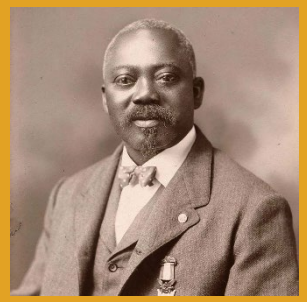


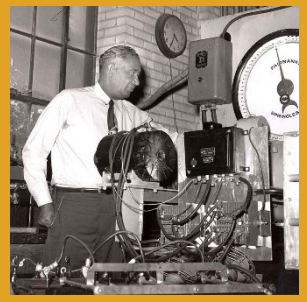
African American Firsts & Things We Wouldn’t Have Without Their Vision and Innovation

While there are so many African American firsts and things/conveniences we wouldn't have without these pioneers, here are a few of those that truly stand out.

Click on a photo to learn more about the person and their achievements.





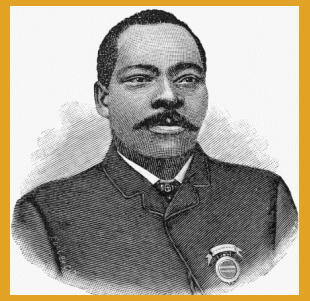















THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN MEDAL OF HONOR RECIPIENT

Army Sgt. William H. Carney earned the honor for protecting one of the United States' greatest symbols during the Civil War -- the American flag.

Carney was born into slavery in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1840. His family was eventually granted freedom and moved to Massachusetts, where Carney was eager to learn and secretly got involved in academics, despite laws and restrictions that banned blacks from learning to read and write.

In March 1863, Carney joined the Union Army and was attached to Company C, 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry Regiment, the first official black unit recruited for the Union in the north. Forty other black men served with him, including two of famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass' sons.

On July 18, 1863, the soldiers of Carney's regiment led the charge on Fort Wagner. During the battle, the unit's color guard was shot. Carney, who was just a few feet away, saw the dying man stumble, and he scrambled to catch the falling flag.

Despite suffering several serious gunshot wounds himself, Carney kept the symbol of the Union held high as he crawled up the hill to the walls of Fort Wagner, urging his fellow troops to follow him. He planted the flag in the sand at the base of the fort and held it upright until his near-lifeless body was rescued.

Even then, though, he didn't give it up. Many witnesses said Carney refused to give the flag to his rescuers, holding onto it tighter until, with assistance, he made it to the Union's temporary barracks.

He received his Congressional Medal of Honor in 1900.

***Note of Interest**: Of the 3,498 service members who have received the Medal of Honor throughout U.S. history, only 88 have been black, who earned the honor for protecting one of the United States' greatest symbols during the Civil War -- the American flag.*

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THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN PRESIDENT

Barack Hussein Obama II (born August 4, 1961) is an American politician and attorney who served as the 44th president of the United States from 2009 to 2017. A member of the Democratic Party, Obama was the first African-American president of the United States. He previously became the first President of the Harvard Law Review and served as a U.S. senator from Illinois from 2005 to 2008.

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THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN ARMY NURSE AND TEACHER

Susie King Taylor (August 6, 1848 – October 6, 1912) was the first Black Army nurse.[1] She tended to an all Black army regiment named the 1st South Carolina Volunteers (Union), later redesignated the 33rd United States Colored Infantry Regiment, where her husband served, for four years during the Civil War. Despite her service, like many African-American nurses, she was never paid for her work. As the author of Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C. Volunteers, she was the only African-American woman to publish a memoir of her wartime experiences. She was also the first African American to teach openly in a school for former slaves in Georgia. At this school in Savannah, Georgia, she taught children during the day and adults at night. She is in the 2018 class of inductees of the Georgia Women of Achievement.

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PIONEER OF LASER CATARACT SURGERY

Patricia Era Bath (November 4, 1942 – May 30, 2019) was an American ophthalmologist, inventor, humanitarian, and academic. She was an early pioneer of laser cataract surgery. She also became first woman member of the Jules Stein Eye Institute, first woman to lead a post-graduate training program in ophthalmology, and first woman elected to the honorary staff of the UCLA Medical Center. Bath was the first African-American person to serve as a resident in ophthalmology at New York University. She was also the first African-American woman to serve on staff as a surgeon at the UCLA Medical Center. Bath was the first African-American woman doctor to receive a patent for a medical purpose. The holder of five patents, she also founded the non-profit American Institute for the Prevention of Blindness in Washington, D.C.

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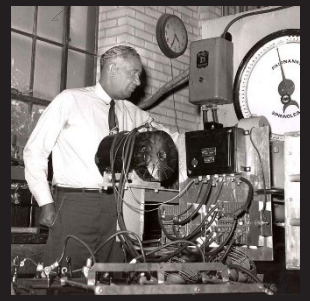

INNOVATOR OF REFRIGERATION FOR LONG-HAUL TRANSPORTATION

Frederick McKinley Jones (May 17, 1893 – February 21, 1961) was an American inventor, entrepreneur, winner of the National Medal of Technology, and an inductee of the National Inventors Hall of Fame. His innovations in refrigeration brought great improvement to the long-haul transportation of perishable goods. He co-founded Thermo King.

