

75 years ago today, Viola Desmond challenged racial discrimination. History shows she won.

Halifax's North End Business Association announces plan on anniversary to honour civil rights icon with art installation

Seventy-five years ago today, Viola Desmond committed the crime of sitting in a New Glasgow theatre's white-only section.

Her courageous action — Black people, according to theatre policy, had to sit in the balcony — earned Desmond an arrest, a night in jail and a conviction for an obscure tax offence.

But she also was an inspiration to generations of African Nova Scotians and to people far beyond the provincial borders. Desmond became the first Canadian woman to be featured by herself on the face of a banknote — the \$10 bill released in 2018. She was also named by the Canadian government that year as a person of national historic importance and was also eventually pardoned for her so-called crime.

To further mark Desmond's legacy, the North End business Association plans to place commemorative art piece "prominently displayed on Gottingen Street close to where Viola's business once stood in the 1940s," the association said in a news release.

"It will honour the life and legacy of Viola Desmond and highlight her contributions to the Black Community. Her perseverance, entrepreneurship and bravery are traits that will be acknowledged and revered for years to come."

"It is especially important that Viola be properly recognized in her community, not only for her bravery on November 8, 1946 but for her contributions as a pioneer for women in business," Tracy Jackson, executive director of the association said in a release. "Our hope is that this project will be a catalyst for cultural recognition and cultural tourism for the North End of Halifax."

The group will select one artist to produce the artwork, which will be installed next summer. It will also produce a series of community art banners in Halifax's north end that showcase work from 40 local artists from marginalized communities.

"I am pleased and excited about the news of a permanent recognition in the North End of Viola's success. I have many fond memories of living on Gottingen Street," Desmond's sister Wanda Robinson said in the release.

"I especially remember Gottingen Street, and what better place to have a permanent recognition of Viola Desmond."

Facts about Viola Desmond

- Along with her nine siblings, Viola grew up in a small townhouse on Maynard Street with her grandparents
- Viola received beautician training in part from Black pioneer Madame C.J. Walker when attending her school in New York
- In 1937, Viola opened her salon, Vi's Studio of Beauty Culture on Gottingen Street.
- A common theme throughout Viola's career was creating opportunities to advance Black women. With few beauty schools in Eastern Canada enrolling Black students, Viola opened The Desmond School of Beauty Culture. In addition, she often would sell Vi's Beauty Products in her former students' shops
- While on a business trip to Sydney in 1946, Desmond's car broke down in New Glasgow. While she waited for repairs, Viola attended a movie at the Roseland Theatre. She sat in the lower section, which had been reserved for white patrons, to better see the screen. After being notified that she would have to move to the Black-only upper level, Viola refused to move.
- Viola was charged with tax evasion. The price for a floor seat was 40 cents and the price for the Black-only upper level seats was 30 cents which Desmond had paid for. The difference in tax was one cent.
- Despite losing her court case, Viola was posthumously granted a pardon 64 years later in 2010, the first instance of which in Canada
- Viola's legacy as a civil rights pioneer and trailblazing entrepreneur has been honored through the naming of the Viola Desmond ferry in Halifax, being featured on the \$10 bank note, along with many other commemorations including being featured in the arts.

Source: North End Business Association

<https://www.saltwire.com/atlantic-canada/news/75-years-ago-today-viola-desmond-challenged-racial-discrimination-history-shows-she-won-100655293/>