
MURDER AT THE COLOURED CLUB

Point Douglas, Winnipeg

Written by John Burchill, President
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In my story on [Detective Abraham Friedman](#), I was drawn to an arrest he made on November 3, 1916. The offence itself was not particularly significant, but the area was. Friedman had arrested Sam Korpas after he saw him leave 98 Hallet Street in the North Point Douglas area. His suspicions were drawn to Korpas, who was white, as he stood out in an area known as “*Coloured Row*”. I had not heard of the Coloured Row before, and so began my journey.

Going back to February 13, 1907, a private bill was put forward to incorporate the Tuxedo Club for “*coloured gentlemen in Winnipeg*”. As there was already a [Tuxedo Park company](#) incorporated in 1905, the lawyer for the registrants was told to find another name. After some debate whether the incorporation should be allowed to proceed as there were already two coloured clubs in Winnipeg, it was subsequently agreed that the name would be changed to the Atlanta Club.

The April 24, 1908, edition of the Winnipeg Tribune reported that many people of colour lived on Martha and Austin, and on Higgins Avenue near Main Street. The article continued that there were two coloured clubs in the city – one on Main Street near the subway (the Winnipeg Club, 704 Main Street) and another on Maple Street (the Atlanta Club, 39 Maple Street). The proprietor of the Winnipeg Club was Frank Johnson, who would later move his club to the Maple Street location, taking it over from Richard Western in 1911. ¹

The article, which was an interview with a well known, but unnamed coloured barber, said “*all told there are about 100 pure blooded negros in the city, including families, and as many mulattoes and quadroons. Some of us run barbershops and restaurants, while many are railway porters.*” ²

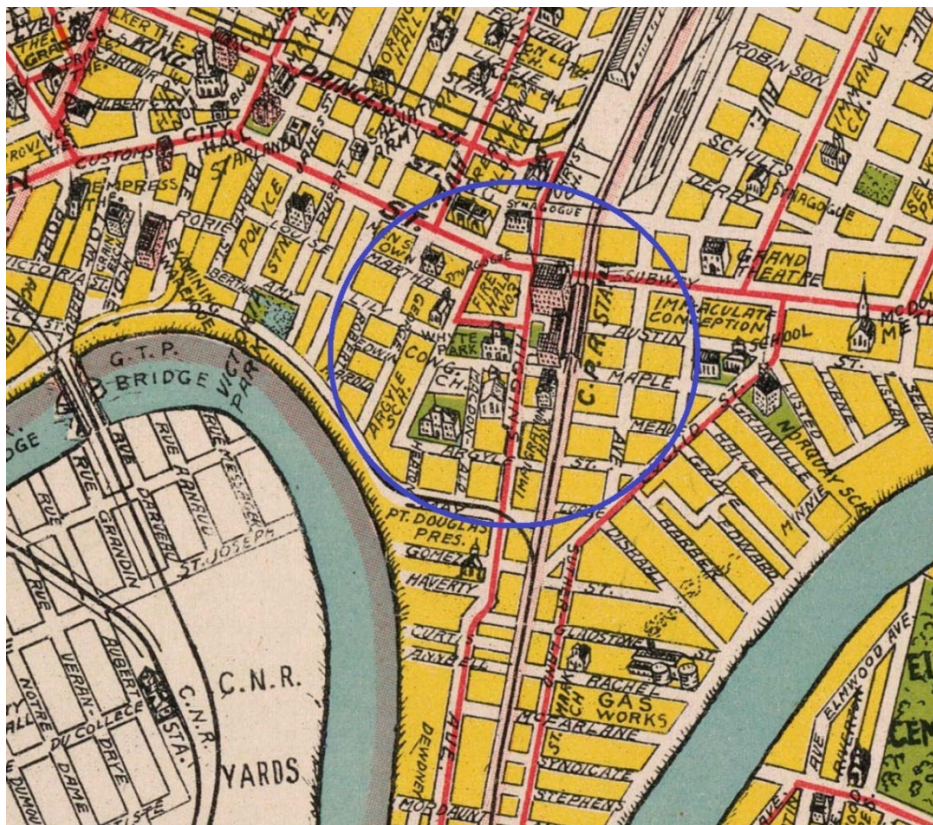
According to the Canadian Encyclopedia, [railway porters](#) were hired from within established Black communities in Canada. They were also recruited from the southern United States and as far as the Caribbean. As quoted in the article, “*many African Canadians migrated westward for promotions or better opportunities with the Pullman Palace Car Company, the Canadian Pacific Railway, and the Grand Trunk Railways.*” As of 1909, the article continued, there were 76 Black men working as porters out of Winnipeg.

