



**Making Their
Mark:
Black Women
Leaders**





U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
VOLUME 16 / NUMBER 6
Published February 2012

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The Bureau of International Information Programs of the U.S. Department of State publishes *eJournal USA*. Each journal examines a major issue facing the United States and the international community, and informs international readers about U.S. society, values, thought, and institutions.

Each *eJournal* is published in English, followed by electronic versions in French, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish. Selected editions also appear in Arabic, Chinese and Persian. Each journal is catalogued by volume and number.

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Washington, DC 20522-0501
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About This Issue



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These women process voter registration applications in Americus, Georgia, a few days after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which outlawed discriminatory voting practices.

In February 1926, historian Carter G. Woodson, the son of former slaves, initiated Negro History Week to encourage African Americans to study their own history. Fifty years later, as the United States celebrated its bicentennial in 1976, President Gerald R. Ford urged all Americans to “seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history” and designated February as Black History Month. Since then, Americans of all races have explored the history and contributions of African Americans during the month of February. In 2012, the theme of Black History Month is Black Women in American Culture and History.

This issue of *eJournal USA* profiles 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. It includes women who have devoted



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Civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer helped organize “Mississippi Freedom Summers” to educate black citizens about voting rights and register them to vote.

their talents and energies to business, civil rights, politics, academia and mass media. Each in her way has affirmed the American Dream not only for African Americans, but for women and men of all ethnicities.

—The Editors



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Madam C.J. Walker

BUSINESS SAVVY TO PHILANTHROPY

A'Lelia Bundles

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 American 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.

Born Sarah Breedlove in Delta, Louisiana, in December 1867, she was the first of her five siblings to begin life as a free person. As a young child Sarah worked beside her parents, Owen and Minerva Breedlove, in the same cotton plantation fields where they had been enslaved until the end of the American Civil War. Sadly, when Sarah was seven years old, both her parents died. With no schools for black children in her community and no job prospects, she married a man named Moses McWilliams when she was just 14 years old. By the age of 20, Sarah was a widow with a young child.

Unable to support herself and her daughter, Lelia, she joined her older brothers in St. Louis. Sarah obtained



Madam C.J. Walker was one of the United States' first African-American millionaires.

Scurlock Studio/Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Archives Center

a job as a laundress, earning barely over a dollar a week, but she was determined that her daughter receive more formal education than she had. While many people looked down on washerwomen like Sarah, she refused to be ashamed of menial, but honest, work. She did admit, however, that she was embarrassed by one aspect of her personal appearance: the severe scalp disease that was causing her to lose her hair. During the early 1900s, when most Americans lacked indoor plumbing and electricity, bathing was a luxury. As a result, Sarah and many other women were going bald because they washed their hair so infrequently, leaving it vulnerable to environmental hazards like pollution, bacteria,

and lice. To cure her condition, she experimented with formulas until she discovered an ointment and a cleansing regimen that healed her scalp and allowed her hair to grow. She began selling her salves and teaching other women to groom and style their hair.

Around this time Sarah met and married Charles Joseph Walker, a newspaper salesman, who helped her market and advertise her products. It was after their marriage in 1906 that Sarah Breedlove began calling herself "Madam" C.J. Walker, a title of dignity and respect borrowed from the women who had created the French cosmetics and fashion industries. In 1910 Walker moved to Indianapolis, Indiana, where she built a factory, hair salon and beauty school to train her sales agents. She also became involved in the city's civic, cultural and political activities. Learning of a campaign to construct a YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association, an international organization promoting physical and spiritual health driven by a service ethic) in the black community, she



A Lelia Bundles/Walker Family Archive/madamcjwalker.com

Madam C.J. Walker (second from left) and educator, author and political leader Booker T. Washington (center left), among others, at the 1913 dedication of the Senate Avenue black Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Indianapolis, Indiana.

pledged \$1,000 to the building fund. Her donation shocked her new neighbors because no black woman ever had contributed such a large sum to an organization like the YMCA. The laundress who once had made \$1.50 a week now was earning enough money to help others.

Bolstered by the positive response to her gift, she set another goal for herself: to address the delegates of the 1912 National Negro Business League (NNBL) convention. Arriving in Chicago with soaring confidence, she tried to share her rags-to-riches story with NNBL founder Booker T. Washington. Washington was by that time a figure of national stature and arguably the most powerful African-American leader of the era. For two days of the convention, he ignored her overture. Undaunted, Walker waited patiently until the final day of the conference, at which point she stood from her seat and addressed Washington as he presided at the podium: "Surely you are not going to shut the door in my face. I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South," Walker said. "I was promoted to the washtub. From there I was promoted to the kitchen. And from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations. I have built my own factory on my own ground!"

Washington was so shocked and annoyed that he still did not invite Walker to the stage, but he could no longer ignore her. The following year, Washington accepted Walker's invitation to be a guest in her Indianapolis home during the dedication of the new YMCA. Walker also contributed to the Tuskegee Institute (an institution of higher learning dedicated to the advancement of African Americans, founded by Washington in 1881), funding scholarships she created for African students there, which helped her further earn Washington's respect. At the 1913 NNBL convention Washington graciously welcomed Walker as a keynote speaker.

Walker continued to expand her market and ventured beyond the United States to Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, Panama, and Costa Rica. She hoped that — through the principles of entrepreneurship that had made her wealthy — her products could provide prosperity for women of African descent all over the world. While she traveled, her daughter, Lelia, set to work opening another school and salon in an expensively decorated townhouse in New York City's predominantly African-American Harlem neighborhood. As the Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company continued to grow, Walker and her daughter organized their sales force into local and

state clubs. Her Walker Hair Culturists Union of America convention in Philadelphia in 1917 drew 200 agents and became one of the first national meetings of American women gathered to discuss business and commerce. At the convention Walker happily listened to stories from former maids, cooks, sharecroppers, and school teachers who now made more money than their former employers. As a reward, she gave prizes not only to the women who had sold the most products, but to the women who had contributed the most to charity in their communities.

The next year, Walker moved into Villa Lewaro, a lavish estate in affluent Irvington-on-Hudson, New York, not far from the homes of oil mogul cum philanthropist John D. Rockefeller and railroad baron Jay Gould (two of the richest men in U.S. history). With New York as her base, she became even more involved in political matters, joining the executive committee of the Silent Protest Parade, a July 1917 public demonstration in which more than 8,000 African Americans marched up Fifth Avenue to protest an East St.

Louis riot that had left 39 black men, women, and children dead. A few days later, she and a group of Harlem leaders visited the White House to urge President Woodrow Wilson to support legislation to make lynching a federal crime.

Just before she died in May 1919, Walker pledged \$5,000 — equivalent to about \$65,000 in today's dollars — to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's anti-lynching fund. At the time, it was the largest gift the civil rights organization ever had received. She also revised her will to reflect her passion for education, children, and the elderly by directing two-thirds of future net profits of her estate to charity and bequeathing nearly \$100,000 to individuals, educational institutions, and orphanages.

Today her legacy is best preserved in the aspirations

of those who are inspired by her entrepreneurial success and philanthropic generosity, like billionaire businesswoman Oprah Winfrey and U.S. Small Business Administration Deputy Director Marie Johns (awaiting Senate confirmation). In 1992 Walker was one of only 21 women inducted into the National Business Hall of Fame at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago.

