

# Mathieu da Costa

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Mathieu da Costa (sometimes d'Acosta) was a member of the exploring party of Pierre Dugua, the Sieur de Monts, and Samuel de Champlain that travelled from France to the New World in the early 17th century. He was the first recorded free black person to arrive in the territory of today's Canada.

Mathieu da Costa was born of partial African ancestry; known to have been a free man favoured by explorers for his multilingual talents. Numerous mixed-race African-Portuguese persons were part of the Atlantic Creole generation, often working as sailors or interpreters. His portfolio of languages is thought to have included Dutch, English, French, Portuguese, Mi'kmaq, and pidgin Basque, the dialect many Aborigines used for trading purposes.

Da Costa was originally engaged by the Portuguese as a translator, having learned the language quickly. It was thought that his skills would be valuable in future cartography expeditions to the New World. The tradition of Europeans depending on such translators was more than a century old by the time da Costa started working with them. An interpreter, translator, and general go-between such as da Costa was known as *um grumete* in the Portuguese-speaking world, which translates to “cabin boy” in English. Da Costa would later be sought by both the English and the Dutch to help in their contacts with Indigenous peoples in North America, but the French secured his services. Du Gua's activities in Canada did not end until 1617.

Da Costa's translation and communication skills helped reduce the cultural gap between early French explorers and the First Nations. His work in Canada is honoured at the Port-Royal National Historic Site in Port Royal, Annapolis County, Nova Scotia.

A domestic rate postage stamp honoring da Costa was issued by Canada Post on February 1, 2017, in conjunction with Black History Month.



A plaque at Port Royal, Nova Scotia commemorates da Costa's contribution. It is part of the Mathieu da Costa African Heritage Trail, a series of monuments marking African Nova Scotian history in the Annapolis Valley. It was unveiled in July 2005.

## Black History Month: Highlight

The Mathieu da Costa Challenge was an annual creative writing and artwork contest started in 1996 by the Department of Canadian Heritage. The challenge encourages youth to discover how diversity has shaped Canada's history and the important role that pluralism plays in Canadian society.

A school in Toronto and two streets, one in Montreal and the other in Quebec City, have also been named after da Costa. Please join the EDI committee in remembering the inspiring life of Mathieu Da Costa.

