

**CULTURAL
AWARENESS**

OBSERVANCE



**Black History Month
Resource Base**

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Table of Contents

People.....	4
Events.....	21
Did You Know?	31
Quotes	47

Instructions

Choose the items you'd like to include on your document from the Resource Base. Copy and paste desired items into the blank templates located on DEOMI's Special Observances tab, under Observance Products. You can also paste facts into emails and other social media. Be creative and share your ideas!

Black History Month

People



Picture of Mary McLeod Bethune and Eleanor Roosevelt between 1935 and 1942. Photo credit: Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017767762/>

Mary McLeod Bethune Advocated for African Americans in Government

Mary McLeod Bethune was an educator, organizer, public policy and health leader, advisor to President Franklin Roosevelt, and the first Black woman to head a Federal Agency. She was born on July 10, 1875, in Mayesville, South Carolina. McLeod advocated against Jim Crow laws and racial violence for most of her life. Early in her career, she organized schooling for African Americans and served in many organizations, including the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools and National Association of Colored Women.

In 1936, Bethune became the Director of Negro Affairs in the Roosevelt administration and established a “Negro College and Graduate Fund” that helped over 4,000 students in higher education. She is partially responsible for drafting the presidential Executive orders that ended segregation in the military and defense industry. While acting as special assistant to the Secretary of War for the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, she was responsible for establishing a training academy for women and recruited Black women for Army officer training, being named honorary General of the Women’s Army for National Defense. Before her death in May 1955, she helped to draft the United Nations Charter as an associate consultant to the U.S. delegation.

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/mary-mcleod-bethune>

<https://www.nps.gov/mamc/learn/historyculture/mary-mcleod-bethune.htm>



Portrait titled *John Jacob Anderson and Sons, John and Edward, 1812-1815*, by Joshua Johnson. Brooklyn Museum, Public Domain. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/2168>

Joshua Johnson was One of the First African American Painters

Joshua Johnson is the earliest documented professional African American painter. Unfortunately, there is not much information known about his life. According to the descendants of the people he painted portraits of, he was a former slave who was active in Baltimore, Maryland, likely born in 1763 and died after 1826. However, there is no question about his incredible work as a portrait painter.

None of Johnson's portraits are dated and only one has his signature; however, there are over 80 works attributed to him. Most of his work depicts affluent residents of Baltimore, and he was likely self-taught.

<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/joshua-johnson-2479>

Phillis Wheatley was the First African American to Publish a Book of Poetry

Wheatley was born around 1753 in Gambia, Africa, before her capture by slave traders. While enslaved, Wheatley was educated in Christian, Greek, Latin, and British literature. She began writing poetry at age 14. Her first book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773), was the second book of poems published by a woman in American history. Wheatley was emancipated shortly thereafter and supported abolition.

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/phillis-wheatley>



IDA B. WELLS.

Portrait of Ida B. Wells, 1891. Photo credit: NAACP, *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors*, I. Garland Penn, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/93505758/>

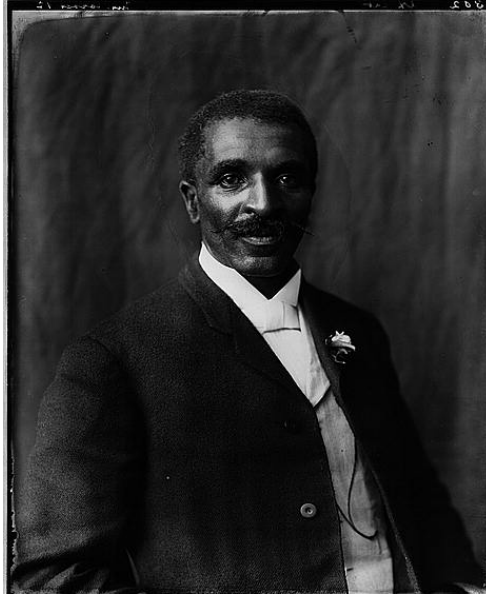
Ida B. Wells Shed Light on the Horrors of Hate Crimes

Ida B. Wells, a journalist and activist, was instrumental in bringing attention to the horrors of lynching in the southern United States, risking her life in the face of racist violence. Wells was born into slavery in July of 1862 in Holly Springs, Mississippi. After her parents died of yellow fever in 1878, she was left to take care of her siblings as a teenager. She became a teacher to support her family.

In 1884, she filed a lawsuit against a train car company in Memphis, Tennessee, after getting rejected from a first-class car, despite having a ticket. She won on a local level, but the case was overturned federally. When several of her friends were lynched after shopping at a grocery store, she became a staunch critic of the unjust treatment of Black people, investigating and publishing findings about lynching in pamphlets and local newspapers. Her investigative journalism found that lynching was a way to suppress and control Black populations. Her journalism led to an angry mob burning down her press and running her out of Tennessee.

Her work continued, though, and she spread the word of injustice to national and international audiences with her exposes, *Southern Horrors*, *The Red Record*, and others. She was founder of both the National Association of Colored Women's Club and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). She also supported women's suffrage and was considered very radical for her time.

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/ida-b-wells-barnett>



Portrait of George Washington Carver, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, 1906. Library of Congress, Public Domain.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98503047/>

George Washington Carver was an African American Innovator

George Washington Carver was an inventor and agricultural scientist who created hundreds of products using peanuts and sweet potatoes. Born into slavery near Diamond, Missouri, by Joplin, a young Carver and his family were kidnapped by raiders during the Civil War.

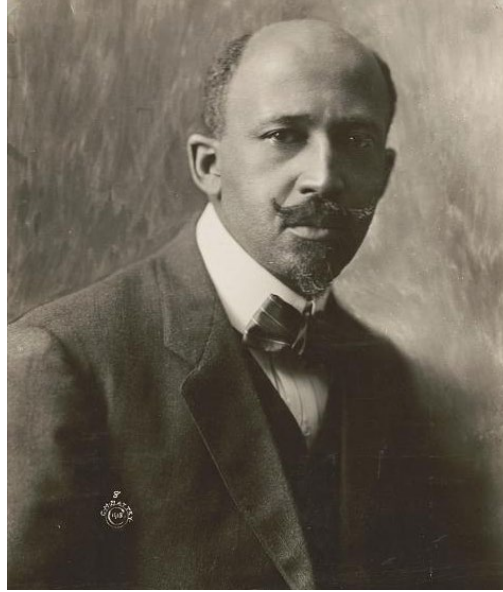
Taking an interest in herbal medicine, cooking, gardening, and education, Carver valued learning and survived using his domestic skills. In 1880, he was accepted into the all-White college, Highland College in Kansas, but was rejected once the administration learned he was Black. He was the first African American to earn a Bachelor of Science degree, and he went on to earn his Master of Agricultural degree and work at Tuskegee University. He developed new kinds of flour, vinegar, paints, oils, cosmetics, and medicines. He is the first African American to receive a national monument built in his honor.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/george-washington-carver>

Booker T. Washington Established Tuskegee University

Born into slavery in 1856, Booker T. Washington became a leading African American thinker and activist. He founded Tuskegee University in 1881 and the National Negro Business League 2 decades later. He rose to national prominence with his charismatic public speaking and works such as *The Story of My Life and Work*, *Up From Slavery*, *The Story of the Negro: The Rise of the Race from Slavery*, *My Larger Education*, and *The Man Farthest Down*, which were all published from 1900 through 1912. He was the first Black man invited to the White House by presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/booker-t-washington>



Portrait of W.E.B. Du Bois, 1919. Photo credit: Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003681451/>

W.E.B. Du Bois Wrote About and Advocated for the Rights of Black People

Born William Edward Burghardt Du Bois in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, in 1868, Du Bois was one of the most influential writers, teachers, sociologists, and activists in American history. The first person to attend high school in his family, Du Bois attended Fisk University in Nashville, where he was an editor for the *Herald*, and then Harvard University for advanced degrees in history.

After taking a position at the University of Pennsylvania, he conducted one of the earliest examples of statistical work used for sociological purposes. Du Bois conducted similar groundbreaking studies about Black people living in the south for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, revealing how the past of slavery still affected African Americans. During the same time, he wrote “The Strivings of the Negro People” for the *Atlantic Monthly*, an essay that explained to White readers what it feels like to be a victim of racism.