Whenever people asked Madam Walker the secret to her success, she would proudly tell them: "There is



A'Leia Bundles Walker Family Archive/madamcjwalker.com

Walker drives her niece Anjetta Breedlove (in front) and two employees in a Model-T Ford, circa 1912.

no royal flower-strewn path to success, and if there is, I have not found it, for whatever success I have attained has been the result of much hard work and many sleepless nights. I got my start by giving myself a start. So don't sit down and wait for the opportunities to come. You have to get up and make them for yourselves!" ■

A'Leia Bundles, a former ABC News producer and executive, is Madam Walker's biographer and great-great-granddaughter. Bundles' book, On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker (Scribner), was a 2001 New York Times Notable Book. She lives in Washington, D.C.

Reprinted from Stories of African-American Achievement, IIP, U.S. Department of State.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett

FIGHTING AND WRITING FOR JUSTICE

Lee D. Baker



Ida B. Wells-Barnett was a journalist and activist for equal rights.

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 our 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.

Although enslaved prior to the Civil War, Ida's parents were able to support their seven children because her mother was a well-known cook and her father a skilled carpenter. When Ida was only 14, a tragic epidemic of yellow fever swept through Holly Springs and killed her parents and youngest sibling. Emblematic of the righteousness, responsibility, and fortitude that characterized her life, Ida kept the family together by

securing a job as a teacher. She managed to continue her education by attending nearby Rust College, and eventually moved to Memphis, Tennessee, to live with her aunt and help raise her youngest sisters.

It was in Memphis where she first began to fight (literally) for racial and gender justice. In 1884, she was asked by the conductor of the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad Company to give up her seat on the train to a white man. The conductor ordered her into the smoking car that doubled as the "Jim Crow" car (a term for laws that segregated people by race), which was already crowded with other riders. Despite the 1875 Civil Rights Act banning discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or color in theaters, hotels, transports, and other public accommodations, several railroad companies defied the law and continued to segregate their passengers.

Wells refused to budge, citing her status as a lady and a non-smoker who therefore belonged in the ladies' car, rather than the less-comfortable one reserved for African Americans. Deaf to her objections, the conductor forcibly removed Wells from the train — to the applause of white passengers. When Wells returned to Memphis, she immediately hired an attorney and sued the railroad for mistreatment. She won her case in local court but the railroad company appealed to the Supreme Court

of Tennessee, and it reversed the lower court's ruling. This was the first of many struggles for social justice and human dignity in which Wells engaged over her lifetime. From that moment forward, Wells worked tirelessly and fearlessly to fight gender and race-based injustice and violence.

Wells' suit against the railroad company also sparked her career as a journalist. Many newspapers wanted to hear about the experiences of the 25-year-old school teacher who stood up against white supremacy. Her writing career blossomed in publications geared to African-American and Christian audiences, as well as British newspapers. In 1889 Wells became a partner in the *Free Speech and Headlight*, a newspaper owned by the pastor of the Beale Street Baptist Church, Reverend R.

Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library



Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library

Ida B. Wells-Barnett had four children with her husband, F.L. Barnett, a fellow newspaper editor.

Nightingale. Rev. Nightingale encouraged his large African-American congregation to subscribe to the paper and, as a result, the publication flourished. This enabled Wells to leave her teaching job and support herself as a writer, editor, and later speaker both in the U.S. and abroad.

Tragedy struck Wells' life again in 1892 when three of her friends were lynched (mob murder without legal sanction). Their names were Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Henry Stewart. The three men were owners of People's Grocery Company and some felt that their store had diverted customers from competing white-owned businesses. In response, a group of angry white men tried to eliminate the competition by attacking People's

Grocery but the owners fought back, shooting one of the attackers. The owners of People's Grocery were arrested but before long a lynch-mob broke into the jail in which they were being held. The mob dragged the incarcerated men out of town and brutally murdered all three. This atrocity catalyzed Wells' outrage. She wrote in *The Free Speech*:

The city of Memphis has demonstrated that neither character nor standing avails the Negro if he dares to protect himself against the white man or become his rival. There is nothing we can do about the lynching now, as we are out-numbered and without arms. The white mob could help itself to ammunition without pay, but the order is rigidly enforced against the selling of guns to Negroes. There is therefore only one thing left to do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts, but takes us out and murders us in cold blood when accused by white persons.

Many people took the advice Wells penned in her paper and left town. Other members of the black community organized a boycott of white-owned businesses to express their indignation at the atrocities. Uncowed by the horrific events, Wells continued her muckraking and investigative journalism until her newspaper office was destroyed in retaliation. Wells could not return to Memphis, so she moved to Chicago, where she could pursue her journalistic endeavors. She continued her blistering editorials on Southern injustices in local, national, and international publications, investigating and exposing the fraudulent "reasons" white supremacists used to rationalize the lynching of black men, which had by then become a common occurrence.

In Chicago, Wells also helped develop numerous African-American women's and reform organizations. Throughout, she remained committed to her anti-lynching crusade, publishing the pamphlet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), with her image emblazoned on the cover. In 1895 Wells married attorney Ferdinand L. Barnett, the editor of one of Chicago's early black-owned newspapers, and bore four children, which slowed but did not stop her activism. She became a tireless worker for women's suffrage, and participated in the historic 1913



Prints and Photographs Division, LOC

Wells-Barnett was active in the women's suffrage movement. She participated in the 1913 National American Women's Suffrage Association march on Washington, D.C. This is the cover of the program for the 1913 procession. Wells-Barnett founded the first black women's suffrage organization, the Alpha Suffrage Club, the same year.

Washington, D.C., march for universal suffrage. Unable to tolerate injustice of any kind, Wells-Barnett, along with Jane Addams (a pioneering social worker and later recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize), successfully blocked the establishment of segregated schools in Chicago.

In 1906, she joined with W.E.B. Du Bois and others to further the Niagara Movement, an African-American civil rights movement that opposed racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and the conciliatory strategy favored by other black activists like Booker T. Washington.

Wells-Barnett was one of two African-American women to sign "the call" to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, becoming one of the organization's founding members. Due to her vocal opposition to Washington's approach, however, she was branded a "radical" and blocked from assuming leadership positions within the group.

As late as 1930, Wells-Barnett became so disillusioned with the major parties' nominees to the state legislature that she decided to run for the Illinois State Legislature, becoming one of the first African-American women to run for public office in the United States. Wells-Barnett passed away a year later, after a lifetime crusading for justice. ■

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Reprinted from Stories of African-American Achievement, III, U.S. Department of State.

Zora Neale Hurston

LITERARY LEGEND

Valerie Boyd

Zora Neale Hurston 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.

By all accounts, Hurston could walk into a roomful of strangers and, a few minutes and a couple of stories later, leave them so completely charmed that many offered to help her in any way they could. She had a fiery intellect, an infectious sense of humor, and “the gift,” as one friend put it, “of walking into hearts.” Her unique combination of talent, determination, and charm led her to become one of the bright lights of the Harlem Renaissance and one of the most successful and most significant writers of the first half of the 20th century. Over a career that spanned more than 30 years, Hurston published four novels, two books of folklore, an autobiography, numerous short stories, and several essays, articles, and plays.

Born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, Hurston moved with her family to Eatonville, Florida, when she was still a toddler. In Eatonville, Zora saw



Novelist Zora Neale Hurston was an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance.

evidence of black achievement all around her. In the town hall, black men, including her father, John Hurston, formulated the laws that governed Eatonville. In the town’s two churches, black women, including her mother, Lucy, directed the Sunday School curricula. On the porch of the village store black men and women passed worlds through their mouths in the form of colorful, engaging stories.

Growing up in a large house on five acres of land in this culturally-affirming community, Zora had a relatively happy childhood, despite frequent clashes with her preacher-father, who sometimes sought — as she put it — to “squinch” her rambunctious spirit.

