

HOMELAND MINUTES



Portia May White
www.blackpast.org

On White Being Black in WWII

She grew up with good role models. Her father served in the No. 2 Construction Battalion in WWI. He graduated from Acadia University as the first black graduate in 1906. Rev. William White served with the rank of

Captain, the only black chaplain in the British Army in WWI. During the Depression, Rev. White helped raise funds to establish vocational schools within churches in Nova Scotia.

Her mother Izie Dora White raised 12 children supporting her husband's Cornwallis Street Baptist Church and its choir where her children sang. One daughter was the organist; another daughter the choir director. The latter daughter Portia May White became an international celebrity.

Portia White (1911–1968) was blessed with an extraordinary voice. She took voice lessons at the Halifax Conservatory and sang devotional songs on her father's monthly radio program. Portia trained as a teacher at Dalhousie University and then took postings in schools in the Black communities of Africville and Lucasville. During the Depression she made \$30 a month.

Repeated outstanding showings in the Halifax Music Festival between 1935 and 1938 changed Portia's destiny. Given a scholarship to study with the renowned baritone and teacher Ernesto Vinci who had fled Nazi Germany, Portia began to sing as a contralto. In 1941 after a recital of European classics and Negro spirituals in Toronto's Eaton Auditorium, Edward Wodson of the *Toronto Evening Telegram* described her voice as a gift from heaven.

After the Eaton Auditorium coup Portia performed in concerts and on radio on programs, often in support of the war effort. Her younger siblings formed the "White Quartette" and regularly entertained the troops stationed in Halifax. Like her father and family, Portia wanted to serve.

Portia White's concert career was, however, limited by difficulties in obtaining bookings. Although black musicians entertained in cities across Canada they did so mostly in black venues. Before her success in March of 1944 at the New York Town Hall, NYC some concert halls in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Ontario had refused to allow Portia to perform.

After a second New York Town Hall concert for a packed audience and with outstanding reviews, Portia was finally on course for a Canada-wide concert tour. She had a gruelling schedule and had to pay her own personal expenses, but, she was a concert soloist performing in traditionally white venues. In an article in the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald*, 27 April 1996, Portia was described as, "the singer who broke the colour barrier in Canadian classical music."

Portia May White lifted thousands of Canadians above the pains of WWII with the beauty of her voice. Her poised stage presence as she sang of overcoming suffering knew no colour barriers. Thus, while music during WWII entertained, provided escape, fuelled recruitment, bolstered Victory Bond drives and raised morale, thanks to Portia May White, it also changed the world, Canada's part of the world.