



Black Women in American Culture and History

Information Resource Center, Public Affairs Section, U.S. Embassy Jakarta

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This information package is compiled by the IRC to commemorate African American History Month February 2012

Presidential Proclamation National African American History Month, 2012

BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

A PROCLAMATION

The story of African Americans is a story of resilience and perseverance. It traces a people who refused to accept the circumstances under which they arrived on these shores, and it chronicles the generations who fought for an America that truly reflects the ideals enshrined in our founding documents. It is the narrative of slaves who shepherded others along the path to freedom and preachers who organized against the rules of Jim Crow, of young people who sat-in at lunch counters and ordinary men and women who took extraordinary risks to change our Nation for the better. During National African American History Month, we celebrate the rich legacy of African Americans and honor the remarkable contributions they have made to perfecting our Union.

This year's theme, "Black Women in American Culture and History," invites us to pay special tribute to the role African American women have played in shaping the character of our Nation -- often in the face of both racial and gender discrimination. As courageous visionaries who led the fight to end slavery and tenacious activists who fought to expand basic

civil rights to all Americans, African American women have long served as champions of social and political change. And from the literary giants who gave voice to their communities to the artists whose harmonies and brush strokes captured hardships and aspirations, African American women have forever enriched our cultural heritage. Today, we stand on the shoulders of countless African American women who shattered glass ceilings and advanced our common goals. In recognition of their legacy, let us honor their heroic and historic acts for years to come.

The achievements of African American women are not limited to those recorded and retold in our history books. Their impact is felt in communities where they are quiet heroes who care for their families, in boardrooms where they are leaders of industry, in laboratories where they are discovering new technologies, and in classrooms where they are preparing the next generation for the world they will inherit. As we celebrate the successes of African American women, we recall that progress did not come easily, and that our work to widen the circle of opportunity for all Americans is not complete. With eyes cast toward new horizons, we must press on in pursuit of a high-quality education for every child, a job for every American who wants one, and a fair chance at prosperity for every individual and

family across our Nation.

During National African American History Month, we pay tribute to the contributions of past generations and reaffirm our commitment to keeping the American dream alive for the next generation. In honor of those women and men who paved the way for us, and with great expectations for those to follow, let us continue the righteous cause of making America what it should be -- a Nation that is more just and more equal for all its people.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, BARACK OBAMA, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim February 2012 as National African American History Month. I call upon public officials, educators, librarians, and all the people of the United States to observe this month with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this thirty-first day of January, in the year of our Lord two thousand twelve, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-sixth.

Source: <http://goo.gl/Ws4xG>

U.S. Embassy Jakarta Mission Statement

Based on mutual respect and shared values, the U.S. Mission works with Indonesia to strengthen democracy, sustain the environment, promote prosperity, enhance understanding and ensure security for our people, our nations, and our region.

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Prominent African American Women

Presenting profiles of African-American women of the 20th and 21st centuries who have made significant contributions to many spheres of American life. It also offers insights into how earlier generations of African-American women serve as touchstones for the present generation.

The list of women featured here, while not comprehensive, is wide-ranging. Some earlier generations of African-American women had few career options, the U.S. civil rights movement and the push for women's equality have created opportunities for black women in virtually any field are:



Madam C.J. Walker: Business Savvy to Philanthropy

Little more than a century ago, when entrepreneur Madam C.J. Walker founded her hair care and cosmetics empire, few women dared to imagine owning a business.

During an era when American women were denied the right to vote and most African Americans were excluded — by law and by custom — from the nation's most prestigious universities, corporations, professions and government positions, Madam Walker transformed herself from an uneducated laundress into a corporate executive — and one of the country's first self-made female millionaires. At a time when most African women who worked outside the home were factory or domestic workers, Walker led an international sales force of thousands of financially independent African-American women. Her unlikely journey as a businesswoman, philanthropist and political activist remains an inspiration and an example of what one woman with courage, perseverance and a generous spirit can accomplish.

Read more at <http://goo.gl/BrTiF>



Ida B. Wells-Barnett: Fighting and Writing for Justice

Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a fearless anti-lynching crusader, suffragist, women's rights advocate, journalist, and speaker of international stature. She stands as one of U.S. nation's most uncompromising leaders and most ardent defenders of democracy. She was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862 and died in Chicago, Illinois, in 1931 at the age of 69.

Read more at <http://goo.gl/X2pl0>



Zora Neale Hurston: Literary Legend

Zora Neale Hurston was an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance. She knew how to make an entrance. At a literary awards dinner in 1925, the earthy Harlem newcomer turned heads and raised eyebrows as she accepted four awards: a second-place fiction prize for her short story "Spunk," a second-place award in drama for her play *Color Struck*, and two honorable mentions. The names of the writers who beat out Hurston for first place that night would soon be forgotten. But the name of the second-place winner buzzed on tongues all night, and for days and years to come.

Read more at <http://goo.gl/Lew2C>

Dorothy Irene Height: Civil Rights Activist

Dorothy Irene Height was one of the earliest and longest-lasting leaders in the fight for equality. Height had been an activist since the New Deal era; she served as the leader of the National Council of Negro Women for four decades and, at



the time of her death in 2010, she was the president emerita of that group.