In contrast, her mother urged young Zora and her seven siblings to “jump at de sun,” employing the African-American vernacular common in Eatonville. “We might not land on the sun,” Hurston explained, “but at least we would get off the ground.”

Hurston’s idyllic early years abruptly ended, however, when her mother died in 1904. Following Lucy Hurston’s death, Zora’s father quickly remarried and seemed to have little time or money for his children. Eventually, after Zora got into a fistfight with her young stepmother, her father sent Zora away to live with various relatives and to find her own way to adulthood. “Bare and bony of comfort and love,” was how Zora described those lean years. She worked a series of menial jobs through her teens

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Hurston examines a book at the *New York Times* Book Fair in New York City, 1937. Her own novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), earned her lasting fame.

while struggling to complete her education. For almost a decade, Zora disappeared from the public record. When she re-emerged, in 1917, she was 26 years old and living in Baltimore — but still lacked a high school diploma. Disguising herself as a teenager to qualify for free public schooling, Zora listed her birth year as 1901 — making her a full decade younger than she really was. From then on, she always presented herself as at least 10 years younger than her true age. Fortunately, Hurston had the looks to pull it off. Photographs reveal that she was a handsome, big-boned woman with playful yet penetrating eyes, high cheekbones, and a full, graceful mouth always animated with expression.

After finally completing high school, Hurston went on to earn a bachelor's degree from prestigious Barnard College and, from there, pursued a Ph.D. at Columbia University under world-renowned anthropologist Franz Boas. Later, Hurston garnered a coveted Guggenheim fellowship to study indigenous communities in Jamaica and Haiti.

By 1935, Hurston was firmly ensconced in the American literary scene. She had published several short stories and articles, a well-received collection of black

Southern folklore (*Mules and Men*), and a novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, that the *New York Times* called, “without fear of exaggeration the most vital and original novel about the American Negro that has yet been written.” The late 1930s and early '40s marked the zenith of Hurston's career. Her masterwork, a novel called *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is now required reading in high schools and colleges throughout the United States.

“There is no book more important to me than this one,” novelist Alice Walker said of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. TV personality Oprah Winfrey has called the novel her “favorite love story of all time.” Winfrey was so inspired by the story, in fact, that in 2005 she produced a television adaptation of it, starring Academy Award-winning actress Halle Berry. The film was viewed by a television audience of an estimated 24.6 million Americans, further entrenching Hurston's novel in the public consciousness and the American literary canon.

Today, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is widely regarded as a masterpiece. But when it was first published in 1937, author Richard Wright, a contemporary of Hurston's, was unimpressed with her book: “The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no



A trained anthropologist, Hurston collected folk traditions, songs and stories for the Federal Writer's Project during the Great Depression. She listens to musicians Rochelle French and Gabriel Brown in Eatonville, Florida, in this 1935 photograph by legendary folklorist Alan Lomax.

thought," he wrote. Still, the book earned largely positive reviews. Hurston was featured in several contemporary newspaper articles, and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Edna St. Vincent Millay sent Hurston a telegram congratulating her on her success. "God does love black people, doesn't He?" Hurston joked with a friend, reveling in the praise the novel had garnered, despite persistent racism in much of the United States at that time. "Or am I just out on parole?"

Still, Hurston never received the financial rewards she deserved for her writing. (The largest publisher's advance she ever received for any of her books was \$500, while her white peers routinely received \$5,000 advances.) Consequently, when she died of a stroke in 1960 at the age of 69, her neighbors in Fort Pierce, Florida, had to collect donations to fund her funeral. The collection did not yield enough to pay for a headstone, so Hurston was buried in a grave that remained unmarked for more than a decade.

Ironically, back in 1945, Hurston had foreseen the possibility of dying without money. At the time, she had proposed a solution that would have benefited her and countless others. In a letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, whom Hurston considered the "dean" of African-American artists, she proposed "a cemetery for the illustrious Negro dead" on 100 acres of land in Florida. "Let no

Prints and Photographs Division, LOC



Carl Van Vechten/Van Vechten Trust/Barnard College Archive

By 1934, when this photo was taken, Hurston was among the leading lights of the Harlem Renaissance arts scene.

Negro celebrity, no matter what financial condition they might be in at death, lie in inconspicuous forgetfulness," Hurston urged Du Bois. "We must assume the responsibility of their graves being known and honored." But Du Bois, citing practical complications, wrote a curt reply discouraging her proposal.

As if impelled by Hurston's prescience, in the summer of 1973, Alice Walker, then a young writer, journeyed to Fort Pierce to place a marker at Hurston's grave in commemoration of the author who had so inspired Walker's own

budding talent. The Garden of Heavenly Rest, where Hurston had been buried, was a neglected, segregated cemetery at the dead end of North 17th Street. Walker braved the snake-infested grounds to search for the final resting place of her literary heroine. Wading through waist-high undergrowth, Walker stumbled upon a sunken rectangular patch of ground that she identified as Hurston's

grave. Unable to afford the majestic black headstone called "Ebony Mist" that Walker felt best honored Hurston's illustrious legacy, Walker purchased a plain, gray headstone instead. Borrowing from a Jean Toomer poem, Walker bestowed a fitting epitaph on the humble headstone: "Zora Neale Hurston: A Genius of the South." ■

Valerie Boyd is the author of the award-winning biography *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston. She teaches journalism and narrative nonfiction writing at the University of Georgia.*

Reprinted from *Stories of African-American Achievement, III, U.S. Department of State.*

MAKING THEIR MARK: PROFILES OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

Thanks to the U.S. civil rights movement and the push for women's equality, African-American women now have opportunities that an earlier generation could only dream about. Today African-American women crew NASA space missions, run Fortune 500 companies and win Pulitzer Prizes for successful Broadway plays. Profiled here are just a few of the black women who have made their mark in various callings, and who inspire women everywhere.

Elizabeth Alexander, Poet



© Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post via Getty Images

Acclaimed poet and academic Elizabeth Alexander is one of only four poets to read her work at a presidential inauguration.

Elizabeth Alexander knows what it is to witness history. She was less than a year old when her parents took her in a stroller to the 1963 civil rights march on Washington that culminated in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Forty-six years later she would witness the inauguration of Barack Obama, the first African-American president, this time as an honored guest, having been invited by the president-elect to read a poem for the occasion.

In the intervening years, Alexander became a highly regarded educator, essayist and poet. Born in Harlem to a writer mother and an attorney father, Alexander has described her family as being steeped in politics. The family relocated to Washington the same year she saw King speak, and her father served in a number of government positions, including chairman of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, eventually becoming the first black secretary of the Army. Her mother became a professor of African-American history at George Washington University.

She graduated from Yale University and studied at Boston University with the poet Derek Walcott, who steered her from fiction writing to poetry. Starting in 1991, she taught English at the University of Chicago, where she made the acquaintance of Obama, then a law professor at the same school.

Alexander's first collection of poems, *The Venus Hottentot*, received widespread critical praise and 2005's *American Sublime* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. In addition to her poetry, Alexander made a name for herself in African-American literary criticism with such books as *The Black Interior* (2003), which examined the cultural influence of prominent African Americans such as Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks.

On January 21, 2009, Alexander read "Praise Song for the Day" as part of Obama's inauguration, making her one of only four poets to have participated in a presidential inauguration. The poem, as shown in this excerpt, positions the historic nature of the occasion against the struggles of everyday workers who made possible the time in which an African American could rise to the nation's highest elected office:

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Mary McLeod Bethune, Educator and Civil Rights Activist



Mary McLeod Bethune National Historic Site

Mary McLeod Bethune (right) inspired young women such as her protégé Dorothy Irene Height (left) to pursue civil rights activism.

