

Famous Firsts by African Americans

The first African-American billionaire, combat pilot, Nobel Prize winner, Poet laureate, Oscar winner, and Miss America.

by Borgna Brunner



African-American Firsts: Government

- **Local elected official:** [John Mercer Langston](#), 1855, town clerk of Brownhelm Township, Ohio.
- **State elected official:** Alexander Lucius Twilight, 1836, the Vermont legislature.
- **Mayor of major city:** [Carl Stokes](#), Cleveland, Ohio, 1967–1971. The first black woman to serve as a mayor of a major U.S. city was Sharon Pratt Dixon Kelly, Washington, DC, 1991–1995.
- **Governor (appointed):** [P.B.S. Pinchback](#) served as governor of Louisiana from Dec. 9, 1872–Jan. 13, 1873, during impeachment proceedings against the elected governor.
- **Governor (elected):** [L. Douglas Wilder](#), Virginia, 1990–1994. The only other elected black governor has been Deval Patrick, Massachusetts, 2007–

- **U.S. Representative:** [Joseph Rainey](#) became a Congressman from South Carolina in 1870 and was reelected four more times. The first black female U.S. Representative was [Shirley Chisholm](#), Congresswoman from New York, 1969–1983.
- **U.S. Senator:** [Hiram Revels](#) became Senator from Mississippi from Feb. 25, 1870, to March 4, 1871, during Reconstruction. [Edward Brooke](#) became the first African-American Senator since Reconstruction, 1966–1979. [Carol Mosely Braun](#) became the first black woman Senator serving from 1992–1998 for the state of Illinois. (There have only been a total of five black senators in U.S. history: the remaining two are [Blanche K. Bruce](#) [1875–1881] and [Barack Obama](#) (2005–2008).)
- **U.S. cabinet member:** [Robert C. Weaver](#), 1966–1968, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development under Lyndon Johnson; the first black female cabinet minister was [Patricia Harris](#), 1977, Secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development under Jimmy Carter.
- **U.S. Secretary of State:** Gen. [Colin Powell](#), 2001–2004. The first black female Secretary of State was [Condoleezza Rice](#), 2005–2009.
- **Major Party Nominee for President:** Sen. [Barack Obama](#), 2008. The Democratic Party selected him as its presidential nominee.
- **U.S. President:** Sen. [Barack Obama](#). Obama defeated Sen. John McCain in the general election on November 4, 2008, and was inaugurated as the 44th president of the United States on January 20, 2009.

African-American Firsts: Law

- **Editor, Harvard Law Review:** [Charles Hamilton Houston](#), 1919. [Barack Obama](#) became the first President of the Harvard Law Review.
- **Federal Judge:** [William Henry Hastie](#), 1946; [Constance Baker Motley](#) became the first black woman federal judge, 1966.
- **U.S. Supreme Court Justice:** [Thurgood Marshall](#), 1967–1991. [Clarence Thomas](#) became the second African American to serve on the Court in 1991.

African-American Firsts: Diplomacy

- **U.S. diplomat:** Ebenezer D. Bassett, 1869, became minister-resident to Haiti; [Patricia Harris](#) became the first black female ambassador (1965; Luxembourg).
- **U.S. Representative to the UN:** [Andrew Young](#) (1977–1979).
- **Nobel Peace Prize winner:** [Ralph J. Bunche](#) received the prize in 1950 for mediating the Arab-Israeli truce. [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), became the second African-American Peace Prize winner in 1964. (See [King's Nobel acceptance speech](#).)

African-American Firsts: Military

- **Combat pilot:** Georgia-born [Eugene Jacques Bullard](#), 1917, denied entry into the U.S. Army Air Corps because of his race, served throughout World War I in the French Flying

Corps. He received the Legion of Honor, France's highest honor, among many other decorations.

- **First Congressional Medal of Honor winner:** [Sgt. William H. Carney](#) for bravery during the Civil War. He received his [Congressional Medal of Honor](#) in 1900.
- **General:** [Benjamin O. Davis, Sr.](#), 1940–1948.
- **Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:** [Colin Powell](#), 1989–1993.

African-American Firsts: Science and Medicine

- **First patent holder:** [Thomas L. Jennings](#), 1821, for a dry-cleaning process. Sarah E. Goode, 1885, became the first African-American woman to receive a patent, for a bed that folded up into a cabinet.
- **M.D. degree:** James McCune Smith, 1837, University of Glasgow; Rebecca Lee Crumpler became the first black woman to receive an M.D. degree. She graduated from the New England Female Medical College in 1864.
- **Inventor of the blood bank:** Dr. [Charles Drew](#), 1940.
- **Heart surgery pioneer:** [Daniel Hale Williams](#), 1893.
- **First astronaut:** Robert H. Lawrence, Jr., 1967, was the first black astronaut, but he died in a plane crash during a training flight and never made it into space. Guion Bluford, 1983, became the first black astronaut to travel in space; [Mae Jemison](#), 1992, became the first black female astronaut. Frederick D. Gregory, 1998, was the first African-American shuttle commander.

African-American Firsts: Scholarship

- **College graduate (B.A.):** Alexander Lucius Twilight, 1823, Middlebury College; first black woman to receive a B.A. degree: Mary Jane Patterson, 1862, Oberlin College.
- **Ph.D.:** [Edward A. Bouchet](#), 1876, received a Ph.D. from Yale University. In 1921, three individuals became the first U.S. black women to earn Ph.D.s: Georgiana Simpson, University of Chicago; Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander, University of Pennsylvania; and Eva Beatrice Dykes, Radcliffe College.
- **Rhodes Scholar:** [Alain L. Locke](#), 1907.
- **College president:** Daniel A. Payne, 1856, Wilberforce University, Ohio.
- **Ivy League president:** [Ruth Simmons](#), 2001, Brown University.