One of his most influential works was *The Souls of Black Folks*, a collection of sociological essays that examined the Black experience in America. By 1903, he taught at Tuskegee University before joining the Niagara Movement, which sought justice and equality for Black people. Several years later, he became the director of the newly formed NAACP and edited the organization’s magazine, *The Crisis*.

After serving the organization for 24 years, he became involved with the American Communist Party and was charged as an agent of foreign principal. In 1961, he moved to Ghana and became a citizen there. His final work was the unfinished *Encyclopedia Africana*, which sought to catalog the achievements and history of people of African descent. He died in 1963, but he and his work have remained influential and earned their place in U.S. history.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/w-e-b-du-bois>



*Portrait of Hiram Rhodes Revels, African American senator, 1870. Photo credit: Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/90705922/>*

Hiram Rhodes Revels Joined Congress Just 5 Years After the Civil War

Hiram Rhodes Revels, born in Fayetteville, North Carolina, became the first Black member of Congress in 1870. Revels was a Mississippi Republican and had gained his citizenship just 4 years earlier with the passage of the 14th Amendment, which granted former enslaved people the rights and protections of full citizenship. This was also the basis for challenges to Revels' legitimacy as a senator; those who opposed Revels claimed that he hadn't been a citizen for 9 years, which is required by the Constitution to serve in Congress.

Despite this hardship and abuse, he took his oath just 5 years after the Civil War. Over the next 10 years, 15 more Black men were elected to positions in the House and Senate, including men who had previously been enslaved. Many former Confederate States had districts of African American majorities and were able to consolidate political power.

By the end of 19th century, White supremacist organizations terrorized and intimidated political leaders, and Jim Crow laws had tremendously limited the autonomy of Black people in the South. George White was the last Black Congressman from any of the 11 former Confederate States until 1973. He gave his farewell address in 1901.

<https://www.history.com/news/first-black-congressman-hiram-revels>



*Portrait of Edmonia Lewis, 1870. Photo credit: Henry Rocher, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institute.
https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.94.95*

Edmonia Lewis Sculpted Her Black and Native American Heroes

Born in New York in 1844, Edmonia Lewis was the first sculptor of African American and Native American descent to achieve international recognition. After being orphaned at a young age, Lewis grew up in her mother's Chippewa tribe making crafts and eventually attending Oberlin College in Ohio, which was one of the first schools to accept female and Black students.

After moving to Boston, she began creating sculptors and portraits of antislavery heroes. In 1865, she moved to Rome, where she learned to work in marble. She is well known for her portrait heads, biblical scenes, and figural works expressing her Native American heritage and the oppression of Black people.

Before her death in London, England, in 1907, she had produced sculpters such as The Death of Cleopatra, Moses (after Michelangelo), Poor Cupid, Hiawatha's Marriage, Old Arrow Maker, and marble busts of Anna Quincy Waterston and Minnehaha.

<https://americanart.si.edu/artist/edmonia-lewis-2914>



School Studies, 1944, oil on canvas by Horace Pippin. Photo credit: National Gallery of Art.
<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.72174.html>

Horace Pippin Established Himself as a Self-Taught Painter

Born in West Chester, Pennsylvania, in 1888, Horace Pippin became one of the most celebrated African American painters. He is most renowned for being self-taught and painting in a nonacademic, linear style with powerful design and expressive color. His work encompasses subjects like African American genre scenes, portraits, biblical scenes, and politically charged historical paintings, such as *John Brown Going to His Hanging* and *Prejudice*.

From an early age, Pippin was interested in art, winning a drawing contest in 1898. He moved to New Jersey as a teenager to work as porter, mover, and iron molder, eventually enlisting in the 15th Regiment of the New York National Guard, which would become the Army's 369th Infantry Regiment. After a sniper shot permanently disabled his right arm, he was honorably discharged and received a disability pension.

After moving back to West Chester and unable to return to manual labor, Pippin began painting cigar boxes and working odd jobs. By 1928, he began experimenting with pyrography, burning imagery into wood panels, and painting with oils. He made one to four paintings a year before 1937, the year of his first solo exhibition. The following year, his work was included in a traveling exhibition by the Museum of Modern Art and gained further attention. After his work was featured in the Carlen Galleries in 1940, Pippin began producing about 15 paintings a year. Before his death in 1946, his work was acquired by many important museums and collectors.

<https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.25.html#biography>

Philip A. Payton Established Harlem as a Black Cultural Center

Philip A. Payton, a Black real estate entrepreneur, procured property in New York City’s Harlem to rent to Black tenants, who faced discrimination elsewhere. Starting out in real estate as a janitor, Payton eventually became the “father of Black Harlem” because of efforts to secure equal housing for African Americans. Harlem became a cultural hub for African Americans through the 20th century.

During WWI, many African Americans went to urban centers for job opportunities that often supported the war effort. This fueled “The Great Migration” of Black people from the South to northern cities throughout the 1900s.

<https://archive.org/details/nationalcycloped01richrich/page/258/mode/2up?view=theater>



Portrait of James Baldwin, 1955. Photo credit: Carl Van Vechten, Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004662552/>

James Baldwin’s Writing Became Essential to American Literature

James Baldwin was born in New York City in 1924. He penned many essays, novels, plays, and public speeches about the pain and struggle of Black Americans and the power of brotherhood. His writing career began as a freelancer who wrote book reviews. After moving to Europe, in 1953 he published his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which was based on his own life in Harlem.

Over the next 10 years, he wrote two books of essays, *Notes of a Native Son* and *Nobody Knows My Name*, and two novels. Baldwin’s work explores racial tensions, homosexuality, and interracial relationships. His writing became important for his pacifist stance and support of the Civil Rights Movement, which continued until his death in 1987. Baldwin’s prolific writing career produced essential bestsellers that challenged audiences and tackled personal and societal challenges with race.

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/james-baldwin-about-the-author/59/>



"Property of National Screen Service Corp. Licensed for display only in connection with the exhibition of this picture at your theatre. Must be returned immediately thereafter."

"THE JACKIE ROBINSON STORY" with Jackie Robinson, Minor Watson and Richard Lane
An Eagle Lion Films Release Made in U.S.A.

Copyright 1950, AN EAGLE LION FILM. Permission granted for Newspaper and Magazine reproduction. Made in U.S.A. Copyright 1950, RKO Radio Pictures, Inc.

50/330

Jackie Robinson posing for a promotional photo for the film, The Jackie Robinson Story. Photo credit: RKO Radio Pictures, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/97519100/>

Jackie Robinson Became the First Black MLB Baseball Player

In 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first Black man to play baseball for the MLB, effectively bringing an end to the unofficial segregation in national baseball. Born in 1919 in Cairo, Georgia, Robinson played baseball, basketball, football, and track. He was signed by Brooklyn Dodgers President, Branch Rickey, and played for 10 years, winning Rookie of the Year and playing in six World Series.

Before playing professional baseball, Robinson was drafted into the Army during WWII. In the military, he became one of the few African Americans to be enrolled in officer candidate school, eventually being commissioned as a second lieutenant and morale officer. In 1944, he refused to move to the back of a segregated military bus, resulting in charges of insubordination and disrespectful conduct. He was court-martialed and prohibited from seeing combat overseas. He was a major supporter of civil rights throughout his life.

<https://scholarship.law.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1159&context=facpub>

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/jackie-robinson>



Sleeve patch of the 761st Tank Battalion, 1944. Public Domain. <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/black-panthers-761st-tank-battalion>

“Black Panthers” Fought Valiantly in WWII

The 761st Tank Battalion was the first African American tanker unit to see combat in Europe during WWII. The battalion, which was better known as the “Black Panthers,” was attached to the 26th Infantry Division in late 1944. After arriving in Normandy, they fought for a record 183 straight days and liberated 30 towns on their way to Germany. The 761st Tank Battalion helped rescue the surrounded American forces in Bastogne.

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/761sttankbattalion.htm>

The Myers Family Faced Housing Discrimination in Levittown, PA

Daisy Myers was a Black woman who moved with her family to Levittown, Pennsylvania, which was intended to be an all-White suburb outside of Philadelphia. Housing discrimination was common around the country when the Myers arrived in 1957. They were met with intense prejudice, including a petition to kick them out signed by 2,000 residents, angry mobs, and cross burnings (a symbol associated with White supremacy).