Mary McLeod was born to former slaves on a cotton plantation in Florida in 1875. Her childhood interest in education led her to enroll in the local school, where she learned to read and write. A teacher there became a mentor who opened doors to higher education for McLeod, enabling her to become a teacher. “The whole world opened to me when I learned to read,” she later said.

After marrying Albertus Bethune she continued teaching and social work in Georgia. The couple moved to Florida where, in Daytona Beach, she established a school for black girls that eventually became the coeducational Bethune-Cookman College. It was noted for its excellence of education. Bethune approached black and white donors alike to support the college, enlisting powerful white benefactors, including James Gamble of Proctor & Gamble, Thomas White of White Sewing Machines and John D. Rockefeller.

Mary McLeod Bethune headed the National Association of Colored Women and in 1935 founded the National Council of Negro Women, which united other black women’s organizations with similar goals: To

improve African-American women’s lives and address racial discrimination, integration and equal rights.

A close friend of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor, Bethune was part of his “Black Cabinet,” a coalition of African-American leaders which advised the Roosevelt administration on issues affecting African Americans and their advancement.

Her social activism included World War II work for the Red Cross, founding schools, and service in educational, business and religious organizations. She wrote a weekly column in the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Honored many times for her achievements, her image appears on a postage stamp. Her memorial statue in Washington, D.C., was the first depicting an African American in the city. Her diverse government and organizational service and dynamism inspired a new generation of women civil rights leaders.

Ursula Burns, Corporate Executive

Ursula Burns of Xerox Corporation is the only African-American woman to head a Fortune 500 company.

Burns spent her childhood in a low-income public housing project on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. “[My mother was] a single woman raising three kids on next to nothing who showed me courage and gave me inner strength,” Burns said. In 2009 she told a YWCA gathering, “I can still hear her telling me, ‘Circumstances don’t define anyone.’ She used to say to me all the time, ‘Where you are is not who you are.’”

Burns’ tenure with Xerox began with a position as a summer intern. Her first years saw her work rewarded with promotion to middle management. “I was very content with my career choice ... until a chance encounter with a Xerox executive steered me in a new direction.” During a panel on teamwork, the strong disapproval Burns expressed about another participant’s opinions on women in management impressed a vice president. “My boldness caught [his] attention. He asked to meet with me and later offered me a position as his executive assistant — a mentoring opportunity to work side by side with him to better understand how the business is run,” she said.

Not long after that, she became executive assistant for Xerox’s chief executive, where she was able to get an understanding of the day-to-day activities of senior-level management. Burns said, “From there I saw a path for me in management that took me outside my comfort zone but gave me a whole new sense of confidence in the value I could bring to the business.”

“I’m known for being frank and speaking my mind,” Burns said. “The critical component [of success] is the alignment of people around a common set of objectives. Diversity is a key factor to this strategy. I truly am my race and my gender. There is no denying either. They define my heritage.”



Courtesy photo

Ursula Burns worked her way up from summer intern to become Xerox chief executive officer.

Shirley Chisholm, Political Trailblazer



© AP Images

Representative Shirley Chisholm (Democrat, New York) at the Capitol in Washington in 1969, the year after she became the first black woman to be elected to the U.S. Congress.

Long before Barack Obama or Hillary Rodham Clinton emerged on the U.S. political scene, there was Shirley Chisholm.

In 1968, Chisholm — a New Yorker — became the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. Congress, representing Brooklyn’s 12th congressional district. Her campaign slogan was “unbought and unbossed,” reflecting the candor and independence that endeared her to her constituents and sometimes infuriated the political establishment in Washington.

Chisholm, an outspoken champion of women’s and minority rights, also shattered gender and racial barriers by running for president in 1972. She eventually lost the Democratic nomination to Senator George McGovern, but earned 152 delegates along the way. Gender bias had always been a bigger obstacle to her than racial prejudice, she told the Associated Press in 1982: “When I ran for the Congress, when I ran for president, I met more discrimination as a woman than for being black. Men are men.”

Her fiery rhetoric notwithstanding, Chisholm’s life reflected a number of traditional American themes, among them the importance of education, close neighborhood ties, civic engagement and great personal determination in surmounting humble origins. The daughter of a factory worker and a seamstress, Chisholm graduated from Brooklyn College with honors in 1946. She went on to earn a master’s degree in elementary education at Columbia University and became an authority on early education and child welfare.

Chisholm was known for her acerbic observations on the ways of Washington. “Congress seems drugged and inert most of the time ... its idea of meeting a problem is to hold hearings or, in extreme cases, to appoint a commission,” she once said.

She left Washington in 1982, after serving seven terms in Congress. Looking back on her career in 2002, three years before her death at age 80, she described her presidential bid as a necessary “catalyst for change.”

“You don’t make progress by standing on the sidelines, whimpering and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas,” she said. “I don’t measure America by its achievement but by its potential.”

Johnnetta B. Cole, Multi-faceted Academic

By her own admission, Johnnetta B. Cole has been a failure at one thing: retirement. In fact, at age 75, she has failed at it three times.

Cole, an anthropologist, author and award-winning professor, gained national attention in 1987 when she became the first black woman to lead Spelman College, a historically black school for women in Atlanta. For 10 years, she improved the school’s academic standing, prominence and financial health. Then she retired as president to return to writing and teaching full time at Emory University, also in Atlanta.

But after she retired from her professorship, in 2002, she again took a president’s chair, this time at Bennett College for Women, another historically black school in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Seemingly tireless, after retiring from Bennett, Cole took a job as director of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art.

Cole grew up in a successful and well-educated family. Her parents worked in the insurance company founded by her great-grandfather, and her mother also was a professor. Cole entered college at age 15 with plans to become a physician but said she became captivated by anthropology instead. Her scholarly work has dealt with cultures in Africa, the Caribbean and the United States, and especially with divisions of race, sex and class.

Cole said the museum job was irresistible because it “allows me to continue to feel the power of education.” In particular, she wants to overturn some people’s presumption that African art is primitive and crudely crafted. “We have to get rid of these old notions, and I must say often racist notions, about Africa, her people, her arts and her culture,” she said. At the National Museum of African Art in Washington, Cole greets visitors by saying, “Welcome home.”

In a 2010 National Public Radio interview, she said, “All you have to do is go back far enough, and each and every one of us is an African.”



Courtesy of National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

Educator Johnnetta B. Cole was the first African-American woman president of Spelman College.

Catherine L. Hughes, Media Leader



Media entrepreneur Cathy Hughes talks with actor Denzel Washington on a 2007 TV One show.

© AP Images

Financial difficulties forced Catherine L. Hughes to give up her home and live with her young son in the studio of the first radio station she bought in Washington. But today Radio One, the company she founded in 1979, is a multibillion-dollar enterprise that includes radio stations in every major market in the United States. Radio One reaches an estimated 14 million listeners each week.

When Radio One became a publicly traded company on the NASDAQ stock exchange in 1999, it was the first ever owned by an African-American woman.

In January 2004, Radio One launched TV One, a national cable and satellite television network featuring programming for African-American adults.

In an interview with Hello Beautiful, a website aimed at African-American women, Hughes decried the negative portrayals of African-American women so often found in mainstream media. “We’re interested in the positive side of being African American,” Hughes said of Radio One and TV One programming.

Hughes was recently appointed chairwoman of the U.S. Small Business Administration’s Council on Underserved Communities. The council will advise U.S. government policymakers on ways to assist minority entrepreneurs. The Small Business Administration directs financial assistance programs for small businesses that would otherwise have difficulties obtaining loans.

