

## **The Great Jamaicans Project – Part 1**

This series we will focus on Jamaicans, many lesser known, who have made an impact in their respective fields. Part One will highlight three individuals who have made a mark in the areas of activism and law. Of note are John Russwurm, Hector Josephs and Robert Sutherland.

### **John Brown Russwurm**

John Brown Russwurm (1799-1851) can easily be considered as one of most important figures in the Black Liberation Movement. Yet despite his achievements, Russwurm remains an obscure figure in Jamaican history. Russwurm was born on October 1, 1799 in Port Antonio, Jamaica. His father John Russwurm was a white slave owner from Virginia. However not much is known about the mother of the younger Russwurm, except for her not being white. Russwurm had an elite childhood. In 1807 he was sent to Canada to acquire a proper education. Unlike most blacks of the era, Russwurm's educational pursuits did not stop at the secondary level. In 1824, he enrolled at Bowdoin's College and later became its first black graduate and third person of African descent to graduate from a college in America. Throughout his college years, Russwurm's interest in abolition and black liberation was facilitated by his professors.

He was fortunate to be taught by men such as Thomas Upham and William Smith, who were involved with black colonization movements. In college, Russwurm also developed an interest in studying the newly independent Haiti. Therefore it is not surprising that Russwurm became a leading critic of slavery and promoter of black liberation. In 1827, he became a co-founder of the *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American operated newspaper in America. Russwurm, however was a controversial figure. He was of the view that racism in America would prevent blacks from achieving on a greater scale. Therefore it would be more appropriate for individuals of African descent to start their own colony. Such a position was unpopular and caused many to discontinue reading the *Freedom's Journal*. Hence the *Freedom's Journal* ceased publication in 1829. Russwurm, being a radical, supported the American Colonization Society's efforts to develop a colony for African Americans in Africa. Therefore he migrated to what would become Liberia in 1829. During his time in Liberia he served as colonial secretary and editor of the *Liberia Journal*. In 1836 Russwurm became the Governor of Maryland, a colony established by the Maryland State Colonization Society. He served the colony until his death in 1851.

### **Hector Archibald Josephs, K.C., B.A., LLB**

Hector Josephs (1871-1936) was Jamaica's first black barrister. Little is known about the early life of Josephs, but the records indicate that he was born into a middle class family. His father, Hector Josephs, owned 27 acres of land in St. Andrew. In his youth Josephs was educated at Collegiate Boys School and York Castle High School. Like other brilliant youngsters of his era, he was a recipient of the Jamaica Scholarship, thus allowing him to study law at Cambridge. Josephs completed his legal studies in 1896 and was called to the Bar in November of that year. He quickly distinguished himself in the legal field and served his country as Assistant Attorney general from 1914-1916. Throughout his time in Jamaica, Josephs served as a member of numerous organizations, such as Jamaica Amateur Athletic Association

and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Despite being qualified for the post of Attorney General, Josephs was never appointed as the Attorney General in Jamaica. Therefore in 1921, he migrated to British Guiana (now Guyana), where he served as the Acting Attorney General, and was eventually promoted to serve as the country's Attorney General. Like his tenure in Jamaica, Josephs vigorously served the public in British Guiana, by supporting the Boys Scout, YMCA and Salvation Army. Hector Josephs remained a passionate activist, until he succumbed to illness in August 1936.

### **Robert Sutherland**

Robert Sutherland (1830-1878), a native of Jamaica lived quite an exceptional life. He was the first known graduate of colour at a Canadian university and the first black person of African descent to study law in British North America. Sutherland enrolled at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada, in 1849 where he was an exceptional student, winning 14 academic prizes. He graduated in 1852 with honours in classics and mathematics and later went on to pursue law through apprenticeship and examination. After being called to the Bar in 1855 he worked as a lawyer for 20 years in Ontario. Sutherland was also active in local politics and served as a member of the municipal council. Robert Sutherland had no family and left his entire estate to his alma mater Queen's University. This bequest saved the university from failing, due to losses stemming from a banking collapse.

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