While the incident helped fuel the fight for civil rights, Levittown remained mostly segregated, primarily through discriminatory redlining practices. The segregation and prejudice in Levittown were shown through a documentary made at the time, which can be viewed here: <https://archive.org/details/47664CrisisInLevittownPA>

<https://guides.libraries.psu.edu/redliningpa/levittown>

Martin Luther King, Jr., Penned His Letter from Birmingham Jail

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a key leader in the Civil Rights Movement, was arrested after organizing a series of protests, marches, and sit-ins against segregation in April of 1963. In Birmingham, Alabama, he and many other activists were sent to jail after continuing their protest after an injunction. There, he penned his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” which responded to critics of his methods for making change. In the letter, he advocated for breaking unjust laws, nonviolent protest, and for others to join his crusade.

His famous speech, “I Have a Dream,” was given during the March on Washington in 1963. King’s protests, writings, organizing, and self-sacrifice ultimately led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. He won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, the youngest person to ever do so. On April 4, 1968, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee while supporting a sanitation workers’ strike.

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/martin-luther-king-jr-writes-letter-from-a-birmingham-jail>

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/martin-luther-king-jr>



*Jesse Jackson speaking at PUSH headquarters, 1973. Photo credit: National Archives.
https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/portrait_of_black_chicago/part_3/part_3_image_3.html*

Jesse Jackson was an Influential Civil Rights Leader into the Modern Era

Jesse Jackson founded the People United to Save Humanity (PUSH) organization, which sought to provide African American better employment opportunities.

Born in 1941, Jackson is an activist and politician who worked closely with Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1980s and 1990s, he independently negotiated the successful release of prisoners from adversarial nations. Jackson helped free 22 Americans and 27 Cuban political prisoners from Cuba and a captured U.S. fighter pilot from Syria.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/jesse-jackson>



Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., meet on March 26, 1964. Photo credit: Marion S. Trikosko, Library of Congress. <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/cph.3d01847/>

Malcolm X Changed the Course of the Civil Rights Movement

Malcolm X was a prominent civil rights activist during the 1950s and 1960s. He was a controversial figure that supported Black nationalism and equity. Born Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, he faced many hardships throughout his young life, including threats from the Ku Klux Klan, the murder of his father (including the denial of his death benefits), various foster homes, and eventually prison for theft at age 21. In prison, he became deeply involved with the Lost-Found Nation of Islam, in particular, the Black Muslims, a group that advocated for power for African Americans and equal rights “by any means necessary.” His early radical views made him a counterpoint to Martin Luther King, Jr., and his rhetoric of nonviolence.

Eventually, he changed his last name to “X” as a rejection of his “slave” name. Malcolm X would eventually become disillusioned with the Nation of Islam and underwent a spiritual transformation after traveling to Mecca. In June of 1964, he created the Organization of Afro-American Unity, a more moderate social justice organization that focused more on fighting racism instead of the White race in general. The next year, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York City by members of the Nation of Islam. His autobiography, published posthumously, became very influential for civil rights activists.

In 2022, Malcolm X became the first Black honoree to be inducted into the Nebraska Hall of Fame.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/malcolm-x>

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/malcolm-makes-nebraska-hall-fame-years-flap-8982422>



Whitney Houston talking to the audience before performing "Saving All My Love for You" during an HBO televised concert, 1991. Public Domain.

Whitney Houston is One of the Most Celebrated Musician of All Time

Whitney Houston was born into a musical family on August 9, 1963, in Newark, New Jersey. In her lifetime, she sold over 200 million combined albums, singles, and videos. She established herself as a music superstar of the modern era, with hits such as "Saving All My Love For You," "How Will I Know," "Greatest Love Of All," and "I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me)."

Her music videos dominated MTV's rotation during its first decade on air. She made her acting debut in *The Bodyguard* in 1992; the soundtrack for the movie, which Houston created, was voted Album of the Year at the Grammy Awards. Over the course of her career, she had been awarded eight Grammy Awards. In 2000, she was honored as Female Artist of the Decade at the Soul Train Music Awards. As of 2006, she was recognized by Guinness World Records as the most awarded female artist of all time, with a total of 411 awards. Houston released seven studio albums before her death in 2012 at the age of 48.

In 2020, Houston was posthumously inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame for her unique fusion of pop, R&B, and gospel music. In 2022, an official biopic of her life, *I Wanna Dance with Somebody*, was released. She is widely regarded as one of the greatest musicians of all time.

<https://www.whitneyhouston.com/biography/>



*President Obama awards Lewis Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011. Photo credit: The White House.
<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/02/17/exclusive-video-presidential-medal-freedom-recipients-their-own-words>*

John Lewis Fought for Civil Rights His Entire Life

John Lewis was a titan of the Civil Rights Movement, being the youngest speaker and organizer of the March on Washington. In 1960, he and others founded the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which he headed from 1963 to 1966. Lewis led the march from Selma to Montgomery with Martin Luther King, Jr. This march resulted in “Bloody Sunday” on February 18, 1965, in which marchers were attacked by segregationists and state troopers. Lewis was a member of the “Big Six” civil rights organizers, which included James Farmer, Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Whitney Young, Jr. In 1987, Lewis became a Congressman for Georgia’s 5th district, continuing to enact racial justice reform until his death in 2020.

<https://www.nps.gov/subjects/civilrights/john-lewis.htm>

<https://www.biography.com/political-figure/john-lewis>

Kamala Harris is the First Woman of Color to Hold the Office of Vice President

In January 2021, Kamala Harris became the first woman and first Black person to hold the office of Vice President of the United States. She is the daughter of two immigrants: one from India and one from Jamaica. Prior to becoming Vice President, Harris was a U.S. senator of California.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones>



*Simon Biles awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom, 2022. Photo credit: The White House.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse/52308684538/>*

Simon Biles is the Most Decorated Gymnast of All Time

In 2022, Simone Biles became the youngest person to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Born in 1997, Simone Biles is an African American gymnast from Spring, Texas.

In 2023, she became the most decorated gymnast of all time, winning a total of 27 world-title medals over her life. She’s a seven-time Olympic medalist, including four gold, one silver, and two bronze. She’s an advocate for athletes’ mental health, sexual assault victims, and children in foster care.

<https://www.teamusa.org/usa-gymnastics/athletes/simone-biles>

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/denzel-washington-simone-biles-presidential-medals-freedom-1235174868/>

bell hooks was a Modern Feminist Writer and Public Intellectual

Born Gloria Jean Watkins in 1952 in Kentucky, bell hooks (stylized in lowercase letters) was an incredible writer with more than 30 books, a number of magazine articles, and many poems to her name. Her writing blends social commentary and autobiography with feministic critique. In 2018, she was inducted into the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame. TIME magazine honored her in 2020 as one of the “100 Women of the Year.” Before her death in 2021, she was a professor at Berea College, exploring ideas in her books, including *Communion*, *The Will to Change*, and *All About Love*.

<https://www.berea.edu/centers/the-bell-hooks-center/about-bell>



Hakeem Jeffries official portrait, 2021. Photo credit: U.S. Congress. <https://jeffries.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Rep-Hakeem-Jeffries-Official-Portrait.jpg>

Hakeem Jeffries Leads a Party Caucus in Congress

In 2023, Congressman Hakeem Jeffries became the first Black American to lead a party in Congress. Born 1970 in Brooklyn, New York, Jeffries began serving in the U.S. Congress in 2013 after years as a lawyer and working with the New York Assembly. While there, he wrote a variety of legislation on civil rights and criminal justice reforms.

Still a prolific writer of legislation in the U.S. Congress, Jeffries spearheaded bipartisan reform efforts including better access to benefit information for veteran and expanded rights to formerly incarcerated people. Jeffries succeeds Representative Nancy Pelosi as the Democratic House minority leader of the 118th Congress. In addition to being the first person of color to lead a party in Congress, he is also the youngest to serve in his role.