It’s something Hughes understands well. When Hughes attempted to purchase her first radio station more than 30 years ago, 32 different bankers, all men, turned down her loan requests. She was finally able to get the seed money she needed from a sympathetic Hispanic woman banker. Much later, as a successful businesswoman, Hughes told the *Houston Chronicle* that instead of criticizing the “old-boy network” that so often excludes them, women should create their own business networks.

Hughes’ commitment to the African-American community and to African-American women, in particular, runs deep. Most of the employees in her business are African Americans, and many of the managers are African-American women.

Mae Jemison, Doctor, Scientist, Astronaut

When Mae Carol Jemison watched the televised flights of Gemini and Apollo spacecraft as a child, she knew someday she would go to space. Her certainty was remarkable since it would be more than a decade before an American woman or any African American left Earth’s atmosphere.

Born in Decatur, Alabama, Jemison spent most of her young life in Chicago. Her mother taught in the Chicago public school system, and Jemison credits her parents’ encouragement of education and exploration for her life in science. “Sometimes people want to tell you to act or to be a certain way,” Jemison said during an event at her high school shortly after she returned from space. “Sometimes people want to limit you because of their own limited imaginations.”

After attending Stanford University in California and graduating from Cornell Medical College in New York, Jemison became a Peace Corps medical officer and worked in Liberia and Sierra Leone for two years. Previously, Jemison earned a degree in chemical engineering and African-American studies from Cornell University. She was inspired to apply to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) by two figures — one real and one fictional: Sally Ride, the first woman in space, and Lieutenant Uhura, the African-American female crew member in the *Star Trek* television series Jemison loved as a child.

She was mission specialist for the September 1992 trip of the space shuttle Endeavour, becoming the first African-American woman in space. Since her groundbreaking spaceflight, Jemison has encouraged children toward careers in the sciences. In 2009, she participated with President Obama in a White House stargazing party and joined Michelle Obama to talk to youth in underprivileged schools about the importance of education.

“When I grew up, in the 1960s,” Jemison writes in the *New York Times*, “the only American astronauts were men. Looking out the window of that space shuttle, I thought if that little girl growing up in Chicago could see her older self now, she would have a huge grin on her face.”



NASA

Dr. Mae Jemison was the first African-American woman to staff a space shuttle flight.

Lynn Nottage, Playwright



© AP Images

Playwright Lynn Nottage has won acclaim for her original and thought-provoking treatment of complex social issues.

During her research for *Ruined*, Nottage interviewed Congolese women who had been victims of violence. “I thought I was going to find broken women, but I found women who had been brutalized but were determined to move on,” Nottage said.

Born in Brooklyn, Nottage attended Brown University and the Yale School of Drama, where she is a visiting lecturer.

By the Way, Meet Vera Stark is her latest play. A humorous look at racial stereotypes in Hollywood, it tells the fictional history of an aspiring African-American actress who works as a maid for a white actress in the 1930s. The main character was inspired by the black actresses of the era who were limited to portraying maids, slaves or “mammies” (children’s nannies).

The women characters created by playwright Lynn Nottage populate a vast expanse in terms of social class, time and place: a teenager in the 1950s, a pretentious businesswoman, a New York seamstress in the early 1900s, women brutalized during the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

When Nottage received a MacArthur “genius” grant in 2007, she was hailed as “an original voice in American theater.” At the time, her best-known play was *Intimate Apparel*, an exploration of race and class in America. Set in 1905, it follows an African-American seamstress who sews lingerie for prostitutes and society women.

Just two years later a very different play by Nottage won the Pulitzer Prize for drama: *Ruined*, set in a brothel in war-ravaged Congo. The Pulitzer board praised *Ruined* as “a searing drama” that “compels audiences to face the horror of wartime rape and brutality while still finding affirmation of life amid hopelessness.” She donated part of her \$10,000 Pulitzer Prize award to the Panzi Hospital in the Congo, which does reconstructive surgery for women.

Condoleezza Rice, Scholar and Diplomat



© AP Images

An accomplished academic, Condoleezza Rice was appointed the first African-American woman secretary of state by President George W. Bush.

The only child of a high school teacher and a Presbyterian minister, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice grew up in what was then racially segregated Birmingham, Alabama. Rice said of her parents that “they refused to allow the limits and injustices of their time to limit our horizons.”

Angelena Ray Rice, who taught music, gave her daughter Condoleezza a name inspired by the music term *con dolcezza*, which means “with sweetness” in Italian. Her family later moved to Denver, where Rice received her doctorate in political science from the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver.

A Soviet specialist, Rice held teaching positions at Stanford University in California before serving the George H.W. Bush White House as a Soviet expert on the National Security Council from 1989 to 1991. She returned to public service in 2000, when President George W. Bush named her the first female national security adviser.

Bush nominated her as the first female African-American secretary of state in 2005. Today, Rice is professor of political economy and political science at Stanford University and a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. She is a founding partner of The RiceHadley Group, an international business consulting firm.

In a memoir of her family life, *Extraordinary, Ordinary People*, Rice credits her success to her parents, who emphasized the importance of a good education. They believed, Rice writes, “that there was nothing worse than being a helpless victim of your circumstances.” She also reflects on the importance of individual freedom and having lived through the American civil rights movement and the collapse of the Soviet Union. “These experiences reinforced for me the idea that freedom is a universal aspiration” and “the importance of leaders to stand for the proposition that every man, woman, and child deserves to live in freedom,” she writes.

Susan E. Rice, Scholar and Ambassador

Since 2009, Ambassador Rice has served at the front lines of President Obama's new era of engagement, helping to strengthen America's international relationships and promote international peace, security and economic development. At the United Nations, she has worked to advance U.S. interests, defend universal values, reinforce international security and prosperity, and protect human rights.

Born in Washington in 1964, Rice received a bachelor's degree in history in 1986 from Stanford University and a master's degree (1988) and doctorate (1990) in international relations from Oxford University in England, where she was a Rhodes Scholar. She received the Chatham House-British International Studies Association Prize, awarded for the most distinguished doctoral dissertation in the United Kingdom in international relations, for her doctoral thesis on the transition of Rhodesia to Zimbabwe.

After she left Oxford, Rice began work as an international management consultant with McKinsey & Company in Toronto, Canada. Later, she joined President Clinton's White House National Security Council staff, serving there as Director for International Organizations and Peacekeeping, and, later, as Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for African Affairs. In the Clinton administration's second term, Ambassador Rice served as Assistant Secretary for African Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. After several years at the Brookings Institution, she served as a senior foreign policy advisor to Senator Obama during his campaign for President.

Says Ambassador Rice, "My big conclusion about how to live one's professional life is to do what you *want* to do as opposed to what someone tells you what you *ought* to do. If you're excited about something and passionate about it, that's what you ought to do."

Ambassador Rice is active on Twitter (www.twitter.com/ambassadorrice) and Facebook (www.facebook.com/ambassadorrice).



Ambassador to the United Nations Susan E. Rice speaks during a session of the U.N. Security Council in New York.

Leah Ward Sears, Lawyer and Jurist



Leah Ward Sears, the first woman and youngest person appointed to the Georgia Supreme Court, questions attorneys during oral arguments.

Leah Ward Sears has had a career of firsts, including first woman (and youngest person) appointed to the Georgia Supreme Court, first woman to win a statewide contested election in Georgia and first black woman to serve as chief justice of any state supreme court in the United States.

By age 7 or 8, she said, she had decided to be a lawyer. "I wanted to be in a profession that had the power to change things, to make things right in the world," she said.

