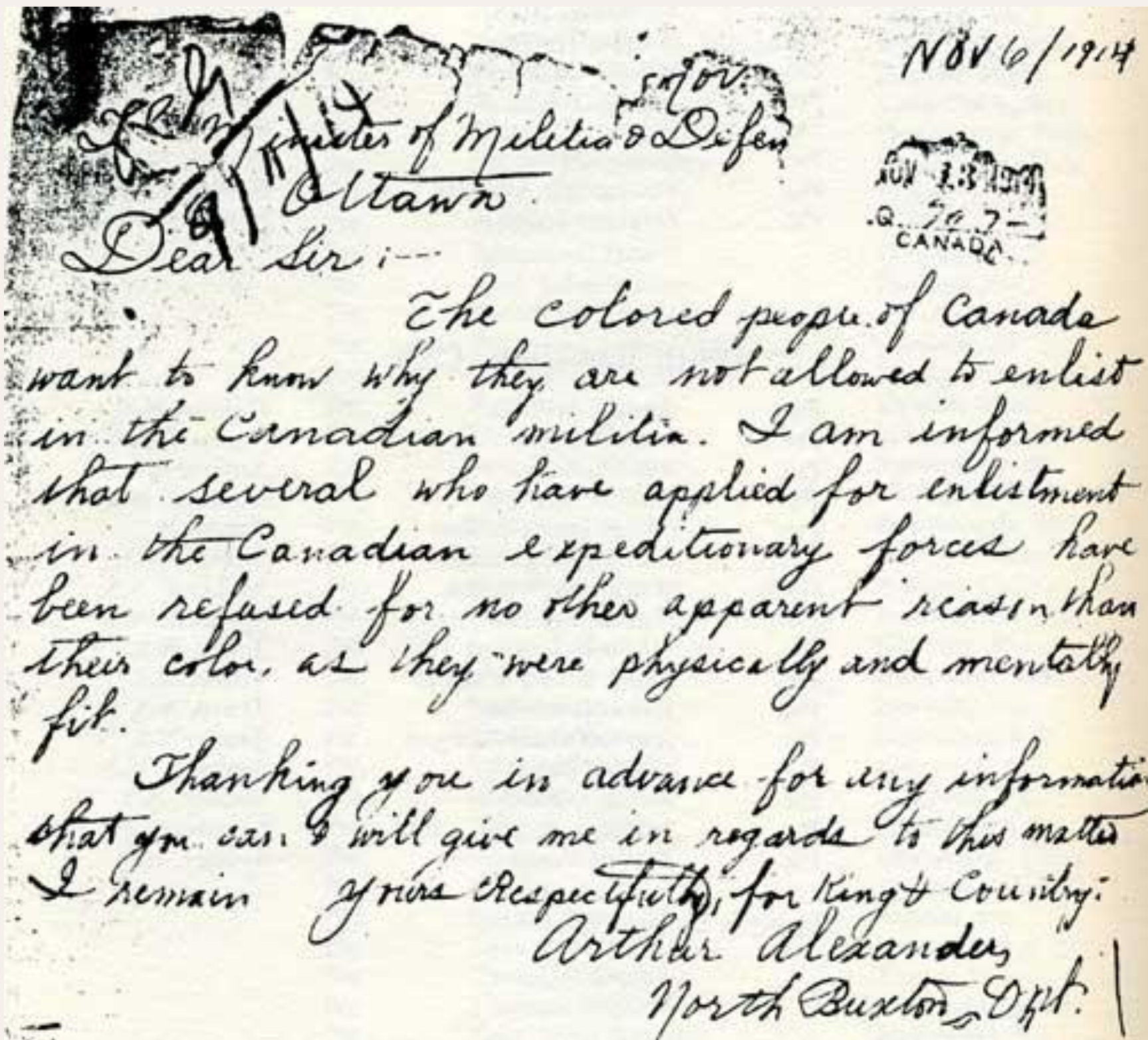


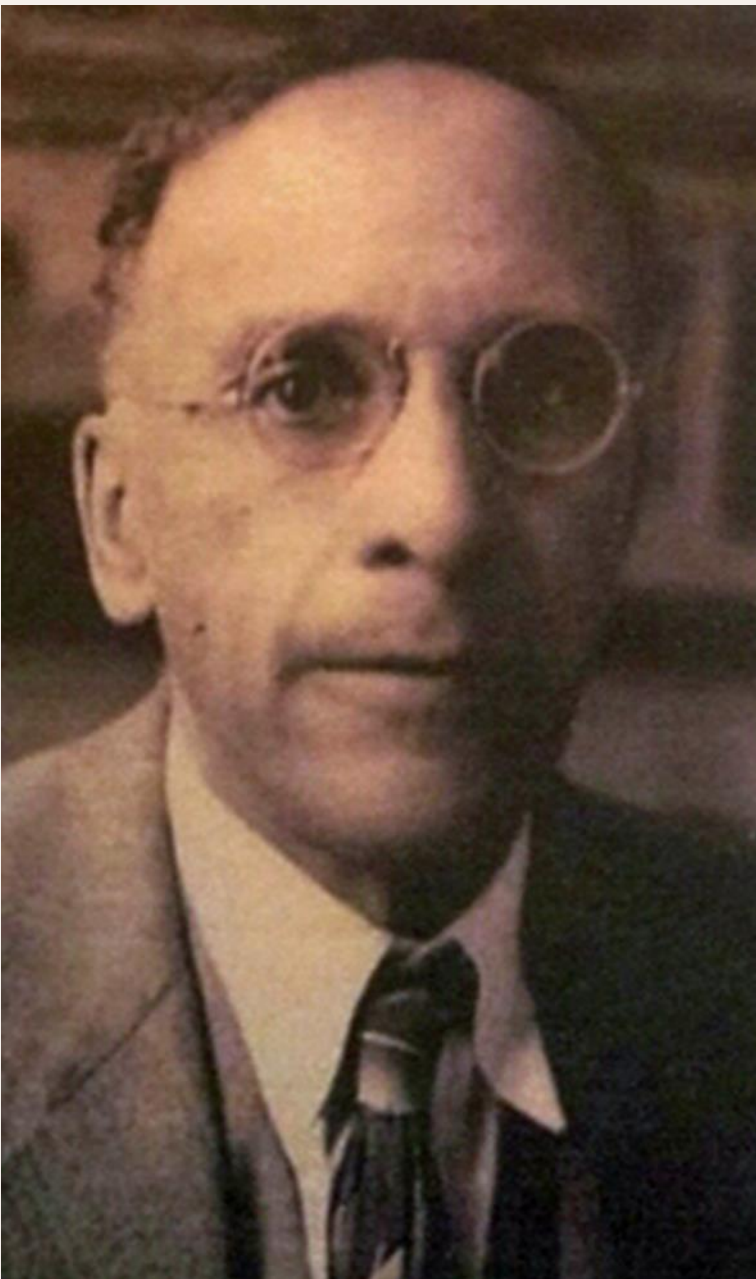
# CANADA’S RESPONSE TO BLACK SOLDIERS

In 1914, Canadian society had a fairly rigid racial, linguistic, religious, and ethnic structure. This structure carried over to the military. For example, the official military policy was that any man who was of age and medically fit could join the army. However, it was up to commanding officers of local regiments to accept or reject applicants. In 1914, most Black Canadian applicants were rejected, although about 1,200 to 2,000 managed to enlist in white Canadian Expeditionary Force regiments, including James Grant of St. Catharines, Ontario.

## Looking at Canada's racist response to Black soldiers in the First World War



Arthur Alexander served as principal of Southwestern Ontario's North Buxton School for 37 years. Alexander had just turned 29 when he wrote this letter on 6 November 1914 asking why Black applicants were refused. A brief reply from Sam Hughes explained, “under instructions already issued, the selection of Officers and men ... is entirely in the hands of Commanding Officers, and their selections or rejections are not interfered with from Headquarters.” This response implied that Ottawa, Ontario was powerless to stop Black Canadians from being rejected at local recruiting stations. Authorities in Ottawa, Ontario were unable to enforce an “official mind” within a decentralized, locally controlled military system.



Arthur Alexander, Principal, North Buxton School

13 April 1916

Memorandum on the enlistment of Negroes in Canadian Expeditionary Force

