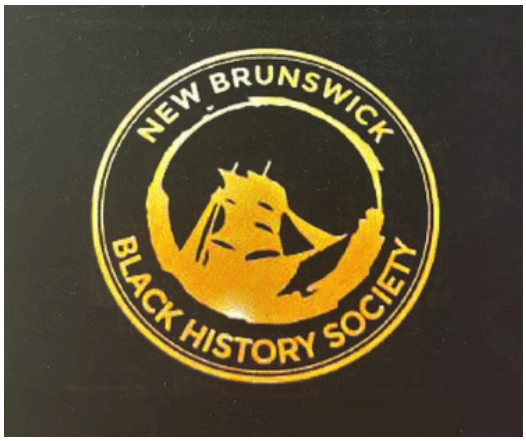
EDIA Spotlight

DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY | FACULTY OF MEDICINE Office of Community Engagement

Beyond Admission: Belonging, History, and Black Presence in Medicine



By: Said Msabaha

Learning to become a physician is often described in terms of clinical competence, diagnosis, treatment, and technical skills. Yet medicine is, at its core, a people-centered profession.

To practice compassion, integrity, and equity, future physicians must understand not only disease, but the communities they serve, and the histories that shape health, trust, and access to care. For Black medical learners, engaging with Black history is not peripheral to medical education. It is foundational.

History plays a critical role in professional identity formation. It helps learners understand not only where they are going in medicine, but where they come from, and why that matters.

A recent in-person visit with Black learners at Dalhousie Medicine New Brunswick (DMNB) highlighted the power of presence, connection, and shared experience, particularly within a distributed medical education system. Gathering over lunch created an intentional space for learners to connect, reflect, and feel seen as part of a broader Black learner community across Dalhousie Medicine. Belonging, after all, is not assumed; it is cultivated.

The visit also included a guided experience at the New Brunswick Black History Society, led by Ralph Thomas, Co-founder and Program Director and Absolom Kisato, Executive Assistant. Learners explored local Black history and reflected on why this knowledge matters, not only to their sense of identity, but to their growth as future Black physicians.

For Black learners, history affirms an essential truth: Black presence, leadership, and contribution did not begin with admission to medical school. They have always existed.

Learning about Black Loyalists and entrepreneurs such as Georgina Whetsel, who supplied ice to households across Saint John, challenges narratives of exclusion and replaces them with stories rooted in resilience, excellence, and continuity.

This grounding matters deeply in a field where Black representation has historically been limited. Seeing themselves reflected in history strengthens confidence, broadens perspective, and supports leadership development. It reinforces that Black learners are not exceptions in medicine, but continuations of a longstanding legacy of service and community care.

History also equips future physicians with an essential context. Understanding the lived experiences of Black communities helps learners better grasp the roots of health inequities, medical mistrust, and the social determinants of health.

In this way, history does not simply inform identity; it shapes clinical practice.

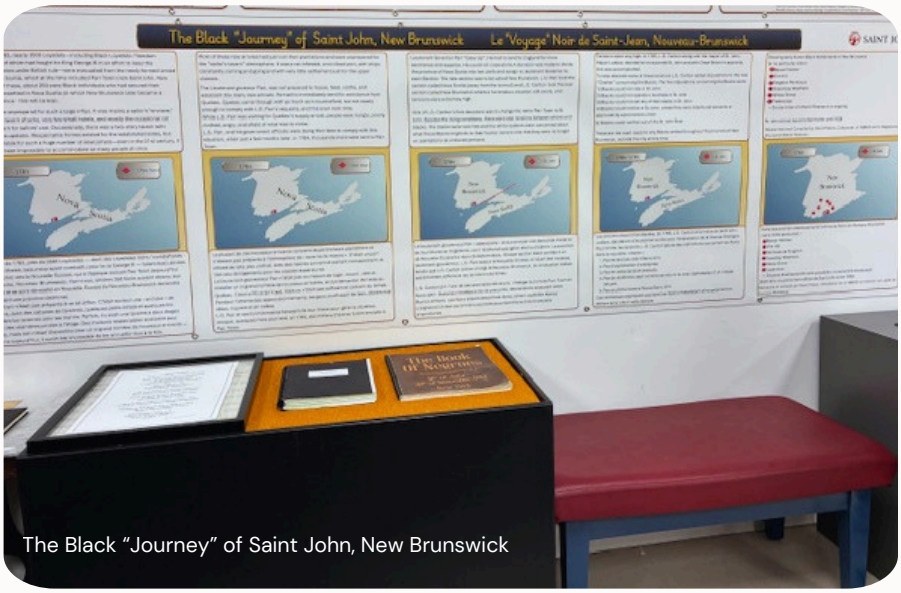
Belonging plays a powerful role in this process. When Black learners feel supported by peers, faculty, student affairs, and community, they are better positioned to thrive.