<https://www.biography.com/political-figures/a44216058/hakeem-jeffries>

Black History Month

Events



“African Amalgamation of Ubiquity” mural by Curtis Lewis, featuring many Black leaders, Detroit, Michigan, 1985. Photo credit: Camilo J. Vergara, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2015647517/>

2024 Black History Month Theme: African Americans and the Arts

Since antiquity until the present, people of African descent have contributed to the arts in profound ways. African Americans have established movements such as the New Negro, Black Arts, Black Renaissance, hip-hop, and Afrofuturism that have set trends across the world.

Throughout American history, people of African descent have impacted every aspect of the arts, from basket weaving prior to the American Revolution, to pioneering music genres such as the blues, rock and roll, and hip-hop, and authoring some of the greatest works of American literature. The theme for 2024 Black History Month celebrates some of these achievements and many more.

<https://asalh.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2024-Black-History-Theme-African-Americans-and-the-Arts.pdf>

African Americans Took It Upon Themselves to Fight in the Civil War

During the Civil War, many newly liberated Black people formed militia units in Louisiana, Kansas, and South Carolina, where they fought skirmishes against the Confederate army. President Abraham Lincoln issued the Second Confiscation and Militia Act of 1862 as a first step to enlist African Americans. These infantry units took it upon themselves to fight for the United States against the Confederacy, and they were encouraged to enlist by Frederick Douglass.

They were later incorporated into the official Armed Forces. The first Black regiment in the Civil War was the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, who led an infantry attack on the Port of Charleston. By the end of the war, more than 180,000 Black men had served for the U.S. Army, comprising about 10% of the total force.

<https://www.history.com/topics/american-civil-war/black-civil-war-soldiers>

Segregation Continued Disenfranchisement for African Americans

The Union victory in the Civil War brought freedom to 4 million enslaved people in the United States. The passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments codified the abolition of slavery, provided citizenship to formerly enslaved people, and gave voting rights to African Americans. However, new challenges arose.

On May 18, 1896, the Supreme Court made a decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which involved Homer Adolph Plessy, who took a vacant spot on a Whites-only railcar, which was outlawed by a Jim Crow law, and was removed and arrested after refusing to leave. Plessy had volunteered to challenge the Jim Crow law on behalf of the Black community in New Orleans to test the protections of the 14th Amendment. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court upheld the recently passed Louisiana law that segregated passengers on railroad cars based on race. The 8-1 decision established the “separate but equal” doctrine.

However, it was clear that separate public utilities, education, housing, employment, and health care were often not equal to those of White Americans. Segregation greatly discriminated against African Americans until it was overturned in 1954 with the unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones>



The Black community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is suffers raging fires. Caption: "Little Africa on Fire, Tulsa Race Riot." Photo credit: Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017679764/>

Tulsa was a Thriving Black Community Before a Racial Massacre

In 1906, a wealthy African American named O.W. Gurley purchased over 40 acres of land there, and sold the land to other African Americans escaping harsh oppression in other parts of the South. The Greenwood district in Tulsa, Oklahoma, was a financial and cultural center for African Americans. It was often called “Black Wall Street. By 1921, Tulsa was home to 10,000 Black residents, which included many professionals and creatives, who had access to many modern luxuries.

On May 31, 1921, the *Tulsa Tribune* published an inflammatory report that a Black man, Dick Rowland, sexually assaulted White woman, Sarah Page. The story accused him of rape without due process, sparking outrage for White and Black communities in Tulsa. The following day, the Tulsa racial massacre occurred when White mobs burned 35 blocks, causing 300 deaths and 800 injuries in the thriving Black neighborhoods in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Armed mobs showed up to the courthouse and shots were fired between Black and White people.

White mobs destroyed businesses, public buildings, churches and private homes with kerosene bombs, totaling damages at \$1.8 million in 1921 dollars; some estimates total the economic loss between \$150–200 million in 2018 dollars, when factoring in personal and commercial assets. Some White men threatened firefighters with their guns, which allowed the fires to spread. Police and city officials did not try to stop the violence. The underlying cause of the massacre was the threat of Black Wall Street’s growing power and influence to White cultural dominance in Tulsa. The Greenwood district never fully recovered to its previous status of success, despite rebuilding efforts.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12225>

<https://daily.jstor.org/the-devastation-of-black-wall-street/>

Race Riots Occurred Throughout the 1920s

Racial violence erupted throughout the 1920s in the wake of WWI and the Great Migration of African Americans to other parts of the country. This outright violence, along with Jim Crow segregation laws, effectively crippled real and potential prosperity for Black communities across the country for future generations.

In Elaine, Arkansas, a local church was fired upon by a White mob after Black sharecroppers got together to protest low wages in 1919. That same year, a race riot erupted in Chicago after a young Black man was stoned to death after swimming in a “Whites only” section of a lake. In January 1923, in Rosewood, Florida, a riot broke out after an alleged sexual assault by a Black man against a White woman, resulting in the burning of homes and businesses owned by African Americans. Deadly riots like these also happened in Knoxville, St. Louis, and Washington DC, among others.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12225>



*A. Philip Randolph at a press conference, 1964. Photo credit: Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/00649671/>*

A. Philip Randolph Pushes Antidiscrimination in Hiring Practices

After the outbreak of WWII, President Franklin Roosevelt released Executive Order No. 8,802, which declared there shall be no discrimination “in the employment of workers in defense industries and in Government, because of race, creed, color, or national origin.”

Black people moved to urban areas to support the war effort. However, they were often met with prejudice and unfair treatment. Afterwards, A. Philip Randolph, a Black labor unionist and civil rights activist, presented a list of racial grievances to Eleanor Roosevelt to give to her husband, the president. This order established the Fair Employment Practice Committee, though it remained largely ineffective at preventing employment discrimination.

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-8802>



The 369th Infantry Regiment are celebrated with a parade through New York City, 1919. Photo credit: War Department, National Archives and Records Administration. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/533553>

WWI Veteran Henry Johnson Received Medal of Honor Decades Later

In 1917, the United States officially entered World War I, and Henry Johnson was a railroad porter working in Albany, New York. At the time, African American volunteers for the war were only allowed in four all-Black regiments in the Army and a few National Guard units. Johnson enlisted in the 369th Infantry Regiment, one first units sent to France.

Most of the members of the 369th came from different parts of New York City and were dubbed the “Harlem Hellfighters.” While in France, German snipers began firing on them. Johnson and another private, Needham Roberts, fought a difficult battle. First, they lobbed grenades, Roberts became wounded, then Johnson fired his rifle at the encroaching Germans, but it jammed. He then used his rifle as a club and his bolo knife to stop the enemy from taking Roberts as a prisoner. In all, Johnson was wounded 21 times in the hour-long battle, killing four Germans and wounding 10 to 20 more. Johnson and Roberts successfully prevented the enemy from breaking the French line.

France awarded both men and about 500 members of the Harlem Hellfighters the Croix de Guerre during WWI. Upon returning to New York City, the regiment was celebrated with a parade, partially because they weren’t allowed to join in the official victory parade alongside other returning troops.

Sadly, after returning to Albany, Johnson received no disability pay, and his discharge papers made no mention of his injuries. He suffered from alcoholism and died in 1929 at the age of 32 in poverty. However, around the turn of the century, Johnson had a monument erected in Albany and earned a posthumous Purple Heart, a Distinguished Service Cross, and the Medal of Honor.

<https://www.history.com/news/wwi-hero-henry-johnson-finally-receives-medal-of-honor>



*African American Infantry unit in Verdun, France, WWI. Photo credit: Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96510701/>*

Many African Americans Enlisted in the U.S. Military Despite Challenges

During World War I, about 200,000 African Americans served in the Army, mostly as support roles in segregated units. This same segregation mostly applied to the Navy and Marine Corps.

Over 2.5 million African Americans registered for the draft during World War II, but they still served in segregated roles in the Army and Army Air Corps. Beginning in late 1945, efforts were made to ensure better treatment of Black soldiers with suggestions for integration and equal rights. This included an Executive order for equal treatment by President Truman, though it was met with resistance. In April of 1949, Defense Secretary Louis Johnson implemented Truman's order with a "bill of rights" for Black servicemen, which gradually removed segregation from the military. In 1954, the Army became the last branch to fully integrate.

https://www.army.mil/article/243604/african_american_service_and_racial_integration_in_the_us_military



*Tuskegee airmen training in Alabama, 1942. Photo credit: Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017767766/>*

Tuskegee Airmen Became the Military’s First Black Pilots

Despite segregation being standard across many aspects of public life for African Americans, some progress was made in 1941 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt, under pressure from civil rights groups, activated the all-Black World War II fighter squadron.