Sears has credited her parents, a U.S. Air Force pilot and a teacher, with setting her on a path to achievement. "I was reared to get out there and compete in a man's world and not whine," she said in an interview with *Georgia Super Lawyers* magazine.

"Being the first was always a little difficult," Sears said. "I had to fight to be accepted. I didn't do it by having a chip on my shoulder; I just worked hard."

After 17 years on the Georgia Supreme Court, in 2009, Sears decided to change jobs. She wanted different challenges. She began teaching law and became a partner with a national law firm. She leads the team that handles appeals and helps colleagues see cases from a judge's point of view. "I'm loving every minute being in front of the bench," she said.

Sears said she is following her husband's advice to keep challenging herself. "There's a thrill to setting sail in a new direction, if you have the guts to do it," she said. "I'm not sure everybody really wants to do that. I do, though. I do if the ship won't sink."

The biggest first might lie ahead: Twice, she has been on President Obama's short list of judges to consider for an opening on the U.S. Supreme Court. If she were ever to be appointed, she would become the first black woman on the highest court in the land.

Dorothy Irene Height

CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST

Holly Cowan Shulman



Dorothy Irene Height was a lifelong social activist and educator.

I first met Dorothy Height in 1963. She was working on the March on Washington and had been introduced to my mother, Polly Cowan. My memories of Dorothy are keen. She was beautiful — as interested in fashion as my own mother. She was also brilliant. Her ability to conceptualize, in the nearly fifty years I knew her, never failed both to amaze and inspire me. She could take a simple thought I offered up, turn it around and around like a precious diamond, examine its facets, and describe its meaning with virtuosity.

Dorothy Height's long life encompassed the Jim Crow era and the presidency of Barack Obama. Born March 24,

1912, in Richmond, Virginia, at a time when American women were not allowed to vote, Dorothy Irene Height lived to see an African-American woman serve as U.S. secretary of state. She played an active role in nearly every major 20th-century reform movement for blacks and women and headed the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) for more than two decades.

Dorothy Height grew up in an environment where the roots of opportunity grew amidst the seemingly immovable rocks of racial prejudice and segregation. Her parents, Fannie Burroughs Height and James Edward Height, were born shortly after the Civil War. They were professionals — her father a building contractor and her mother a nurse. They succeeded in a South where Jim Crow laws imposed strict professional and behavioral limits on African Americans. As the demand for coal and steel increased during the First World War, northern industrialists began to recruit African-American workers from the South. By 1916 the push of segregation and the pull of northern industry drew the Heights to Rankin, Pennsylvania, a small mining and steel-producing town near Pittsburgh whose earliest workers came from eastern and southern Europe. Rankin was a place, Height wrote, for

which “I have many happy memories of being together with people who were so different from one another.” (*Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir*, New York, 2003)

Fannie and James Height were educated and ambitious. They were also committed Christians who devoted their spare time to their church. As Dorothy later remembered, “My father was very active in Baptist circles ... [and] our house was kind of a meeting ground” for southern blacks seeking work in northern industry, although industrial employment was always more tenuous and less well paid for blacks than for whites. Dorothy's parents expected their daughter to perform well at school,

and to participate in civic culture. At the age of 14, having skipped several grades, she was elected president of the Pennsylvania State Federation of Girls Clubs and was a poster girl for the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). An enthusiastic debater, she won a college scholarship in an oratory contest sponsored by the Elks, a national society whose Elks National Foundation supports charitable work. An all-white jury gave Height, the only black contestant, the first prize — a scholarship — for her speech arguing that

constitutional protections include former slaves and their descendants. Her civil rights work had already begun.

Still a young teenager, Height lived with one of her sisters in Harlem when she went to New York City to attend Barnard College. Although accepted by Barnard, at the last minute she was denied admission on the grounds that Barnard's annual quota for Negro students had been filled. Instead, she went to New York University and became a social worker.

Dorothy Height entered the national stage in the 1930s, a decade of economic depression and political reform. It was in 1930s Harlem that Height witnessed firsthand the degrading effects of racial prejudice, as she observed the mistreatment of black female household workers and the poverty on the streets of her neighborhood. She stayed in New York and came under the influence of two of the most important women of 20th-century America: first lady Eleanor Roosevelt and NCNW founder Mary McLeod Bethune.

In 1937, Height left her social worker job to become assistant director of the YWCA's Emma Ransom House in Harlem. There she first met both Roosevelt and Bethune, who asked her to join the NCNW to fight



On August 28, 1963, Dorothy Height was on the dais beside Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as he delivered his memorable "I Have a Dream" speech to more than 200,000 people assembled for the March on Washington. She was the sole woman member of the United Council of Civil Rights Leaders.

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for women's rights, equal employment and education. It was a pivotal moment. Though she remained an employee of the YWCA until 1977, Height devoted herself to the NCNW and then to her sorority, Delta Sigma Theta. She was national president of Delta from 1947 until 1956, and the national president of the NCNW from 1977 until 1998. After retiring she became NCNW's chair and president emerita.

In the 1960s, Dorothy Height emerged as one of the United States' major civil rights leaders. She was the only

woman who was part of the United Council of Civil Rights Leaders, representing NCNW, the only woman's organization in the civil rights movement, and working alongside such better-known figures as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Roy Wilkins. Believing that women could be grassroots missionaries for freedom, in 1964 Dorothy Height and my mother launched a project called Wednesdays in Mississippi (WIMS) to support Freedom Summer and the civil rights movement. Organized and staffed entirely by women, WIMS flew interracial and interfaith groups of women from the North into Jackson, Mississippi, every Tuesday, sending them across the state on Wednesdays to help civil rights workers and promote African Americans' voting rights. My mother was white and Jewish and the memory of anti-Semitism in the Chicago of her childhood, and of the Holocaust, made her especially sensitive to oppression. As she explained in the 1970s, for her, "freedom for black people was a step toward freedom for all people. ... No one of us can be free until all of us are free." A shared commitment to promoting civil rights and human dignity sealed my mother's friendship with Dorothy Height.

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

One of my fondest memories of Dorothy Height occurred in 1966 when I was living in a tiny tenement on the sixth floor of a Greenwich Village walk-up. One evening she, my mother and my father, Lou, came to visit me. It still amazes me that the three of them, all in their mid-50s, walked up all those stairs just to come to my home, giving me the pleasure of extending to them my hospitality. They sat there talking; three of the most remarkable people in my life, Dorothy a beloved member of the Cowan family.

In the 1990s she asked me to do some research about African Americans who had boarded a ship called the *Pearl*. She had become interested in the story of Emily and Mary Edmondson, two young slave girls who attempted to escape and were then sold at a slave market located on Seventh Street and Pennsylvania Avenue in northwest Washington — a location across the street from the current offices of the National Council of Negro Women. I remember that Dorothy was quite clear about why the past related to the present, why finding out about the Edmondson girls was critical and how these stories could inspire women of color today. As Height wrote in her memoir, “I believe it was providential that we had the opportunity to claim this site and to sustain upon it an active presence for freedom and justice.”

Dorothy Height’s commitment and work on behalf of the causes she believed in did not waver as she grew older. In 1986, at the age of 74, she launched a crusade for the black family and committed the NCNW to international

development for the betterment of women and families in Africa and developing nations. She remained active until her death on April 20, 2010. In a life that afforded little spare time, she wrote two books: the first was a memoir, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, published in 2003. The second, *Living with Purpose*, to be published posthumously, explores how a person can discern one’s true purpose in life — and act upon it. In this book she shares firsthand lessons from people ranging from Roosevelt and Bethune to children in India and mothers in Mississippi.

