

The Story of Herbert & Estelle Brown

A COUPLE WHO SHAPED A COMMUNITY

The business, migration, African Caribbean Canadian, Jamaican Canadian, and community-building story of Sergeant Herbert "Pops" Brown and Estelle Trinilita Brown belongs in the public history of Ottawa-Gatineau. From the 1950s to the 1970s, they helped shape an early Afro-Caribbean support network in the National Capital Region.

Herbert Brown came to Canada from Jamaica in 1939 as a steward with the Canadian National Steamship Line, travelling between Jamaica, Caribbean islands, Bermuda, and Canada. He later joined the Canadian Army and served with the Royal Canadian Artillery. Family records place him with the 5th Westmount Field Battery as a lance-bombardier. He later became an instructor, later rose to sergeant. Military service mattered. Under Canada's citizenship law, immigrants who served during the Second World War qualified for citizenship after one year of residence. For Herbert, service helped open a legal door in a country where African Caribbean migration remained restricted.

After the war, Herbert opened a dry-cleaning business in Montreal. It did not grow as hoped. He moved to Hull, (Gatineau) Québec.

In 1953 to 1954, Estelle Brown closed her seamstress and tailoring business in Kingston, Jamaica, and brought the children to join Herbert in Hull. She arrived with a rare skill. She taught herself to sew by eye. She could study a person and make dolls, shirts, pants, suits, wedding dresses, gowns, and formal clothing. In Canada, her talent became work, income, and service. She dressed people for weddings, church, funerals, employment, and public life. In a society quick to overlook African Caribbean people, Estelle helped them step forward with dignity.

In 1957, Herbert and Estelle left the Beacon Arms Hotel and founded Brown's Cleaners and Tailors after their idea for a pickup and delivery service was not accepted. Herbert managed dry cleaning.

Estelle managed tailoring, dressmaking, and alterations. The business became known for skill and customer care, but its deeper value reached far beyond clothing.

Brown's Cleaners became a landing place. From the late 1950s into the 1970s, Caribbean and African newcomers arriving in Ottawa were often told, "Go and see the Browns." 286 Bank Street shop and at the Brown home, people found advice, introductions, food, conversation, company, and trust. They found people who understood what it meant to begin again in Canada.



Their work mattered during a period when Canadian immigration policy gave limited openings to Caribbean people. Between 1955 and 1967, they were involved in the West Indian Domestic Scheme which brought over 3,000 Caribbean women to Canada as domestic workers. Parks Canada recognizes the program as a national historic event. The women often faced racial discrimination, low wages, isolation, and difficult working conditions. Yet many sponsored relatives, pursued education, built careers, and helped establish Caribbean Canadian communities. "Pops" was the stand-in father for three and Estelle designed dresses for two women of this project. Jean Augustine, who entered Canada through the scheme in 1960, later became the first African Caribbean woman elected to the House of Commons.

Herbert and Estelle Brown stood in that space between arrival and belonging. They were not immigration officers or elected officials.

They gave newcomers what formal systems often failed to provide: practical guidance, warmth, connections, and a reason to keep going.

In 1974, Brown's Cleaners and Tailors at 286 Bank Street was bought by their daughter Nessa Bedward Sherwood, son-in-law Venancious Bedward, and son Winston Brown. They expanded the family business to a second Bank Street location south of Heron Road. In 1976, Browns Cleaners was sold to Mack and Heather MacGregor, who carried forward its customer-focused ethic and later grew the company into one of Ottawa's largest cleaning and tailoring businesses.

Recognition followed. Family records state that Herbert and Estelle were honoured by Governor General Jules Léger when they reached 50 years of marriage on December 25, 1977. On September 25, 1985, they were honoured on Parliament Hill for their contribution to the West Indian Domestic Scheme and the Afro-Caribbean Canadian community.

Herbert Brown died in Ottawa in 1991 at age 90. Estelle Brown died in 1999 at age 87. They stand among the African Caribbean people whose work helped build the community Ottawa-Gatineau knows today. Herb and Estelle are survived by their children Carmen Hajdu and Winston Brown, and predeceased by their children Herbert F. Brown, Velma Philips and Nessa Bedward Sherwood.

On September 4, 2024, Ottawa City Council unanimously approved the renaming of Besserer Park in Ward 12 as Herbert and Estelle Brown Park. Councillors Rawlson King and Stéphanie Plante recognized them as founders of Brown's Cleaners and pillars of Ottawa's Caribbean diaspora community.

The park at 615 Besserer Street now carries their names into the public memory of the city they helped build. It also carries their story: two Jamaican Canadians who built a business, opened their home, helped newcomers find their footing, and left Ottawa-Gatineau stronger than they found it.