¹ The Giffo Club, located at 47-49 Martha Street, was also identified as a “coloured club” in the newspapers when it was raided by the Winnipeg Police on May 7, 1911. David A. Hall was the proprietor. The word “coloured” does not appear in the formal names of these clubs. Rather this is how they were referred to in the local newspapers.

² A [Quadroon](#) is an outdated term for someone with one-quarter African descent, whereas a Mulatto refers to a person with half African descent. Both terms are considered archaic and potentially offensive today. Other similarly pejorative terms as Negro are used as they appear in their original sources.

It is not surprising then, that this area around Martha, Maple, Austin, Higgins and Main Street would be home to, or cater to, the Black community as it was near the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) station and the CPR's Royal Alexandra Hotel, as well as the federal government's Immigration Hall located at Higgins and Maple. Established in 1924, [Pilgrim Baptist Church](#) at 41 Maple Street is, today, an active remnant of this largely unknown black neighbourhood.³

Indeed, in Sarah-Jane Mathieu's book "[North of the Color Line](#)", she stated that within a few steps of the major railway stations in Canada the "*black community was placed there to service the rails ... And while most white Canadians might not have known of their existence or grumbled about them as centers of swing and sin, for the thousands of blacks who made their lives there, cut through between train shifts, these neighborhoods' black barbers, tailors, grocers, and news agents represented an instantly recognizable community. For so many African Canadian men and women, black churches and Freemason temples conferred membership and fraternity when white trade unionists and landlords held the line on black exclusion. The black-owned boardinghouse or late night diner, ... affirmed blacks' sense of belonging precisely when their work robbed them of any sense of place*".⁴



City of Winnipeg Map, 1911. Showing area around CPR Station and Immigration Hall, including Martha, Austin, Maple and Higgins streets.

³ Originally Hill's Memorial Baptist Church. Prior to the Pilgrim Baptist Church, there was the Bethel African Methodist Church, at Alexander and Stanley, which operated from 1916-1924, before relocating to 156 Austin Street North for a couple of years. [John Ashley Robinson](#), one of the founders of the Order of Sleeping Car Porters in 1917, the first Black railway union in North America, was a member of the Bethel African Methodist Church.

⁴ Mathieu, Sarah-Jane, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955*, University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill (2010), p 18.

Frank Harry Johnson was the owner and manager of the Winnipeg (Coloured) Club and later the Atlanta (Coloured) Club. Living at 39 Maple Street at the time of the 1911 Census, he identified as negro, born in the United States. In various newspaper articles written about him, it was said Johnson was well off. Apparently, he had run several similar clubs in the United States before coming to Winnipeg in 1904, owned a few racehorses (“Major Dey” and “Resolution”), had property in River Heights, and won a substantial amount of money betting on the Johnson-Jeffries fight.⁵

Johnson was also no stranger to the police. On February 12, 1910, members of the Winnipeg Police raided the Winnipeg (Coloured) Club and arrested Johnson and 18 “found ins” for illegal gambling. Winnipeg Police records show that 18 of the 19 men (including Johnson) were Black Americans, mostly porters, but also cooks, tailors, and barbers. Johnson received a \$100 fine, and most of the rest had their charges withdrawn or dismissed.