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INVENTED THE BLOOD BANK

Charles R. Drew was a teacher, physician and medical researcher. In the latter role, his accomplishments were nothing short of brilliant. Awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship in surgery in 1938 at Columbia University, Drew wrote a doctoral thesis entitled, "Banked Blood." In his research he discovered that by separating plasma (the liquid part of blood) from the whole blood (where the red blood cells exist) and then refrigerating them separately, blood lasted longer and was less likely to become contaminated. Drew also demonstrated that everyone has the same type of plasma; thus, in those instances where a whole blood transfusion is unnecessary, a plasma transfusion could be administered, regardless of blood type. He helped establish a blood bank at Columbia University and became the first African American to receive a Doctor of Medical Science degree from that university.

During World War II, Drew was appointed Supervisor of the Blood Transfusion Association for New York City and oversaw the "Blood for Britain" program, which saved the lives of many wounded soldiers. This success led to his appointment as Director of the Red Cross Blood Bank and Assistant Director of the National Research Council, responsible for blood collection for the United States Navy and Army. He resigned in protest of the United States War Department's policy that African American blood should be separated from the blood of White Americans.

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THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN & SOUTH ASIAN VICE PRESIDENT

Kamala D. Harris is the Vice President of the United States of America. She was elected Vice President after a lifetime of public service, having been elected District Attorney of San Francisco, California Attorney General, and United States Senator.

Vice President Harris was born in Oakland, California to parents who emigrated from India and Jamaica. She graduated from Howard University and the University of California, Hastings College of Law.

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THE INVENTOR OF THE 3 POSITION TRAFFIC SIGNAL AND A SMOKE/SAFETY HOOD, A PREDECESSOR OF THE GAS MASK

Garrett Augustus Morgan, Sr. (March 4, 1877 – July 27, 1963) was an African-American inventor, businessman, and community leader. His most notable inventions were a three-position traffic signal and a smoke hood (a predecessor to the gas mask) notably used in a 1916 tunnel construction disaster rescue. Morgan also discovered and developed a chemical hair-processing and straightening solution. He created a successful company based on his hair product inventions along with a complete line of hair-care products, and became involved in the civic and political advancement of African-Americans, especially in and around Cleveland, Ohio

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INVENTED THE DRY-CLEANING PROCESS

Thomas L. Jennings (1791 – February 12, 1856) was an African-American tradesman and abolitionist in New York City, New York. He operated and owned a tailoring business. In 1821 he was one of the first African Americans to be granted a patent for his method of dry cleaning. With the proceeds of his invention he bought his wife and children's freedom, then continued his civil rights work.

Jennings became active in working for civil rights for the African-American community. In 1831, he was selected as assistant secretary to the First Annual Convention of the People of Color in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which met in June of that year. He helped arrange legal defense for his daughter, Elizabeth Jennings, in 1854 when she challenged a private streetcar company's segregation of seating and was arrested. She was defended by the young Chester Arthur, and won her case the next year.

With two other prominent African-American leaders, Jennings organized the Legal Rights Association in 1855 in New York, which raised challenges to discrimination and organized legal defense for court cases. He founded and was a trustee of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, a leader in the Black community.

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THE FIRST NATIONAL YOUTH POET LAUREATE TO SPEAK AT THE PRESIDENTIAL INAUGURATION

Amanda S. C. Gorman (born 1998) is an American poet and activist. Her work focuses on issues of oppression, feminism, race, and marginalization, as well as the African diaspora. Gorman was the first person to be named National Youth Poet Laureate. She published the poetry book The One for Whom Food Is Not Enough in 2015. In 2021, she delivered her poem "The Hill We Climb" at the inauguration of U.S. President Joe Biden.

Click here for a her inaugural poem!



THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN MILLIONAIRE AND COSMETICS DEVELOPER

Madam C.J. Walker (born Sarah Breedlove; December 23, 1867 – May 25, 1919) was an American entrepreneur, philanthropist, and political and social activist. She is recorded as the first female self-made millionaire in America in the Guinness Book of World Records. Multiple sources mention that although other women might have been the first, their wealth is not as well-documented.

Walker made her fortune by developing and marketing a line of cosmetics and hair care products for black women through the business she founded, Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company. She became known also for her philanthropy and activism. She made financial donations to numerous organizations and became a patron of the arts. Villa Lewaro, Walker's lavish estate in Irvington, New York, served as a social gathering place for the African-American community. At the time of her death, she was considered the wealthiest African-American businesswoman and wealthiest self-made black woman in America. Her name was a version of "Mrs. Charles Joseph Walker", after her third husband.

In 2020, Netflix released a drama series titled "Self Made". The series is inspired by the life of Madam C.J. Walker.

Click here for a video!



THE FIRST FEMALE AFRICAN AMERICAN TO SERVE AS A PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL COACH

Bianca Smith is a professional baseball coach in the Boston Red Sox organization. She is the first African American woman to serve as a professional baseball coach.