See also [Milestones in Black Education](#).

African-American Firsts: Literature

- **Novelist:** Harriet Wilson, *Our Nig* (1859).
- **Poet:** Lucy Terry, 1746, "Bar's Fight." It is her only surviving poem.
- **Poet (published):** [Phillis Wheatley](#), 1773, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Considered the founder of African-American literature.
- **Pulitzer Prize winner:** [Gwendolyn Brooks](#), 1950, won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry.

- **Pulitzer Prize winner in Drama:** Charles Gordone, 1970, for his play *No Place To Be Somebody*.
- **Nobel Prize for Literature winner:** [Toni Morrison](#), 1993.
- **Poet Laureate:** [Robert Hayden](#), 1976–1978; first black woman Poet Laureate: [Rita Dove](#), 1993–1995.

African-American Firsts: Music and Dance

- **Member of the New York City Opera:** [Todd Duncan](#), 1945.
- **Member of the Metropolitan Opera Company:** [Marian Anderson](#), 1955.
- **Male Grammy Award winner:** [Count Basie](#), 1958.
- **Female Grammy Award winner:** [Ella Fitzgerald](#), 1958.
- **Principal dancer in a major dance company:** [Arthur Mitchell](#), 1959, New York City Ballet.

African-American Firsts: Film

- **First Oscar:** [Hattie McDaniel](#), 1940, supporting actress, *Gone with the Wind*.
- **Oscar, Best Actor/Actress:** [Sidney Poitier](#), 1963, *Lilies of the Field*; [Halle Berry](#), 2001, *Monster's Ball*.
- **Oscar, Best Actress Nominee:** [Dorothy Dandridge](#), 1954, *Carmen Jones*.
- **Film director:** Oscar Micheaux, 1919, wrote, directed, and produced *The Homesteader*, a feature film.
- **Hollywood director:** [Gordon Parks](#) directed and wrote *The Learning Tree* for Warner Brothers in 1969.

African-American Firsts: Television

- **Network television show host:** [Nat King Cole](#), 1956, "The Nat King Cole Show"; [Oprah Winfrey](#) became the first black woman television host in 1986, "The Oprah Winfrey Show."
- **Star of a network television show:** [Bill Cosby](#), 1965, "I Spy".

African-American Firsts: Sports

- **Major league baseball player:** [Jackie Robinson](#), 1947, Brooklyn Dodgers.
- **Elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame:** [Jackie Robinson](#), 1962.
- **NFL quarterback:** [Willie Thrower](#), 1953.
- **NFL football coach:** [Fritz Pollard](#), 1922–1937.
- **Golf champion:** [Tiger Woods](#), 1997, won the Masters golf tournament.
- **NHL hockey player:** [Willie O'Ree](#), 1958, Boston Bruins.¹
- **World cycling champion:** [Marshall W. "Major" Taylor](#), 1899.
- **Tennis champion:** [Althea Gibson](#) became the first black person to play in and win Wimbledon and the United States national tennis championship. She won both

tournaments twice, in 1957 and 1958. In all, Gibson won 56 tournaments, including five Grand Slam singles events. The first black male champion was [Arthur Ashe](#) who won the 1968 U.S. Open, the 1970 Australian Open, and the 1975 Wimbledon championship.

- **Heavyweight boxing champion:** [Jack Johnson](#), 1908.
- **Olympic medalist (Summer games):** George Poage, 1904, won two bronze medals in the 200 m hurdles and 400 m hurdles.
- **Olympic gold medalist (Summer games):** John Baxter "Doc" Taylor, 1908, won a gold medal as part of the 4 x 400 m relay team.
- **Olympic gold medalist (Summer games; individual):** [DeHart Hubbard](#), 1924, for the long jump; the first woman was [Alice Coachman](#), who won the high jump in 1948.
- **Olympic medalist (Winter games):** Debi Thomas, 1988, won the bronze in figure skating.
- **Olympic gold medalist (Winter games):** Vonetta Flowers, 2002, bobsled.
- **Olympic gold medalist (Winter games; individual):** Shani Davis, 2006, 1,000 m speed skating.

Other African-American Firsts

- **Licensed Pilot:** Bessie Coleman, 1921.
- **Millionaire:** [Madame C. J. Walker](#).
- **Billionaire:** Robert Johnson, 2001, owner of Black Entertainment Television; [Oprah Winfrey](#), 2003.
- **Portrayal on a postage stamp:** [Booker T. Washington](#), 1940 (and also 1956).
- **Miss America:** [Vanessa Williams](#), 1984, representing New York. When controversial photos surfaced and Williams resigned, Suzette Charles, the runner-up and also an African American, assumed the title. She represented New Jersey. Three additional African Americans have been [Miss Americas](#): Debbye Turner (1990), Marjorie Vincent (1991), and Kimberly Aiken (1994).
- **Explorer, North Pole:** Matthew A. Henson, 1909, accompanied Robert E. Peary on the first successful U.S. expedition to the North Pole.
- **Explorer, South Pole:** George Gibbs, 1939–1941 accompanied Richard Byrd.
- **Flight around the world:** Barrington Irving, 2007, from Miami Gardens, Florida, flew a Columbia 400 plane named *Inspiration* around the world in 96 days, 150 hours (March 23-June 27).

1. O'Ree, the first black player in the National Hockey League (NHL), was Canadian.

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