A few weeks later, on March 6, 1910, Johnson struggled with Augustus (Gus) Smith, a coloured barber, and disarmed him of a revolver. Smith had come to Johnson’s club on Main Street intent on killing him, believing Johnson had been fooling around with Verna Miller. In fact, Smith had just come from shooting Miller in the head outside of 187 McFarlane Street. Miller fortunately survived and Smith was tried for attempted murder. Smith was convicted by a jury on March 30, 1910, and sentenced to seven years in prison.

After changing locations, Johnson’s club on Maple Street was also raided by the Winnipeg Police for illegal liquor sales on June 19, 1911. Johnson received a \$50 fine. However, on July 29, 1911, the police came to investigate another matter – Johnson’s murder. According to the Winnipeg Tribune on July 31, 1911, “*no event in the history of Winnipeg has excited so much interest amongst the coloured population ... [Johnson’s murder] was the sole topic of conversation in those places where the coloured population congregate*”.



Henry Wilbur Redd had come into the club that morning intent on killing Johnson. They had argued the previous evening over women or money, or both. Redd purchased a six-shot revolver that morning and walked over to the Winnipeg Club where he shot Johnson as he stood behind the bar. Two shots to the head and stomach, and the remainder as Johnson lay on the floor. The number of shots was confirmed at post mortem by Dr. Edmund James Boardman, who identified six wounds and removed three bullets from the body. The gun was recovered nearby.

At the time of the 1911 Census Henry Wilbur Redd lived at 387-389 Selkirk Avenue. He indicated he worked as a porter with the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR), although the GTR would tell the media that Redd worked as a waiter (not a porter) serving on the dinning cars running between Winnipeg and Edmonton. Six other porters, all American and working at either the GTR or CP Railway lived at the same address on

⁵ The [Johnson-Jeffries fight](#), or the “Fight of the Century”, was a boxing match between the first Black world heavyweight champion (Jack Johnson) and the previously undefeated world heavyweight champion (James Jeffries) on July 4, 1910. Johnson won, leading to the Johnson–Jeffries riots in which more than 20 people died. A year earlier, on March 10, 1909, Johnson had fought Victor McLaglen, a former Winnipeg Police officer. But that is another story.

Selkirk at the time of the Census. Presumably they were all Black. ⁶

Redd fled from the club. Responding officers set up a perimeter around the area and Detectives [Lee Hai](#) and [Joseph Barattieri](#), who generally worked in the immigrant communities, along with Detective Harry Osman and Inspector Donald MacPherson (later Chief of Police), began looking for Redd. As he worked for the railway, the immediate search was focused on all the sleeping and dining cars.

At about 11:15 a.m., Detective Osman observed a foot protruding from beneath the seat of one of the sleeping cars. He ordered Redd out, who came without trouble. He was handcuffed and whisked off my police car to the Winnipeg Police Headquarters on Rupert Avenue.

Redd was tried for murder before Judge Thomas Mathers sitting with a jury on Monday, November 20, 1911. After deliberating for 45 minutes, the jury found Redd guilty of murder on Tuesday, November 21, 1911. He was sentenced to hang by Judge Mathers on March 1, 1912. On February 28, 1912, with the scaffold already erected in the yard of the old [Vaughan Street Jail](#), Redd's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment by a federal government Order in Council.

After his release from prison, Redd returned to the United States. As of the 1930 United States Census, Redd was living in Salt Lake City, Utah, running a barber shop.



MR. AND MRS. FRANK JOHNSON.
Mr. Johnson, Proprietor of the Colored Club, was Shot and Killed Saturday Morning by H. W. Redd, who is Under Arrest.