What was then known as the “Tuskegee Airmen Experiment,” which was anticipated to fail by the Government, allowed Black Americans to enlist in the military and tested to see if they could even become combat pilots. The pilots needed to have a college education and reach the same fitness goals set by the Army. On July 19, 1941, 12 aviation cadets and a student officer, the first Black pilot candidates, reported to the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to officially start flight training.

Less than 1 year later, the first class became the Nation’s first African American military pilots. Afterwards, more than 16,000 Tuskegee Airmen trained in Alabama; 996 were pilots and 352 were deployed in combat. The Tuskegee Airmen included more African Americans and men and women of different races who worked as test pilots and parachute technicians.

The Black airmen flew twice as many combat missions as their White counterparts and were treated poorly; they flew over 15,000 missions and shot down 112 enemy planes in WWII. Seven years later, President Truman desegregated the military, which many attribute to the Tuskegee Airmen’s accomplishments. Many of these trailblazers have been awarded medals including a collective Congressional Gold Medal in 2007.

<https://www.pbs.org/articles/who-are-the-tuskegee-airmen>



Dizzy Gillespie, John Lewis, Cecil Payne, Miles Davis, and Roy Brown play jazz in New York City between 1946 and 1948. Photo credit: William P. Gottlieb, Library of Congress. <https://loc.gov/item/gottlieb.03151>

Harlem Rose to Be an Important Cultural Center for Black People

Harlem became a major cultural hub for African Americans in the United States after moving during the Great Migration from Southern States, the Caribbean, and other parts of New York City. During the 1920s and 1930s, the “Harlem Renaissance” saw many Black artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals work alongside each other.

Figures like Langston Hughes, a poet, Aaron Douglas, a painter, and Alain Locke, a philosopher, all rose to prominence in Harlem and African American history. Some more of the countless influential African Americans who helped establish Harlem as a cultural center include Zora Neale Hurston, an anthropologist and folklorist, Countee Cullen, an author and poet, Louis Armstrong, a famous jazz musician, and Paul Robeson and Josephine Baker, prominent musical performers.

However, the Great Depression and WWII devastated the area. Higher rents, unemployment, and racism caused the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943. During the Civil Rights Movement, political and religious leaders gathered in Harlem to support and empower African Americans to seek equal rights. Some of these figures include Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Queen Mother Moore, and Preston Wilcox.

<https://www.history.com/topics/roaring-twenties/harlem-renaissance>

<https://www.harlemheritage.com/history-of-harlem/>

Kehindle Wiley was Chosen to Paint Barack Obama's Presidential Portrait

Kehindle Wiley, born in Los Angeles in 1977, became well known for his portraits of people of color in the traditional style of European art of 1300 through 1800. His work combines contemporary culture and visually heroic, powerful portraits with Black people Wiley has met throughout the world. He's been honored with the U.S. Department of State's Medal of Arts, Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Medal, and France's distinction of Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters.

In 2018, Wiley became the first Black man to paint an official presidential portrait. He was selected by President Obama and the work is currently in the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery. Since then, he founded Black Rock Senegal, a multidisciplinary art-in-residence program for artists around the world.

At the same time Wiley achieved this, Amy Sherald, another accomplished painter, was the first African American artist to be commissioned for a portrait of the first lady to be displayed at the Smithsonian when she painted a portrait of Michelle Obama.

<https://kehindewiley.com/about/>

Lonnie Bunch III Plans to Open More Smithsonian Museums

In 2019, Lonnie Bunch became the first African American historian and secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, overseeing 21 museums, 21 libraries, the National Zoo, and many research and education centers. He is also overseeing the in-development National Museum of the American Latino and the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum.

Prior to this accomplishment, Bunch was the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. When we started in 2005, he had one staff member, no collections, no funding, and no site for the museum; however, he transformed his vision into reality when it finally opened in 2016.

Before that, he was appointed by President George W. Bush to the Committee for the Preservation of the White House and was reappointed by President Barack Obama in 2010. In 2019, he was awarded the Freedom Medal, the Legion of Honor from France, and the Dan David Prize from Tel Aviv University.

<https://www.si.edu/about/bios/lonnie-g-bunch-iii>



*Admiral Chest W. Nimitz pins Navy Cross on Doris Miller, 1942. Photo credit: Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017767778/>*

Navy Aircraft Carrier Named After WWII Hero Doris Miller

In 2020, the Navy named a new aircraft carrier after the World War II hero Doris Miller. At a ceremony at Pearl Harbor, Navy Secretary Thomas Modly marked the first time a flattop paid homage to an African American.

Doris Miller, a Navy Cross recipient, rose to the occasion on the morning of December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked by Japanese planes. That morning, Miller was supposed to collect laundry; however, he carried wounded shipmates from the flaming West Virginia battleship, fought the fires, and then manned a .50 caliber machine gun, which he never used before, to take down enemy planes. Seventeen months later, he perished on an escort carrier during the invasion of the Gilbert Islands. Miller was previously honored in 1973 when the Navy commissioned the destroyer escort USS Miller.

<https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2020/01/20/navys-next-aircraft-carrier-named-in-honor-of-african-american-hero/>

Michael Langley Becomes First Four-Star General in the Marine Corps

On August 6, 2022, Lt. Gen. Michael Langley was promoted to the rank of general, becoming the first Black four-star general in the Marine Corps. Langley will oversee the U.S. Africa Command, leading the military branch's presence on the continent.

Langley was nominated by President Biden in June 2022. Langley said "The milestone and what it means to the Corps is quite essential . . . especially for those younger across society that want to aspire and look at the Marine Corps as an opportunity."

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/06/politics/michael-langley-marines-black-four-star-general/index.html>

Black History Month

Did You Know?



Civil rights march on Washington, DC, 1963. Photo credit: Warren K. Leffler, Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003654393/>

The Origins of Black History Month Began in 1926

Black History Month originally began as “Negro History Week,” created by the Black historian and educator, Carter G. Woodson, in 1926. He chose the second week of February because it coincides with Fredrick Douglass’s and Abraham Lincoln’s birthdays.

In the 1960s, colleges and universities began celebrating Black history for the entire month because of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement and the absence of substantial Black history educational materials. In 1976, President Ford announced Black History Month as a national observance.

<https://time.com/4197928/history-black-history-month/>

Hundreds of Thousands Escaped Bondage Before Emancipation

Over 400,000 people had escaped slavery by 1860. Many escaped through the Underground Railroad, a network of routes and safehouses that enslaved people could follow to freedom.

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/african/resistance-and-abolition/>



*Annie Tabor, at age 20, was a lathe operator at a supercharger plant, 1942. She had no prior experience but was one of their best workers. Photo credit: Ann Rosener, Office of War Information, Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017694610/>*

Many Black Women Supported the War Effort During WWII

During World War II, there were more than 500,000 Black women working to support the war effort. These women worked tirelessly in shipyards, factories, administrative offices, and for railroads to fight authoritarianism abroad and racism in the United States.

In both WWI and WWII, the entire U.S. population had to contribute to the war effort. Because many men were abroad fighting in the wars, women needed to fill domestic war-related roles. During WWII, about 2 million women worked in these industries during the peak of industrial production. For Black women, this provided a new sense of economic empowerment and fueled the Great Migration to cities and different parts of the Nation.

However, many of the businesses, which were usually owned by White men, did not want to hire Black women. This changed after activists Mary McLeod Bethune and A. Philip Randolph pressured President Franklin D. Roosevelt into doing something about the discrimination. He signed Executive Order No. 8,802, which banned racial discrimination in the defense industry. About 1 million African Americans entered new industries for the first time; over half were women.

<https://www.history.com/news/black-rosie-the-riveters-wwii-homefront-great-migration>



African American members of an artillery unit stand by and check their equipment in Belgium during World War II, 1944. Photo credit: Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003689100/>



While Black men and women fought overseas during WWII, they still faced discrimination and segregation at home; the man photographed is drinking at “colored” drinking fountain, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1939. Photo credit: Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017740552/>

The “Double V Campaign” Sought Victory in WWII and at Home Against Racist Oppression

During World War II, Black colleges and universities contributed greatly to the war effort. About 80% changed their curricula to defense-related programs, particularly in manufacturing and engineering.

