

Bolton author pens book on first Black Canadian woman to become a doctor

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Sophia Jones was the first Black woman born in Canada to receive a medical degree.

John Steckley, a Bolton resident and retired professor, recently discovered her story and was inspired by it. He decided to write a book about her, and in his research found amazing stories about Jones' family as well.

Steckley, who has a PhD from the University of Toronto, taught at Humber College for over 30 years. His primary area of study was anthropology. When writing a sociology textbook, Steckley was looking for the first Black Canadian woman to receive a medical degree. This led him to discover Jones.

Jones was born in 1857 in Chatham, ON (Chatham, Canada West at the time) ? a place known as a major northern terminus of the Underground Railroad.

Steckley explained her first education would have taken place in a segregated private school financially supported by the local Black community.

Jones then went to Wilberforce Collegiate Institute, a school that prepared Black students for university.

In 1879, Jones was accepted to the University of Toronto, but was unable to join the school's medical program ? both because she was Black and because she was a woman.

In 1880, Jones was able to follow her dreams by moving to the United States and attending the University of Michigan Medical School.

In 1885, when Jones was 28, she became the first Black woman to graduate from the University of Michigan Medical School and the first Black Canadian woman to receive a medical degree.

?The university still respects her? there's a lectureship named after her, there's a conference room named after her, and there's an alumni society that provides a scholarship fund,? said Steckley. ?She's considered important in Michigan but in Canada she's pretty much unknown.?

Jones went on to have a successful career teaching in many places of higher learning, such as Spelman College, Wilberforce University, and the Agricultural and Mechanical College in Greensboro, North Carolina (which later became a branch of the University of North Carolina).

Jones' father had an arts degree from Oberlin College and was a well-known gunsmith. One of her uncles, William Allen Jones, was the first dentist in B.C. to be granted a license and was known as ?Painless Jones?. Another of Jones' uncles was the first and only teacher on Salt Spring Island in B.C.

Jones had three sisters, and they all became teachers as well.

?They became champions of Black education in the U.S.,? said Steckley. ?Just an amazing family, what they achieved.?

Steckley is publishing his upcoming book on Jones and her family with Rock's Mills Press sometime later this year.

?She should have been written about decades ago,? said Steckley of Jones. ?I'm glad I got to write about her, I learned a lot.?