

VIOLET KING HENRY PLAZA



Courtesy of Joanne Henry



Courtesy of Joanne Henry

TOP LEFT
Violet King Henry with her parents
John and Stella King (no date).

LEFT
Violet with her younger sister Lucille and
her older brother Ted in Calgary, late 1930s.

Violet King Henry (1929–82) was a legal pioneer who made history as the first black woman to practise law in Canada. She graduated from the University of Alberta Law School in 1953 and was called to the bar on June 2, 1954. While her career as a lawyer in Alberta was relatively short, King Henry's achievement stands as an important milestone in Alberta's legal history.



Violet King Henry is called to the bar in Calgary, 1954.

Courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Archives and Special Collections, University of Calgary, NA-5600-7160a

Violet King Henry's family history is linked to the larger story of black settlement in Alberta. Her grandparents were among the hundreds of black settlers who fled racist violence in Oklahoma and moved to Alberta in 1911. Though these black pioneers often faced hostility and discrimination in their new home, they founded vibrant communities in places such as Amber Valley and Keystone (now Breton). It was from Keystone that her parents, John and Stella King, moved to Calgary in 1919. Violet was born in Calgary in 1929 and raised in the Hillhurst-Sunnyside neighbourhood. She graduated from high school in 1947 and was the only black female student at the entire University of Alberta when she enrolled in 1948. She was also only one of three female students admitted to the University of Alberta's Faculty of Law in 1950. She practiced law in Calgary from 1954 to 1956 before leaving to pursue a new opportunity with Canadian Citizenship and Immigration. In that role she worked alongside community leaders to help new immigrants (and in particular women from the Caribbean) find work and adjust to life in Canada.

In a 1955 speech, King Henry expressed her frustration that women of colour had "to outshine others to secure a position" as a lawyer. Her comments reflected the continued inequalities of a profession that remained overwhelmingly dominated by white men. Despite these challenges, she persevered and her significant achievements broke new ground for women and people of colour in the legal profession.



Violet King Henry graduates from the University of Alberta, 1953.

Courtesy of Joanne Henry



Violet King Henry is honoured by the International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1954. Her father, John King, had worked as a porter for the Canadian Pacific Railway.

Courtesy of Glenbow Archives, Archives and Special Collections, University of Calgary, NA-5600-7575a



Beta Sigma Phi Sorority Banquet, 1955. Violet King Henry was a guest speaker at the event.

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