What would medical education look like if every Black learner saw themselves rooted in a history of belonging?

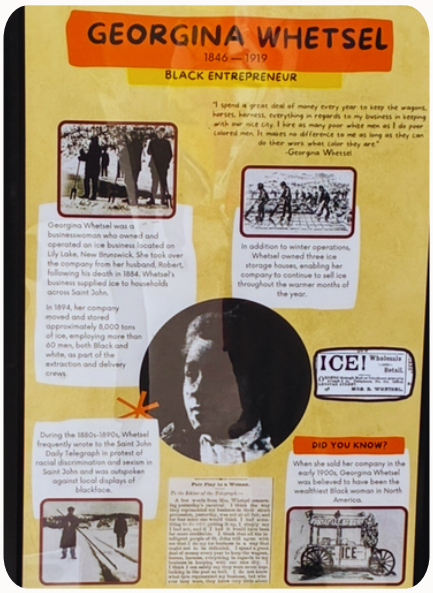
Acknowledgement

I would like to sincerely acknowledge colleagues across Dalhousie Medicine New Brunswick (DMNB) including Drs. Julie Copeland and Marc Nicholson for their tireless support for all learners. Special thanks to Dr. Lisa Sutherland, Assistant Dean of Student and Resident Affairs, and her team for their continued commitment to supporting our pathway learners, particularly Black and Indigenous. Your dedication plays a vital role in fostering belonging, wellbeing, and meaningful learner success at DMNB.

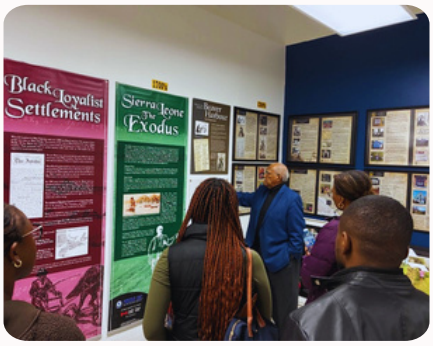
EDIA Spotlight - Beyond Admissions

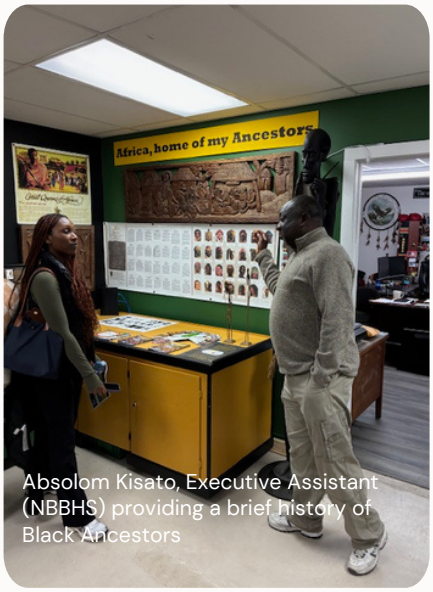


The Black "Journey" of Saint John, New Brunswick



Ralph Thomas, Co-Founder and Program Co-ordinator (NBBHS)





Absolom Kisato, Executive Assistant (NBBHS) providing a brief history of Black Ancestors

Front: Hara Saadia (Med 2)
Back-(L-R): Pride Nubong (Med 1), Said Msabaha (PLANS), Laurett Nwaonumah (Med 1), Alex Hack-Polay (Med 1), Ralph Thomas (NBBHS), Ore Alugo (Med 1), Eva Bandyayera (Med 2), and Dr. Toni Sappong (PLANS)