Binga still had his supporters. Amidst the many bank runs and financial collapses of the Great Depression, community leaders in Chicago felt that Binga had been singled out because of his race. The priest at Binga's home church gathered ten thousand signatures—many from people who had lost money in Binga's failures—on a petition that asked for clemency. Noted lawyer Clarence Darrow testified to the parole board, noting that "I have known Binga for 30 years and he is a man of fine character. He lost his fortune trying to keep his bank open". Binga was granted parole in 1938, and when he was released, the *Afro-American* ran a massive headline: "JESSE BINGA FREED" and an extensive article about how "the release of the aged banker marks finis to the famous case". Binga, a Catholic parishioner, was given a job as a handyman in one of the local churches, and lived humbly; the governor of Illinois granted Binga a full pardon in 1941, but the damage to Binga's finances and reputation could not be undone (*Afro American* 1938; Grossman 2018; Osthaus 1973, 59-60).

Binga is listed on the 1940 census as a boarder, age 75, widowed, with no income, living with a mother-daughter pair of public-school teachers; they seem to be strangers to him (1940 US Census). The contrast with his years as the talk of the town are extreme; when Jesse Binga died in 1950, his obituary ran in more than 35 newspapers across the continent, from Victoria, British Columbia, to Newport, Rhode Island, from Fort Lauderdale to St. Louis to Montreal, with the first paragraph describing how he "rose from bootblack to millionaire bank president only to fall into obscurity after his bank failed and he served a prison sentence".² Yet "thousands of people including many depositors in his ill-fated Binga State Bank, old friends and business cronies, as well as the purely curious trudged in and out of the funeral parlor for four days", the newspaper account of his funeral announced (*The Pittsburgh Courier* 1950). As one appreciation argued after his death, Binga had been "an ex-convict whose accomplishments should inspire youth", as he had been "a successful businessman who dominated business and social life in the Negro community", and he was only felled when "hard times came—for everybody", in the Great Depression (Prattis 1950).

² The obituary, a short Associated Press obituary, turns up in newspapers.com on June 14, 1950, in the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Oshkosh Northwestern*, *Marshfield News-Herald*, *Newport (RI) Daily News*, *The Indiana (PA) Gazette*, *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, *The (Baltimore) Evening Sun*, *Fort Lauderdale News*, *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader*, (Victoria, BC) *Times Colonist*, *The York (PA) Dispatch*, *The Dixon (IL) Telegraph*, *The (Roseburg, OR) News-Review*, *Mt. Vernon (IL) Register-News*, *Des Moines Tribune*, *The Columbia (SC) Record*, *The (Racine) Journal Times*, *The Montreal Daily Star*, and *Pampa (TX) Daily News*, among others. Quotation from *The Town Talk* (1950).

Concluding Remarks

What about time in Canada shaped Black US business history? To paraphrase Tolstoy, perhaps every successful business story is somewhat the same, with the right experience meeting the correct opportunity. But, for these border-crossing Black businesspeople, we can be a bit more specific: the chance for an extensive education, for Elijah McCoy; the unique natural resources of Canada, for John Sullivan Deas, Georgina Whetsel and May B. Mason; the network of opportunities, for Charles Spencer Smith and for members of the Perry, McCurdy, and Binga families. Over the decades, the direction for advantageous migration shifted—first north away from enslavement, and then south into the robust US economy, and then north again for special opportunities. But the link between mobility and opportunity in the successes of those discussed here is unmistakable.

The power to be a fortuneteller, the success of an oil cup or a salmon cannery: these accomplishments might normally stay famous only in a local history exhibition or tour. It might seem, at first glance, that these accomplishments do not shift History writ large. But we should see these Black lives in their context: a generation removed from the escape to enslavement, with parents (and cousins and likely family visits) across the border into Canada, and then back into the United States. In years of Black North American history often dismissed or overlooked, in networks and on routes and in professions that are often ignored in the broad strokes of Black history at the turn of the twentieth century, the accomplishments of these Black border-crossers suggest we do not know enough about either Black business successes or the Black quotidian world (see Matthew F. Delmont 2019; Field 2017; Saidiya V. Hartman 2019).

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