Dorothy Height’s remarkable memory and conceptual genius, combined with an unsurpassed commitment to social justice and an inspiring charisma, made her great. I was privileged to know her personally, but as a historian I know Dorothy Height as an iconic figure through whom Americans can examine and remember our shared past. ■

Holly Cowan Shulman was a friend of Dorothy Height and is currently a historian at the University of Virginia. Editor, with David C. Mattern, of The Selected Letters of Dolley Payne Madison (2003), Shulman also edits the Dolley Madison Digital Edition and is founding director of Documents Compass at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities.

Reprinted from Stories of African-American Achievement, IIP, U.S. Department of State.



U.S. President Bill Clinton confers the Presidential Medal of Freedom upon Dorothy Height, at the White House, in August 1994. Height advised a succession of presidents on social justice and women’s issues.

Claudette Colvin

THE FIRST TO KEEP HER SEAT

Phillip Hoose

The American Civil War ended slavery without ending racial prejudice. In the decades that followed, Caucasian Americans passed hundreds of laws (primarily in the Southern part of the United States) designed to keep whites and blacks from living, working and riding public transportation together. They were not even allowed to be buried in the same cemeteries. Nicknamed “Jim Crow” after a character in a minstrel song (performed by white entertainers in “blackface” makeup), these laws and rules were often enforced by violence.

One of the first successful challenges to Jim Crow came in Montgomery, Alabama, in March of 1955 when a high school junior named 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. Although black leaders did not select Claudette as their “poster child” for the subsequent Montgomery Bus Boycott — instead opting nine months later for 42-year-old Rosa Parks — the Colvin case provided tactical and political information that was later useful to boycott leaders, including the young Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Significantly, Colvin helped bring the boycott — and racial segregation in intrastate public transportation — to an end by courageously serving as a plaintiff in the landmark lawsuit *Browder v. Gayle*.

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. The 10 seats in front were for white passengers only. The 26 seats



Claudette Colvin was 15 years old when she refused to surrender her seat.

Farrar, Strauss and Giroux/AP Images

behind them were controlled by the driver, who constantly glanced in the mirror above his head to make sure no one violated the seating regulations. After the 10 seats up front reserved for whites were filled, the driver ordered black customers to yield their seats in the middle and rear of the bus to incoming white passengers.

When Claudette boarded the bus that day, there were no white people yet present. The passengers were mostly students like her, heading home from school. Claudette slid into a seat in the mid-section, next to the window. Three of her classmates took seats in the same row. Claudette daydreamed as the bus began to fill up. Soon, a Caucasian lady moved into the aisle next to her row and waited pointedly. Claudette snapped out of her daydream, suddenly realizing

that she was expected to get up and move for this woman.

The driver cocked his glance in the rearview mirror and ordered the African-American girls to take seats farther back. Claudette’s classmates rose and walked slowly to the rear of the bus. But Claudette did not speak nor did she move. “Hey, get up!” the driver yelled. Claudette remained seated. The driver snapped open the door and hailed a passing transit policeman to hop aboard and help him enforce the seating regulations. But the transit officer had no authority to make an arrest. A block later, the driver summoned two city policemen waiting in a nearby squad car. They boarded the bus and ordered Claudette to rise. When Claudette refused, the officers grabbed her wrists and jerked her from her seat, sending her textbooks flying. Shouting that she had a constitutional right to sit where she chose, Claudette willed herself not to struggle. “I couldn’t



© AP Images

Black and white passengers were segregated on a trolley in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1956. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed such racial segregation.

get up that day,” recalled Claudette, years later. “History kept me stuck to my seat. I felt the hand of Harriet Tubman pushing down on one shoulder and Sojourner Truth pushing down on the other.”

The officers handcuffed Claudette, shoved her into a police car, and drove her to City Hall — insulting her along the way. The 15-year-old was booked and escorted to a cell in the adult jail. The iron cell door clanged shut and locked behind her. Claudette found herself alone in a small room containing a rusted toilet and a cot without a mattress. Did her mother have any idea where she was? Claudette fell to her knees, sobbing and praying.

Hours later, Claudette’s mother and pastor bailed her out of jail and took her home. But Claudette was in serious legal trouble. The city had charged her with disorderly conduct, violating the segregation law, and with “assaulting” the policemen who had dragged her off the bus. In the past, other African-American passengers had been arrested for refusing to yield their seat to a white passenger but no one had ever fought the charges. They typically paid a fine and went home. Claudette was different. Funds to hire an attorney for Claudette were

raised with help from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and black churches throughout Montgomery.

At Claudette’s hearing, the presiding judge threw out the first two charges but kept the assault charge. Claudette was placed on probation in the custody of her parents. Her attorney appealed, but the effort was futile. No judge in the city was going to overturn the verdict against her.

After the trial, Claudette returned to Booker T. Washington High School and tried to get on with her junior year. Rather than treating her as a hero, many of her classmates mocked her. She became discouraged and depressed. “Sometimes I felt I did something wrong ... I lost a lot of friends,” Claudette later admitted.

In December of 1955, nine months after Claudette’s arrest, a 42-year-old seamstress named Rosa Parks was arrested for taking similar action on a crowded bus in the same city. Now prepared, thanks in part to Claudette’s earlier experience, Montgomery’s black leaders rallied around Mrs. Parks and quickly organized a boycott of all the city buses. Some 35,000 fliers were passed out, urging the black community to walk or carpool until city officials changed

the way black passengers were treated on public buses.

Black leaders, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., backed away from Claudette Colvin, choosing instead to use Mrs. Parks alone as the face of the bus protest. Why? Some community leaders assumed that a teenage girl who was rebellious enough to resist authorities trying to drag her from a public bus would be difficult to control in a tightly organized protest. However, Claudette thought she was overlooked because, in contrast to Mrs. Parks, her skin was dark, her hair coarse, and her family was poorer than the black leaders in town. “We weren’t in the inner circle,” Claudette later said. “The middle-class blacks didn’t want us as a role model.”

After the bus boycott dragged on for months and city officials obstinately refused to negotiate, black leaders decided to sue the city of Montgomery in federal court, alleging that segregation laws violated the U.S. Constitution. But finding plaintiffs was difficult. To put one’s name on a lawsuit publicly challenging the Jim Crow system was to risk one’s life. In the end, only four females agreed to serve as plaintiffs, including then 16-year-old Claudette Colvin.

When Claudette was called to testify in this trial held on May 11, 1956, she advanced to the witness stand and sat down, raising her right hand and smoothing her blue dress. She glanced at the three white judges to her right, who sat in grim appraisal of the headstrong young Claudette. The city’s lawyer attacked right away, attempting to trap Claudette into testifying that Dr. King had manipulated Montgomery’s blacks into boycotting the buses against their will.

“Who are your leaders?” the lawyer demanded.

“... Just we, ourselves,” Claudette replied evenly.

“Why did you stop riding on December fifth?” asked the lawyer, referring to the start date of the boycott.

Claudette’s eyes narrowed as she replied, “Because we were treated wrong, dirty and nasty.”

One of the other plaintiffs’ lawyers later recalled, “If there was a star witness ... it had to be Claudette Colvin.”

Months later — after the bus boycott had

continued for more than a year — the judges ruled that Montgomery’s bus segregation laws were unconstitutional. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the decision, forcing the city to desegregate its buses.

Two years after the trial, at the age of 18, Claudette Colvin moved to New York City, where she worked for the next 50 years, primarily as a nurses’ aide in a Manhattan nursing home. She told no one in New York about her role in catalyzing the historic Montgomery Bus Boycott as a teen, save for a handful of reporters and researchers interested in civil rights who rediscovered her story and sought her out. Colvin, now 70, retired and the grandmother of five, still speaks to youth about how she resisted bus segregation as a teenager. She is proud that as a 15-year-old, she set the stage for the first major victory of the U.S. civil rights movement.