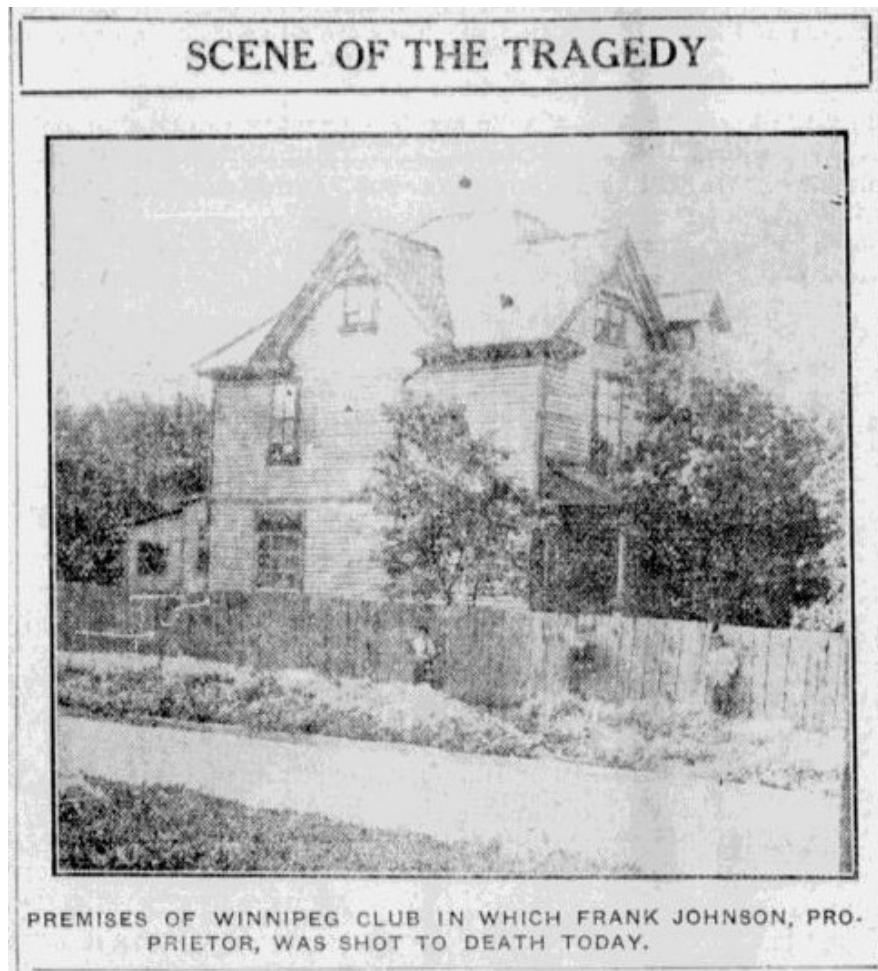
As for Johnson, he was laid to rest in Elmwood Cemetery, plot 3-G0438. The Winnipeg Tribune reported that *“amongst those who attended [Johnson’s] last rites were all the foremost coloured men of the city”*. As Johnson had not planned to die that day, he never prepared a Will. In searching the Probate files from the Court of Kings Bench, I located the record of his estate, which included several properties. When sold, the properties realized \$3700 for his estate, or about \$105,000 today. As Johnson had no children, the sole beneficiary of his estate was his wife, Catherine (Kate) Johnson, whom he had married in Winnipeg in 1904.

As an interesting fact, the Winnipeg/Atlanta Club, located at 39 Maple Street, was the former home of [William Gomez da Fonseca](#). Born at Santa Croix in the West Indies in 1823, perhaps of Creole background, ⁷ his full name was Don Derigo Nojada Gomez da Silva Fonseca. He migrated to New York, where he became an American citizen, then moved to

⁶ A search of the 1911 Census located 146 individuals in Winnipeg who identified their “race or tribal origin” as “negro” and another ten who identified as “coloured”. As the individuals living with Redd also only identified their race or tribal origin as “American”, the number of Black or coloured individuals were likely higher.

⁷ In the 1901 Census Fonseca identified his race or tribal origin as “Spaniard”. All his children, although born in Manitoba, identified their race or tribal origin as Spanish.

Wisconsin, and eventually to Winnipeg in 1860. He purchased a large area of land in Point Douglas where he built the family home.