“The civilized negro is vain and imitative; in Canada he is not being impelled to enlist by a high sense of duty; in the trenches he is not likely to make a good fighter; and the average white man will not associate with him on terms of equality. Not a single commanding officer in Military District No. 2 is willing to accept a coloured platoon as part of his battalion; and it would be humiliating to the coloured men themselves to serve in a battalion where they were not wanted.”

W. Gwatkin, Major-General  
Chief of the General Staff



MAJOR-GENERAL W. G. GWATKIN, C. B., C. M. G.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Share reasons why you think people decide to join the armed forces.

Should there be any restrictions on who can join? Why or why not?

What would influence your thinking about this issue?

What does the memo tell you about attitudes in early 20th-century Canada?

What questions would you like to ask, if you could, that would help you understand why this memo was written?

What influences would there be on commanding officers when considering to accept or refuse enlistment requests?

## When you compare the photographs of then and now, what conclusions can you draw about changes in attitudes toward Black Canadians in Canadian society and the Canadian forces?

FIND  
JAMES  
GRANT



James Grant is easily identified in this partial photo of 49th Battery taken in 1916 as he is the only Black soldier in the Battery

FIND  
MAJOR  
SMITH



Current photo of Canadian military personnel posing with military counterparts from the African nation of Cameroon. Smith is the 5th from left in the front row, not as easily identified.

## How has Canada’s response to Black soldiers changed?