Height's career in activism lasted for nearly 80 years. She was active in protests against lynching in the 1930s, and she advised U.S. presidents from

Dwight Eisenhower to Bill Clinton. President Barack Obama, the first African-American president of the United States, declared her the "godmother of the civil rights movement and a hero to so many Americans," according to *the New York Times*. Source: Gale Biography in Context



Claudette Colvin: The First to Keep Her Seat

Fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin boarded the Highland Gardens bus in downtown Montgomery, Alabama, the afternoon of March 2, 1955, and settled in for the long ride home to her neighborhood

across town. She knew the seating rules well — everybody did. Claudette Colvin was arrested for refusing to surrender her seat on a public bus to a white passenger and, for the first time in the city's history, fought the charges in court.

Read more: <http://goo.gl/ePWUg>

A New Generation of Black Women Leaders

Today's African-American women leaders excel in a variety of fields such as in business, medicine, science, literature, the law, academia and taking advantage of opportunities that earlier generations never dreamed of. Here are few of them.

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About African American History Month



Carter G. Woodson, the father of black history month.

African American History Month, also called Black History Month, a month long commemoration of African American history and achievement that takes place each February in the United States. It was begun in 1976.

The idea for an African American History Month was first conceived by the

historian Carter G. Woodson and members of his Association for the Study of Negro Life and History

(now the Association for the Study of African American Life and History). Together they organized a Negro History Week, beginning in February 1926. They selected the month of February for this celebration because it was close to the birthdays of Pres. Abraham Lincoln, who had been responsible for the Emancipation Proclamation, and the African American orator and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. During the next 50 years Negro History Week grew in popularity, with American cities initiating their own celebrations of black achievements and with teachers—particularly in schools with a large percentage of African American students—using class time to discuss contributions to history made

by notable African Americans. The civil rights movement also contributed to its popularity. Negro History Week was expanded to become African American History Month in 1976, with President Gerald Ford urging Americans to participate in its observance.

At the beginning of the 21st century, African American History Month was celebrated with a range of events at public schools, universities, and museums as well as within individual communities across the country.

By Chelsey Parrott-Sheffer, Encyclopedia Britannica (available at IRC eLibraryUSA database).

Prominent African American Women

(continued from page 2)



Michelle Obama Presents Modern Image for Black Women

Every time Michelle Obama appears as first lady, the combination of her professional and domestic success challenges stereotypical media images of black women in America. As the first black woman to become first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama is shattering generations-old stereotypes about black women and working mothers. Read more at <http://goo.gl/ZjC4> and <http://goo.gl/l7Zot>



Oprah Winfrey

Raised on a Mississippi farm with no indoor plumbing, Oprah Winfrey has become arguably the most influential person on American television and one of the richest women in the world. At 19, she was Nashville, Tennessee's, first female and first black television news anchor. Winfrey is best known for hosting her internationally syndicated daytime television talk show, The Oprah Winfrey Show, which ran for 25 years, ending in 2011. Winfrey used the show to promote reading and other forms of self-improvement. In 2006 she founded the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa, a school designed to offer academically talented girls an opportunity to develop their full intellectual, social, and leadership potential. Read more at <http://goo.gl/GIBV>



Joan Higginbotham

Joan Higginbotham was recruited by NASA when she was completing her studies in electrical engineering at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, which led her to NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida. She worked on 53 shuttle launches before being selected as an astronaut candidate in 1996. Ten years later, aboard the space shuttle Discovery, Higginbotham became the third African-American woman to go into space. Read more at <http://goo.gl/SqhGv>



Jurnee Smollett

Actress Jurnee Smollett is best known for her role in The Great Debaters, a 2007 movie about the debate team at an all-black school in Marshall, Texas, during the 1930s. But she is also an HIV/AIDS activist who traveled to Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland in 2009 to educate and empower young people to protect themselves against HIV. Read more at <http://goo.gl/hbdrE>

Elizabeth Alexander

Poet Elizabeth Alexander, seen here, graduated from Yale University and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for her 2005 poetry collection American Sublime. She became one of only four poets to have participated in a presidential inauguration



when she read her poem "Praise Song for the Day" at Barack Obama's inauguration as U.S. president on January 21, 2009. Read more at <http://goo.gl/cHLSj>



Mary Spio

Born in Syracuse, New York, to Ghanaian parents. A graduate degree in engineering led her to a job at Boeing Company, where she became head of satellite communications and created a digital cinema division. Today, she is known as a groundbreaker in transferring movies by satellite and also as the founder of an online dating service and as a marketing and technology executive. See also <http://goo.gl/92AUa>

Related Links:

- ◆ Making Their Mark: Black Women Leaders < <http://goo.gl/oqbO6> >
- ◆ Free at Last: The U.S. Civil Rights Movement < <http://goo.gl/2rMcZ> >
- ◆ Black History Month Honors Legacy of Struggle and Triumph < <http://goo.gl/9QNFN> >
- ◆ Beyond Dr. King: More Stories of African-American Achievement < <http://goo.gl/2fv6H> >
- ◆ IRC Information Package: African American History Month 2011 < <http://goo.gl/J5qww> >

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