The Winnipeg Club, 39 Maple Street, in 1911. Formerly the Fonseca Estate



In 1865, Fonseca married Margaret Ann Logan, daughter of Thomas Logan and niece of Alexander Logan.⁸ Fonseca served as a Winnipeg City Alderman for the North Ward for six terms from 1874-1880. He died in Winnipeg on April 22, 1905, and was buried in the St. John's Cathedral Cemetery. Originally Higgins Avenue was called Fonseca in his honour. However, today, he is commemorated by Gomez Street in Point Douglas. Two of his sons, Benjamin Fonseca and Alfonso Fonseca, built and operated the Wolseley Hotel, 186 Higgins Avenue in 1904 (now the [Mount Royal Hotel](#)).

⁸ The son of [Robert Logan, Jr.](#), who was born at St. Thomas, Jamaica in September 1778, who was in turn the "quadroon" son of West Indies planter, [Robert Logan, Sr.](#), and a "free mulatto" woman named Anne Stitche. In 1814 Logan joined the Hudson's Bay Company and in 1820 he was appointed to take charge of Lord Selkirk's affairs at Red River. Logan remained at Red River until his death on May 26, 1866, becoming one of its most prominent and wealthy settlers. He is commemorated by Logan Avenue in Winnipeg.

Although the Winnipeg Police had been proactive at hiring detectives of various racial and ethnic backgrounds at the turn of the last century, there is no record they hired any Black individuals until 1975. However, considering most of all Black men in Canada were associated with the railway and most of them came from the United States or Caribbean islands, they would have spoken English, and there may have been no perceived need (unlike the detectives that spoke a foreign language). In addition, the CPR had their own police force that may have maintained order in and around the railway. For example, on June 21, 1911, the Winnipeg Police Arrest Books show that the CPR Police arrested and detained Joseph Lopez, a negro train porter from the British West Indies, for being disorderly in public.

Nevertheless, like the Chinese, Black immigrants were often denied entry to Canada after 1912 based on unofficial government immigration policies. For example, a Federal Government [Order-in-Council P.C. 1911-1324](#), signed by Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier, was a proposed ban on Black immigration to Canada based on their unsuitability for the climate. However, CPR agents are reported to have told Black recruits from the United States and the Caribbean to present CPR business cards to Canadian border guards, who would allow them passage.⁹

Up until 1962 Canada imposed strict limitations on non-European immigration. In 1962, Canada introduced new immigration regulations (1962 Immigration Act), which reduced the emphasis of people migrating to Canada based on the colour of their skin or their nationality and increased the emphasis on their education and skills. In 1967, Canada further implemented a points system. Between 1968 and 1973 landed immigrant status in Canada could be obtained by applicants who had been admitted as visitors.

[Allen Mayes](#), the first Black police officer hired by the Winnipeg Police, was born in Edmonton but grew up in Point Douglas before moving to East Kildonan. Allen advised me that his father and uncle had both been porters. Allen recalls attending at the Pilgrim Church on Maple Street infrequently as a young boy, mainly for special occasions and a couple of Sunday school appearances, before switching to Calvary Temple's outreach Sunday School after they had moved.¹⁰

At the end of 2023, the Winnipeg Police Service had an authorized complement of 1,366 police officers and 561 civilian staff. Across the Service, nearly one-quarter of its members are multilingual, speaking 40 different languages. Nine percent of police officers are from a racialized background and thirteen percent of civilians are from a racialized background.¹¹

⁹ See Sleeping Car Porters in Canada, The Canadian Encyclopedia. Online <<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/sleeping-car-porters-in-canada>>

¹⁰ In addition Allen told me that his father was a member of “[Prince Hall](#)” (the African American branch of the Freemasonry/Shriners) and his mother was a member of the “[Daughters of Isis](#)”, the female auxiliary of that organization. The head office for Prince Hall in Winnipeg was in St. Paul, Minnesota. Besides travelling south for 'major' events, the Winnipeg members attended several meetings per year locally, usually in a member's home.

¹¹ See Winnipeg Police Annual Statistical Report (Complement & Demographics). Online <<https://wps-2023-statistical-report-wpsgis.hub.arcgis.com/pages/complement>>.