“When it comes to justice,” says Claudette, “there is no easy way to get it. You can’t sugarcoat it. You have to take a stand and say, ‘This is not right.’ And I did.” ■



Colvin (right) speaks to students at Booker T. Washington Magnet School in Montgomery, Alabama, about how she resisted segregation as a teenager in the 1950s. She was a student at the same school in 1955 when she refused to give up her bus seat to a white woman.

© AP Images

Phillip Hoose won the 2009 National Book Award in the Young Readers category for his book Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice. He is the author of numerous books, articles, essays, and stories, including The Race to Save the Lord God Bird, Hey Little Ant (co-authored with his daughter Hannah), and We Were There, Too! Young People in U.S. History, also a National Book Award Finalist. A graduate of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Sciences, Hoose has been a staff member of The Nature Conservancy since 1977. He is also a songwriter and performing musician who lives in Portland, Maine.

Reprinted from Stories of African-American Achievement, IIB, U.S. Department of State.

Additional Resources

Print and online publications by contributors and women featured in this *eJournal USA*

BOOKS

Boyd, Valerie, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Scribner, 2002.

Bundles, A'Lelia, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker*. New York: A Lisa Drew Book/Scribner, 2001.

Duster, Michelle. Ed., *Ida In Her Own Words: The timeless writings of Ida B. Wells from 1893*. Chicago: Benjamin Williams, 2008.

Duster, Michelle. Ed., *Ida From Abroad: The timeless writings of Ida B. Wells from England in 1894*. Chicago: Benjamin Williams, 2010.

Height, Dorothy Irene, *Living With Purpose*. Washington, D.C.: Dorothy I. Height Education Foundation, 2010.

Height, Dorothy Irene, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir*. New York: Public Affairs, 2005.

Hoose, Phillip, *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009.

Hurston, Zora Neale, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: HarperCollins, 2000.

WEBSITES

Elizabeth Alexander

Home page of poet, essayist, playwright and teacher Elizabeth Alexander
<http://www.elizabethalexander.net/home.html>



YouTube video reading of "Praise Song for the Day" at the inauguration of Barack Obama.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nH6fC3W3YvA>



Lee D. Baker

Dean of Academic Affairs, Trinity College of Arts and Sciences
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Duke University
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Mary McLeod Bethune Council House

National historic site and resource center in Washington, D.C.
<http://www.nps.gov/mamc/index.htm>



A'Lelia Bundles

Author and journalist A'Lelia Bundles writes biographies about the amazing women in her family: entrepreneur Madam C.J. Walker and Harlem Renaissance icon A'Lelia Walker.
<http://www.aleliabundles.com/>



Dorothy Irene Height

YouTube Video posted by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, July 8, 2008.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEa0kr42XYk>



Zora Neale Hurston

Website of one of the pre-eminent writers of 20th-century African-American literature.
<http://www.zoranealehurston.com/>



Mae Jemison

Astronaut, physician, scientist, chemical engineer and teacher Mae Jemison in a YouTube video about Science Literacy on LIVING SMART with Patricia Gras.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fv4TditrXt8&feature=related>



Lynn Nottage

Official website for award-winning playwright Lynn Nottage, whose honors include a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant and an OBIE Award for playwriting.
<http://www.lynnnottage.net/>



Leah Ward Sears

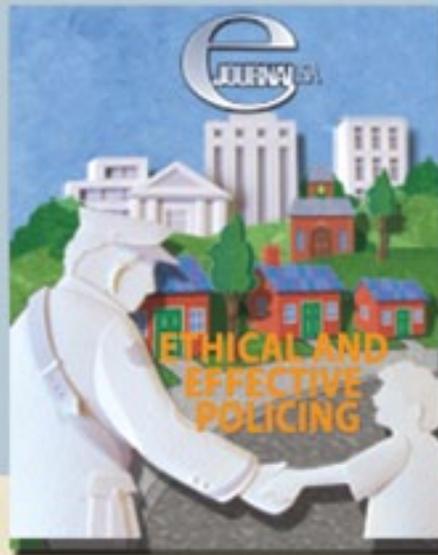
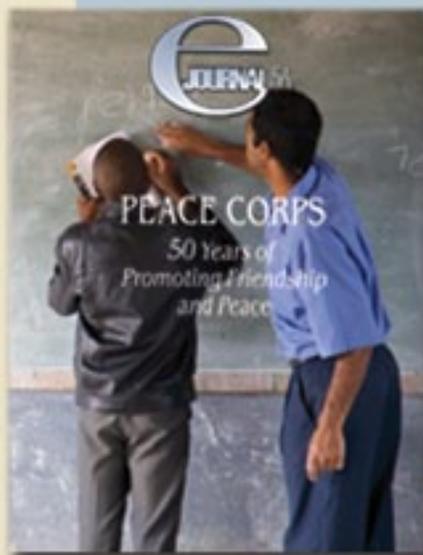
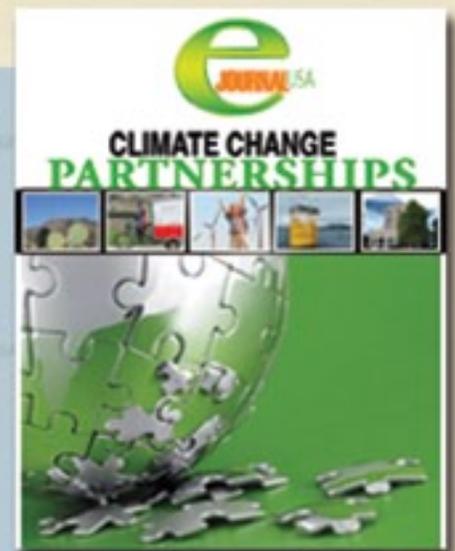
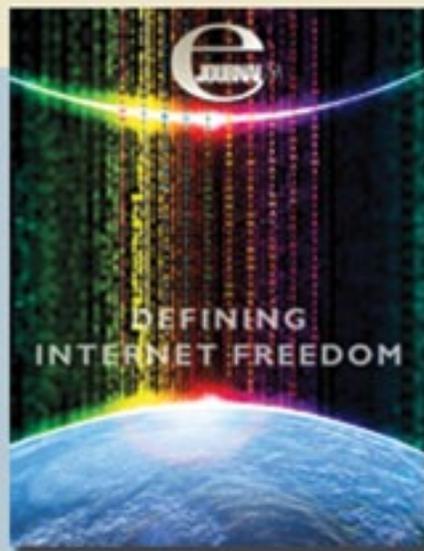
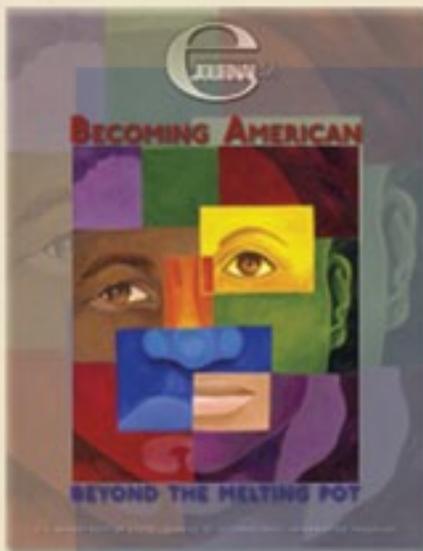
YouTube video posted by the Atlanta Press Club, June 2, 2009.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chrRI-6aN08>





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