

The Guardian of English Bay

A burly seaman born in Barbados was one of Vancouver's most beloved figures, ensuring safety in the water and civility on land.

by **FRANCES BACKHOUSE**

Joe had a nice round brown face and a beautiful brown body and arms and legs as he waded majestically in the waves of English Bay amongst all the little white lawyers and doctors and trained nurses and seamstresses who jumped up and down and splashed around him. "Joe," they called, and "Look at me, Joe! Is this the way?" and they splashed and swallowed and Joe supported them under their chins and by their behinds and said in his rich slow fruity voice, "Kick out, naow! Thassaway. Kick right out!"

—Ethel Wilson in *The Innocent Traveller* (The Macmillan Company of Canada, 1949).

Unless you're thirsty, it's easy to miss the monument to Seraphim "Joe" Fortes. Fashioned as a plain, granite drinking fountain, it sits in a small park on Vancouver's English Bay, surrounded by flower beds and massive shade trees. The seaward side of the fountain is graced by a bronze plaque that depicts three children cavorting in the ocean below a portrait of an affable-looking, bald gentleman. An inscription reads: "Little children loved him"—a simple epitaph for an unassuming hero.

Fortes was born in Barbados in 1865. Nothing is known about his family except that his father was of African descent and his mother was part Spanish or Portuguese. Although Barbados had abolished slavery in 1834, most of the island's black population still toiled in the sugar-cane fields. Fortes wanted a different future and decided to try his luck in England.

In Liverpool, the burly 17-year-old worked as an attendant and swimming instructor at St. George's Baths. His first dip in the frigid Mersey River must have been a shock after years of

swimming in the warm, crystal-clear waters of the Caribbean, but it didn't put him off the sport he excelled at and loved. His swimming prowess came to public attention in August 1881, when a retired captain saw Fortes swim 1.2 kilometres across the Mersey River, purportedly to visit a young woman. Impressed, the captain entered him in a clandestine, midnight cross-Mersey race against two other men.

One man gave up the contest almost immediately. Fortes surged ahead with powerful strokes, reaching the far shore in 25 minutes. Then he swam back to rescue the remaining competitor, who was close to drowning. Fortes and his sponsor split the prize money. Another race earned him a gold medal, presented by the Lord Mayor of London's daughter.



● Seraphim "Joe" Fortes arrived in Vancouver by ship and went on to become English Bay's first official lifeguard in 1901.



● above: In the 1890s, Joe Fortes set up a tent and joined the squatters at English Bay. He swam daily and drank a cup of sea water every morning for his health.



● above: The lifeguard plunges into the water at English Bay as his students look on.



● above: Fortes in dress clothes, circa 1920, in front of the boulder on the beach at English Bay.

In 1884, Fortes signed on to the *Robert Kerr* as an able-bodied seaman and set sail for British Columbia. When the three-masted barque arrived in Vancouver on September 7, 1885, Fortes left the ship. He soon found work, first shining shoes, then as a porter, handyman, and bartender at the Sunnyside Hotel in Gastown. From there, he moved on to the Bodega Saloon's bar, where he earned a reputation for discouraging over-indulgence.

It probably didn't take Fortes long to discover that one of the best places to swim in Vancouver was English Bay. From the residential streets of the city's west end, well-trodden paths cut through the forest and emerged onto a long, curving shoreline dotted with squatters' shacks and tents. The boundary between the men's and women's sides of the beach was marked only by a single boulder, and there were no public facilities—the first changing rooms wouldn't be built until 1905—but it suited Fortes fine.

Some time during the 1890s, Fortes quit bartending and joined the squatters at English Bay. For cash, he took odd jobs as a labourer, but at every opportunity he was in the ocean or on the

beach. Each morning he drank a cup of sea water for his health and plunged into the waves for a swim. He spent the rest of his time giving free swimming lessons and patrolling the bay, ready to dive in and rescue any bathers in distress.

Ethel Bryant, who was to become a famous novelist under her married name of Wilson, was one of many children who overcame their fear of the ocean under Fortes's tutelage. To the timid, recently orphaned 10-year-old, he was a "heroic figure." In *The Innocent Traveller*, an autobiographical novel published in 1949, Wilson described how Fortes assisted his students, "swimming like frogs," out to a raft anchored offshore. After clambering aboard, the youngsters were supposed to leap back into the water. If anyone hesitated too long, as Ethel often did, their kindly teacher became "impatient and terrible."

"Jump now! I'll catch you!" he would roar. "You jump off of that raff [sic] or I'll leave you here all night!"

Despite Ethel's fear of being dragged to the bottom by the weight of her blue serge bathing costume and black woollen stockings, she was even more afraid of being abandoned

on the raft. Each time she jumped toward Fortes's strong arms and reassuring bulk she grew more confident. Eventually, she no longer needed him standing by.

In 1901, the Vancouver Park Board put Fortes on its payroll as the city's first official lifeguard and swimming instructor. His record of selfless service and irreproachable conduct made him a natural candidate for the job. But for members of the Vancouver Morals Association, the hiring of a black ex-bartender confirmed their suspicions that English Bay—with its bandstand, dancing pavilion, and indecently attired bathers—was no place for upstanding citizens.

Shortly after the appointment, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union's superintendent of rescue work spotted Fortes giving the president of the Vancouver WCTU a hands-on swimming lesson. Although Fortes was always scrupulously well-mannered in his teaching, the shocked rescue worker demanded that the president be censured for "misconduct[ing] herself while in the water" and described Joe using a racial slur. Instead, the members voted to oust the complainant.



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● top: The beloved teacher stands by the gate of his cottage at its new location on Bidwell Street.

● above: A view of English Bay beach looking west, with Joe Fortes seated on the far left.

● left: Fortes saved many lives and helped hundreds of children overcome their fear of water.



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● The Joe Fortes memorial drinking fountain, created by sculptor Charles Marega, is inscribed with the words: "Little Children Loved Him."

As the new century unfolded, English Bay gained respectability and Fortes's detractors fell silent. According to Alan Morley, author of *Vancouver: From Milltown to Metropolis*, "Mothers confidently shooed their children away to the bay for the long summer days with the simple command, '... and don't go away from where Joe is.'"

Fortes's popularity earned him special privileges in the early 1900s when the City of Vancouver cleared all the beachside squatters' residences. By then Fortes had moved from the tent he'd originally occupied to a neat little cottage at the foot of Gilford Street, but he didn't own the land it sat on. Bowing to public demand, the mayor had the cottage relocated a few blocks south to English Bay Park, a small triangle of land that was later renamed Alexandra Park.

By the 1920s, an entire generation of Vancouverites had grown up thinking of the warm-hearted Barbadian as a permanent fixture at English Bay. Not only did he ensure their safety in the water—saving at least 29 lives over the course of his career—he also exerted a refining influence on land. In Morley's words,

"He was host to picnickers, chaperone to courting couples and a terror to the bum and hoodlum."

When 57-year-old Fortes was hospitalized with pneumonia in January 1922, his death seemed unthinkable. Well-wishers inundated the hospital switchboard with phone calls and filled his room with flowers, but all their prayers were in vain. On February 4, he passed away.

On the day of Fortes's burial, mourners packed the Holy Rosary Cathedral and spilled out into the streets. According to some estimates, it was Vancouver's best attended funeral to date. For a man who had spent his adulthood far from family and marginalized by his skin colour, it was a remarkable testament to the fact that he was loved, not just by children, but by people of all ages. ☺

Info

● The Joe Fortes Memorial Drinking Fountain, erected in 1926, is in Alexandra Park on Beach Avenue at Bidwell Street.