Bianca Smith was born in Paterson, New Jersey. Her father, Victor Smith, played football at Dartmouth College from 1985 to 1987; her mother, Dawn Patterson (d. 2013), was also a Dartmouth alumna and an attorney.

Smith attended Colleyville Heritage High School in Dallas, where she played softball and was a co-captain in her senior year. She graduated high school in 2008. She next enrolled at Dartmouth College, where she played the outfielder position on the softball team and was a member of the baseball team. She graduated from Dartmouth with a B.A. in sociology in 2012.

With an eye on pursuing a career as a baseball general manager, Smith obtained a J.D. degree and a MBA in sports management from Case Western Reserve University in 2017. At the same time, from 2013 to 2017, Smith worked as director of baseball operations for the Case Western Reserve Spartans.

In 2018, Smith was a volunteer assistant coach for the University of Dallas baseball team, as well as an intern in the baseball operations departments of the Texas Rangers. She also interned at Major League Baseball corporate headquarters. In 2019, she was a baseball operations trainee with the Cincinnati Reds. In August 2019, she was hired as assistant athletic director for compliance and administration, and assistant baseball coach and hitting coordinator, at Carroll University in Wisconsin. Her coaching relied heavily on statistical metrics and data analysis.

On December 31, 2020, The Boston Globe reported that the Red Sox would hire Smith as a minor league coach in January, based in Fort Myers, Florida and working with position players. On January 4, 2021, the Red Sox made the hiring official. Smith is the first African American woman to serve as a coach in a professional baseball organization.

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THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN FIRST LADY

Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama (born January 17, 1964) is an American attorney and author who was the first lady of the United States from 2009 to 2017. She is married to the 44th president of the United States, Barack Obama, and was the first African-American first lady.

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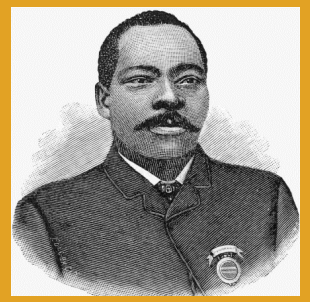
INVENTED THE FIRST HOME SECURITY SYSTEM

Marie Van Brittan Brown was the inventor of the first home security system. She is also credited with the invention of the first closed circuit television. Brown was born in Queens, New York, on October 22, 1922, and resided there until her death on February 2, 1999, at age seventy-six. Her father was born in Massachusetts and her mother was from Pennsylvania.

Inspired by how long it would take the police to arrive in her neighborhood, Brown invented the first home security system. Her work hours were not the standard 9–5, and the crime rate in their Queens, New York City neighborhood was very high. Wondering who was on the other side of her door was always something Brown was doing. Marie started her invention by creating three peepholes in the door in order to provide access for tall and average height people along with her children. The next step was setting up a camera that could adjust from peephole to peephole in order to allow people inside the house to look outside to see who was there. Marie wanted to find a way to view who was outside the house from any room she or her family were in and decided a wireless television system would work best. In order to do this she used a radio controlled wireless system which could stream the video to any television in the house. Along with the video system Marie and her husband created a two way microphone system which would allow for communication between the family and the person at the door. Marie knew this would only help them know who was at the door or attempting to enter the home, but would not improve the emergency response time. Knowing that the police or security response was slow she decided that there must be a quicker way for them to alert the authorities. To do so she invented a system that contacted police and emergency responders with just the tap of a button. This invention changed the world of home security and has led to a number of current home security systems.

Click here for a video!



THE INVENTOR OF THE FIRST SYNCHRONOUS MULTIPLEX RAILWAY TELEGRAPH

Granville Tailer Woods (April 23, 1856 – January 30, 1910) was an inventor who held more than 60 patents in the U.S. He was the first African American mechanical and electrical engineer after the Civil War. Self-taught, he concentrated most of his work on trains and streetcars. One of his notable inventions was a device he called the Synchronous Multiplex Railway Telegraph, a variation of induction telegraph which relied on ambient static electricity from existing telegraph lines to send messages between train stations and moving trains. His work assured a safer and better public transportation system for the cities of the United States.

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THE FIRST FEMALE AFRICAN AMERICAN ELECTED TO THE UNITED STATES CONGRESS

Shirley Anita Chisholm (née St. Hill; November 30, 1924 – January 1, 2005) was an American politician, educator, and author. In 1968, she became the first Black woman elected to the United States Congress, representing New York's 12th congressional district for seven terms from 1969 to 1983. In the 1972 United States presidential election, she became the first African-American candidate for a major party's nomination for President of the United States, and the first woman to run for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination.

Born in Brooklyn, Chisolm studied and worked in early childhood education, becoming involved in local Democratic party politics in the 1950s. In 1964, overcoming some resistance because she was a woman, she was elected to the New York State Assembly. Four years later she was elected to Congress, where she led expansion of food and nutrition programs for the poor and rose to party leadership. She retired from Congress in 1983 and taught at Mt Holyoke College, while continuing her political organizing. Although nominated for an ambassadorship in 1993, health issues caused her to withdraw. In 2015, Chisholm was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

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