In the military itself, African Americans still faced prejudice. Black Americans weren’t allowed to participate in civil defence training programs and jobs. The Jim Crow philosophy impacted service branches. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, a race riot broke out between Black GIs, civilians, and police in Alexandria, Louisiana. Because of this and racism at large, many African Americans felt disaffected by the war. Many thought it was hypocritical to fight for democracy in Europe while suffering as second-class citizens at home in the United States. This galvanized many African Americans to push for greater civil rights.

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/double-v-victory>



First graduating class of African American pilots in the U.S. Army Air Corps, Tuskegee, Alabama, in March, 1942. Photo credit: Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/92521044/>



*The Woolworth Co. where the first “sit-in” took place is now the International Civil Rights Center and Museum, 2017.
Photo credit: Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017880625/>*

Sit-Ins were Crucial to the Civil Rights Movement

In February of 1960, Black students at North Carolina A&T College began the first “sit-in” protest at a Woolworth store. These four students, Ezell Blair, Jr., David Richmond, Franklin McCain, and Joseph McNeil, were influenced by the nonviolent protests by Mohandas Gandhi and the Freedom Rides. Woolworth’s dining counter was reserved for White people only, so the students sat there until they were served. Police arrived, but weren’t able to do anything without provocation.

<https://history.msu.edu/files/2010/04/V.P.-Franklin4.pdf>

In 1967, Interracial Marriage Became Legal

Loving v. Virginia was a Supreme Court case ruled in 1967, which invalidated laws prohibiting interracial marriage. Laws against interracial marriage existed in the United States since the colonial period of American history and were present in all but nine States at some point before 1967.

The case involved a couple, Richard Loving and Mildred Jeter of Virginia, who fell in love and married in Washington DC, where they could legally marry. A few weeks after they returned to Virginia, they were arrested and charged with felonies for marrying. In the Supreme Court decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote, “Under our Constitution, the freedom to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides with the individual, and cannot be infringed by the state.” This made it possible for men and women of different races to marry one another across the country.

<https://www.history.com/topics/civil-rights-movement/loving-v-virginia>

African American Music Has Impacted Genres Across the World

Spiritual music or sacred music has played an important role in African American spiritual and religious life. Some of the earliest forms of musical expression by African Americans were based on Christian psalms and hymns merged with African music styles and American music forms. Originally an oral tradition that imparted Christian values and defined the hardships of slavery, gospel music comes from Black churches and has grown into large influential genre.

Similarly, folk music has links to African cultural traditions. Originating from field hollers, work chants, and game songs, folk music has long been a genre of social commentary. Popular folk music spread in the 1960s, and its elements can be heard in many genres today.

Blues music, with links to folk and gospel, arose in Mississippi, Memphis, Chicago, and southern Texas. Each region has produced blues that illustrates hardships faced in different aspects of American life, particularly poverty, while celebrating cultural richness. Blues has also grown into the diverse rhythm and blues (R&B) genre, incorporating soul and funk characteristics.

African Americans have played a significant role in the military band tradition. Beginning with the Revolutionary War and Civil War, African Americans served in the infantry and drum corps. Through both world wars, military bands have incorporated jazz and other modern musical styles, even touring the United States and Europe.

Jazz music evolved from ragtime, first materializing in New Orleans. Today, many variations on the genre exist, from dance-oriented music of the 1920s to experimental avant-garde jazz. It has influenced music across the globe with its combination of swing, blues, and improvisation.

Rock and roll music incorporates elements from many African American genres combined with American pop and country music. Originating in its modern form in the 1950s, it appealed to rebellious yearnings of American youth.

Hip-hop and rap has become a global phenomenon. Evolving from spoken word and jazz traditions, it has created a music form for artists to voice opinions and share experiences about social and political issues.

Each of these genres has a long, storied tradition that has impacted many musical trends throughout American history. African American contributions to the musical arts are outstanding, producing countless innovations and inventive artists.

<https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/celebrating-black-music-month>



Lt. James R. Europe leads a jazz band in the courtyard of a Paris hospital to entertain patients, 1918. Photo credit: U.S. Army Signal Corps, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2016651602/>

Lt. James R. Europe Led Jazz Musicians in Paris

James R. Europe was born in Mobile, Alabama, in 1881. In 1904, he started his music career as a pianist in New York City, eventually writing songs in the Black theater scene. He formed the Clef Club, which put together orchestras and choruses and functioned as a union and contracting agency for Black musicians. He soon managed 200 Black musicians, putting on large, successful concerts. Soon, he formed another organization, the Tempo Club, which booked musicians for dances in New York City.

After a prolific music career and the outbreak of World War I, he joined the war effort as a lieutenant for the 15th Regiment, which became the 369th Regiment. He put together a band that amazed the European continent as it toured and performed a combination of jazz, blues, ragtime, and patriotic tunes like Stars and Stripes Forever. Many Europeans, particularly those in France, marveled at their music, unable to replicate Lt. Europe's band's sound. When Lt. Europe's company returned home in 1919 to continue playing, and they were celebrated as heroes. They played a New York show to rave reviews; however, before their next show in Boston, Lt. Europe was tragically killed by a drummer in his band.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200038842/>

The 404th Armed Service Forces Band Fought to Continue Playing Music

During World War II, all-women military bands played an important role in rallying support and raising money in war bonds. These women were among the first female Army personnel, facing many societal barriers; however, only one group fought against racial bias as well. The 404th Armed Service Forces band was the military's first all-Black female band, comprised of 28 women.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt signed a law that established the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. This also opened the door for greater participation by Black women in the Armed Forces. Many Black women in the organization were housed at Fort Des Moines but were left unutilized and stagnant, due in part to racism and sexism. By 1944, the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps was changed to the Women's Army Corps (WAC), and Fort Des Moines started the military's first all-female band.

After Black women were denied the chance to join the military band comprised of White women, a segregated company was created following numerous complaints and pushback. Soon, the women began practicing and getting lessons; 8 weeks later, their initial performance exceeded expectations. This was thanks in part to one member, Leonora Hull Brown, who had two degrees in music and would teach other members. Lt. Thelma Brown, a Black officer, became the conductor, and the band began performing in parades and concerts, incorporating swing, jazz, singing, and dancing.

The band, then known as the WAC Band #2, played for Mary McLeod Bethune, an opera star, for churches, hospitals, community organizations, the 34th NAACP conference, and thousands of fans. Afterwards, they were defunded and stripped of their band merit by the Army; however, many wrote letters of protest to reinstate the band.

“Our officers urged us to fight for our existence,” Leonora Hull Brown said, “and told us that this could best be done by asking our friends and relatives to write letters of protest to powerful persons.”

About 1 month later, the support for the band paid off, and they were reinstated as the 404th Army Service Forces WAC band. This activism was an early precursor to the fight for civil rights. The 404th toured Chicago for the Seventh War Bond Drive, which raised over \$26 billion across the Nation in 6 weeks.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/seventy-five-years-ago-militarys-only-all-black-female-band-won-victory-against-war-department-180971815/>



*A Black Lives Matter event in Washington, DC, 2020. Photo credit: Carol M. Highsmith, Library of Congress.
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2020720179/>*

The Black Lives Matter Movement Began to Combat Modern Injustice

The Black Lives Matter movement first began in 2013 after the death of a Black teenager, Trayvon Martin, and the acquittal of the police officer who shot him. The movement spread in 2014 after the deaths of Eric Garner, who died in a police chokehold after being accused of selling loose cigarettes, and Michael Brown, an unarmed Black man shot by police.

The Black Lives Matter organization was founded by three Black women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. The organization is made up of 40 chapters across the Nation; it's more decentralized than the Civil Rights Movement that came before it. The movement seeks equal opportunity for African Americans, the elimination of police brutality, and the end of systemic racism in the United States.

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/from-civil-rights-to-black-lives-matter1/>

<https://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>

African American Demographics are Growing and Diverse

As of 2019, there were 46.8 million people in the United States who self-identify as Black, a 29% increase in population from 2000. Black Americans make up a diverse group of different demographics (Hispanic, non-Hispanic, multiracial). In total, they make up about 14% of the total U.S. population.

In 2019, Black households' median incomes were around \$44,000. About 46% of all Black households made more than \$50,000 a year. About a quarter of Black adults in the United States have a bachelor's degree or higher. About 33% of Black residents have completed some college, and 44% have a high school diploma or didn't finish high school.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/facts-about-the-us-black-population/>

Many Black Writers have Achieved National Prominence with Pulitzers

In the early 2020s, many Black writers won Pulitzer Prizes in writing. The Pulitzer Prize is one of the most distinguished awards for artistic achievement in writing in the United States.

- In 2020, Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* won in Fiction.
- Lynn Nottage’s *Sweat* won in Drama.
- Tyehimba Jess’s *Olio* won in Poetry.
- Hilton AI’s work in the *New Yorker* won in Criticism.
- Marcia Chatelain, Les Payne, Tamara Payne, James Ijames, and Winfred Rembert are some of the writers and artists who won the coveted prize in 2021 and 2022.
- In 2023, Caitlin Dickerson won a Pulitzer for Explanatory Reporting for her work in *The Atlantic*.
- In 2023, Robert Samuels and Toluse Olorunnipa won the prize for General Nonfiction for *His Name Is George Floyd: One Man’s Life and the Struggle for Racial Justice*.
- In 2023, Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels won the prize in Music for *Omar*.
- The first Black person to win a Pulitzer Prize was Gwendolyn Brooks in 1950 for her book, *Annie Allen*.

<https://www.essence.com/news/black-writers-pulitzer-prize-winners/>

<https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-year/2021>

<https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-year/2022>

Legislation Officially Makes Lynching a Federal Crime

In 2022, Congress passed the Emmett Till Anti-Lynching Act after over 200 attempts to make a similar Federal law. This legislation imposes a criminal offense on anybody who has conspired to commit a hate crime that results in death or injury.

The law is named after Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy, who was brutally lynched in 1955. His murderers got away with their crimes. The injustice of Till’s death fueled the growing demand of expanded civil rights in the 1950s into the present day.

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/55>

<https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/emmett-till>



Maya Angelou reciting "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Clinton's inauguration. Photo credit: William J. Clinton Presidential Library, Public Domain.

Maya Angelou's Legacy Celebrated with Specialty Quarter

In 2022, the United States Mint announced production of quarters featuring civil rights activist and poet Maya Angelou. Her representation marks the first time for a Black woman to be featured on the quarter.

Angelou is best known for her memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, written in 1969, about her childhood experiences of racism, abuse, motherhood, and persistence. Beyond her 30 bestselling books, she was also the first African American cable car conductor in San Francisco, acted on Broadway and in films, performed as a professional calypso singer and dancer, and helped to guide the Civil Rights Movement. Before her death in 2014, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2010.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/newly-minted-maya-angelou-quarters-enter-circulation-and-make-history-180979398/>



The Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, Michigan, 2007. Photo credit: Library of Congress, Balthazar Korab Studios. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2020714716/>

There Are Over 100 Museums Focusing on African American History

African American history, art, and culture are being preserved and elevated in over 100 museums across the United States. Some of the most notable include the African American Museum in Philadelphia, the National Voting Rights Museum in Selma, Alabama, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, which is the largest museum dedicated to Black Americans in the world.

Some of the more recently established African American history museums include the International African American Museum in Charleston, South Carolina, which opened in 2023. This museum features 10 galleries including artistic, historic, and immersive displays that range from the past of slavery to modern achievements.

Another new museum is the Harriet Tubman Museum in Cape May, New Jersey, which opened in 2020. Harriet Tubman, one of the most influential figures in the fight against slavery, lived in Cape May in the 1850s, working to fund her missions to free enslaved people. The museum focuses on the local abolitionist movement and the work of Tubman.

<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-museums-united-states-and-canada/>

<https://www.harriettubmanmuseum.org/about>

<https://iaamuseum.org/the-museum/>

Three Women Are Trying to Save Black Cemeteries

Margott Williams created a nonprofit to improve the conditions of tombstones and cemeteries in Washington, Georgia, and Texas. Lisa Fager is the executive director of the Black Georgetown Foundation, which preserves two cemeteries. Yamona Pierce founded the nonprofit Hamilton Hood Foundation, which is restoring the Pierce Chap African Cemetery. Together, these three women are preserving the legacy of African Americans who have died, even though none of them have prior experience in preservation or landscaping.

They've fought hard to preserve many historic cemeteries. Yamona Pierce, for instance, demanded that Georgia Power repair a path destroyed by plowing. Lisa Fager fought with the city and Government to prevent workers from digging into the Female Union Band Society cemetery to make a bike path. Margott Williams pushed her mower miles to and from her house before convincing Houston County to entrust her with a cemetery's lawncare.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation's African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund has gotten proposals from 5,400 Black cemeteries and has begun mapping Black burial sites, many of which are in poor condition. Many of the sites that the three women have worked on have been littered with trash, overgrown, vandalized, affected by natural disasters, or partially destroyed by local governments or corporations. However, they have continued to protest this, repair damage, and organize funding and efforts to bring attention to preservation.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/27/us/black-cemeteries.html>



Mount Zion Cemetery/Female Union Band Cemetery, Georgetown, Washington, DC. Photo credit: Carol M. Highsmith, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011633008/>



Jesse L. Brown receives his wings under the naval aviation cadet program at graduation ceremony, Jacksonville, Florida, 1948. Photo credit: Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002716943/>

2023 Film About Black Pilot Jesse L. Brown Calls for Repatriation

Jesse Leroy Brown was born and raised in Hattisburg, Mississippi, to a sharecropping family. After attending Ohio State University, he applied for a naval aviation program. Eventually, he was accepted and, at the age of 22, he became the first African American man to complete Navy flight training. For this accomplishment, he was featured in *Life* magazine.

While assigned to a fighter squadron in Korea to assist United Nations forces, Brown was hit and suffered a crash landing. Despite a rescue attempt from his wingman, Thomas Hudner, who risked court-martial or capture, Brown became trapped in the wreckage and died. Posthumously, Brown received the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, and a Purple Heart. Hudner received a Medal of Honor for valiant action and selfless devotion to a shipmate. In 1973, the USS *Jesse L. Brown* was launched, attended by Hudner and Brown's widow.

In 2023, the new film *Devotion* released, chronicling the life of Jesse Brown. Directed by J.D. Dillard, the retelling hopes to renew calls to find and repatriate Brown's remains to the United States.

<https://www.militarytimes.com/off-duty/2022/08/30/devotion-trailer-pays-homage-to-pilots-of-americas-forgotten-war/>

<https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/people/trailblazers/jesse-brown.html>



Director Ava DuVernay with actors David Oyelowo and Colman Domingo from the film *Selma*, 2015. Photo credit: U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Germany. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/usbotschaftberlin/16316295157/>

Black Filmmakers Have Historically Been Overlooked, But That's Changing

Black filmmakers have left an indelible mark on the world of cinema; however, they have often been overlooked. Below, just a small sample of directors is featured, particularly some more recent filmmakers; still, there are countless filmmakers that have created great works of art since the beginning of film history.

- Ryan Coogler directed the Marvel comic book film *Black Panther* in 2018 and its sequel in 2022. The former is the highest grossing film ever directed by a Black director, and he's earned two Academy Award nominations. Some of his other films include *Creed* and *Fruitvale Station*.
- Tyler Perry is a prolific filmmaker who writes, produces, and directs his own projects. He is most known for his Madea character, whose films usually earn twice as much money as it took to make them.
- Jordan Peele gained fame for his sketch comedy show, *Key & Peele*, but has gone on to create critically acclaimed horror films like *Get Out* in 2017, *Us* in 2019, and *Nope* in 2022. His work takes new, challenging perspectives on racism.
- Ava DuVernay was the first Black woman to win the directing award at the Sundance Film Festival in 2012 for her film *Middle of Nowhere*. Since then, she directed *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Selma*, which chronicles part of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life.
- The first known Black filmmaker was Oscar Micheaux, who directed *The Homesteader* in 1919, *Within Our Gates* in 1920, and *The Exile* in 1931. Also an author, Micheaux was posthumously honored with the Golden Jubilee Special Award for Directorial Achievement.
- One of the most famous Black directors is Spike Lee, who directed *She's Gotta Have It* in 1986, *Do the Right Thing* in 1989, *Malcolm X* in 1992, and most recently *Da 5 Bloods* in 2020, among many other films. From 2020 to 2021, he was the first Black president of the Cannes Film Festival, paving the way for many new Black filmmakers to gain wider attention.

<https://www.nfi.edu/black-film-directors/>

Black Chefs Have Left an Important Mark on Culinary and American History

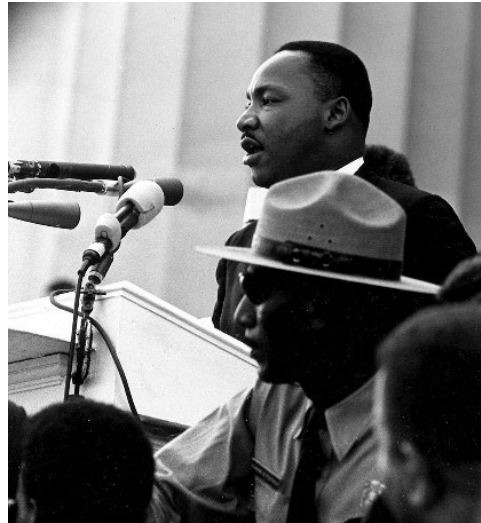
African American food culture is distinct, varied, and has left an important mark on U.S. history. Black people have made important contributions to the culinary arts, and some of those people are featured below:

- James Hemings, born in 1765, was enslaved by Thomas Jefferson. After Jefferson was appointed to commerce minister to France, Hemings went with him. There, he became the first American trained as a French chef, studying in prestigious kitchens. Eventually, he became the chef de cuisine at Jefferson's personal residence and was freed in 1796. He introduced European-style macaroni and cheese, French fries, crème brûlée, and ice cream to America.
- Zephyr Wright, born in Marshall, Texas, was the personal chef to Lyndon B. Johnson. The former president became well known by guests for the delicious comfort food served at his home, particularly chile con queso and peach cobbler. Wright expressed her experiences of discrimination to Johnson, which is thought to have contributed to Johnson's understanding of unequal treatment of Black people. She was there when he signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964; he gave her the pen used to sign the law, saying "You deserve this more than anybody else."
- Abby Fisher, born into slavery in South Carolina in 1832, was one of the first Black cookbook authors. Her book was originally published in 1880, featuring her Southern cooking with 160 recipes. After the Civil War, she moved to San Francisco, where she became well known for her pickles, preserves, and sauces.
- Edna Lewis, born in Freetown, Virginia, in 1916, learned to cook on a farm before moving to New York City, becoming a local legend for her biscuits and herbed roast chicken. In 1954, she started teaching cooking classes at the American Museum of Natural History. She wrote cookbooks that emphasized Southern cooking and farm-to-table eating. She is still recognized as a pioneering voice in American cooking.
- Larry and Jereline Bethune opened their restaurant, Brenda's Bar-B-Que Pit, in 1942 in Montgomery, Alabama. Beyond serving popular ribs, pig ears, and chopped pork, the Bethunes and their staff helped organize parts of the bus boycott that followed Rosa Parks' arrest, becoming an unofficial center for the local Civil Rights Movement. There, Jereline Bethune also held lessons to teach other Black people how to read in order to pass literacy tests to vote. Today, it's the oldest barbecue restaurant in Montgomery still in operation.

<https://nytimes.com/2019/02/28/dining/black-chefs.html>

Black History Month

Quotes



Martin Luther King, Jr., giving his "I Have a Dream" speech. Photo credit: Rowland Scherman, National Archives and Records Administration. <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/542069>

“Despite the attitude of some employers in refusing to hire Negroes to perform needed, skilled services, and despite the denial of the same opportunities and courtesies to our youth in the armed forces of our country, we must not fail America and as Americans, we must not let America fail us.”

“I leave you hope. The Negro’s growth will be great in the years to come. Yesterday our ancestors endured the degradation of slavery, yet they retained their dignity. Today, we direct our strength toward winning a more abundant and secure life. Tomorrow, a new Negro, unhindered by race taboos and shackles, will benefit from more than 330 years of ceaseless struggle. Theirs will be a better world. This I believe with all my heart.”

– **Mary McLeod Bethune**

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/mary-mcleod-bethune>

“Over the last few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or even more, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends.”

“If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.”

“There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right.”

“Those who are not looking for happiness are the most likely to find it, because those who are searching forget that the surest way to be happy is to seek happiness for others.”

– **Martin Luther King, Jr.**

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/23924.Martin_Luther_King_Jr

https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf

“You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies, / You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I'll rise.”

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

“We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty.”

“You can only become truly accomplished at something you love. Don't make money your goal. Instead pursue the things you love doing and then do them so well that people can't take their eyes off of you.”

“The desire to reach for the stars is ambitious. The desire to reach hearts is wise.”

– **Maya Angelou**

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3503.Maya_Angelou

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/newly-minted-maya-angelou-quarters-enter-circulation-and-make-history-180979398/>

“Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America.”

“Every generation leaves behind a legacy. What that legacy will be is determined by the people of that generation. What legacy do you want to leave behind?”

“Darkness cannot overcome darkness, only light can do that. Violence can never overcome violence, only peace can do that. Hate can never overcome hate, only love can do that.”

“We are one people, one family, the human family, and what affects one of us affects us all.”

– **John Lewis**

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6429079.John_Lewis

“I felt that one had better die fighting against injustice than to die like a dog or rat in a trap. I had already determined to sell my life as dearly as possible if attacked. I felt if I could take one lyncher with me, this would even up the score a little bit.”

“The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.”

“Virtue knows no color line, and the chivalry which depends upon complexion of skin and texture of hair can command no honest respect.”

– **Ida B. Wells**

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/102474.Ida_B_Wells_Barnett

Wells, I. B., Duster, A. M., Duster, M., & Ewing, E. L. (2020, May 13). Crusade for justice: The autobiography of Ida B. Wells, Second Edition. University of Chicago Press.

“I’m for truth, no matter who tells it. I’m for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I’m a human being, first and foremost, and as such I’m for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole.”

– **Malcolm X** in his autobiography, published in 1965 after his death

X, M., Haley, A., Handler, M. S., Sloan, S., & Shabazz, B. (2015, November 29). The autobiography of Malcolm X. Ishi Press.

“I’m not concerned with your liking or disliking me . . . all I ask is that you respect me as a human being.”

“A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives.”

“Life is not a spectator sport. If you're going to spend your whole life in the grandstand just watching what goes on, in my opinion you're wasting your life.”

“There's not an American in this country free until every one of us is free.”

– **Jackie Robinson**

<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/jackie-robinson>

“I will not have my life narrowed down. I will not bow down to somebody else's whim or to someone else's ignorance.”

“For me, forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?”

“The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it’s to imagine what is possible.”

– **bell hooks**

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/10697.bell_hooks

“The worker must work for the glory of his handiwork, not simply for pay; the thinker must think for truth, not for fame.”

“But art is not simply works of art; it is the spirit that knows Beauty, that has music in its being and the color of sunsets in its headkerchiefs; that can dance on a flaming world and make the world dance, too.”

“The most important thing to remember is this: to be ready at any moment to give up what you are for what you might become.”

– **W.E.B. Du Bois**

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/10697.bell_hooks

“History shows that it does not matter who is in power or what revolutionary forces take over the government, those who have not learned to do for themselves and have to depend solely on others never obtain any more rights or privileges in the end than they had in the beginning.”

– **Carter G. Woodson** in *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, originally published in 1933

Woodson, C. G., & Darnell, T. (1999, December 31). The Mis-Education of the Negro. 12th Media Services.

“Those who are happiest are those who do the most for others.”

“Associate yourself with people of good quality, for it is better to be alone than to be in bad company.”

“A lie doesn't become truth, wrong doesn't become right, and evil doesn't become good, just because it's accepted by a majority.”

“We all should rise, above the clouds of ignorance, narrowness, and selfishness.”

– **Booker T. Washington**

https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/84278.Booker_T_Washington

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