



THE ENTREPRENEUR

Madame C.J. Walker, 1867-1919

She was born Sarah Breedlove, daughter of a poor farm couple who died while she was still a little girl. She was married at 14; when her husband died, she supported herself as a washerwoman. In 1905, Walker perfected a formula for straightening the hair of Black women; it was the beginning of a cosmetics empire that, by the time of her death would make her a millionaire — one of the first Black Americans to achieve that status, if not the first. Walker denied herself no luxury — her mansion at Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y., is said to have been a regal showplace. But the hair-care magnate was also a generous contributor to good causes; she funded scholarships and gave to the indigent and the needy.



THE SINGER

Mamie Smith, 1883-1946

Bessie Smith was better known, but Mamie got there first. Her hit, “Crazy Blues,” recorded in 1920, was the first blues vocal ever recorded and also the first recording by an African-American woman. Despite that distinction, Smith did not think of herself primarily as a blues singer — she was a vaudevillian who sang many different styles. The Cincinnati-born vocalist spent the ‘20s and ‘30s barnstorming across the United States with her Jazz Hounds, a band that included such luminaries as James “Bubber” Miley and Willie “The Lion” Smith.



THE EXPLORER

Matthew Alexander Henson, 1866-1955

On the day in 1887 that he first met Robert Peary, Henson, though only about 21 years old, already had experience as a stevedore, seaman, bellhop and coachman. Peary thought Henson might make a valuable valet on Peary’s attempt to become the first man to reach the North Pole. But Peary soon discovered that Henson’s abilities and experiences made him even more valuable as a colleague. As Peary once put it, “I couldn’t get along without him.” The men mounted seven expeditions to the Arctic, including the last, in 1908 and 1909, when they finally stood together at the top of the world, the first explorers to do so.



THE ACTIVIST

A. Philip Randolph, 1889-1979

His courtly, Sphinx-like demeanor belied the soul of a fighter. Randolph, a leader of the “New Negro” movement of the early 20th century, was tapped by Black railroad workers to lead their fledgling union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, in 1925. It would take years for the union to even get the Pullman Co. to recognize them, years more before an agreement was hammered out, but when it was over, Randolph and his union had won workplace concessions once unthinkable for Black employees. In later years, Randolph was instrumental in pushing President Franklin Roosevelt to do away with segregation in the defense industry. He was also an organizer of the 1963 March on Washington.



THE JOURNALIST

John Russwurm, 1799-1851

Although he was technically born a slave in Jamaica, Russwurm enjoyed many privileges of freedom because his father was a White American bachelor. His father, also named John Russwurm, provided a quality education for his son at Bowdoin College in Maine (he graduated in 1826, the third African-American to graduate from an American college). When the elder Russwurm relocated to Massachusetts, he took the boy with him. In 1827, this child of privilege took up the plight of the American slave. With his partner, Samuel Cornish, he founded Freedom’s Journal, the first Black newspaper published in the United States. The paper’s then-controversial credo: Complete freedom and equality for African slaves. As the editors put it in their first editorial, it was time for Black people to plead “our own cause.”

10 WHO COUNTED

From politics to exploration, **Leonard Pitts Jr.** profiles 10 influential African-Americans you might not have heard of

Sometimes, history forgets.

Sometimes, the big names everyone knows crowd out the smaller ones fewer people recall. Sometimes, when it is time to apportion honor and assign recognition, men and women who ought to be singled out are not.

And so, those who inspired the dreams, fanned the flames and stood in the thick of revolutionary change can find themselves left out of the books, short-changed in the reminiscences.

In this annual season of Black history’s celebration, much will be said, and deservedly so, about giants such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois. But here, in 10 fields of American endeavor, are 10 other names, lesser-known women and men whose contributions and heroism we should remember, always.

— Leonard Pitts Jr., *The Miami Herald*



THE PREACHER

Adam Clayton Powell Sr., 1865-1953

He was the grandson of slaves, the father of a flamboyant namesake congressman and a towering figure in his own right. As a boy, Powell, a Virginia native, is said to have learned the alphabet in a day. A year later, he was reading from the Bible. A grandfather nudged Powell toward the ministry and he eventually served as pastor of churches in Connecticut and Pennsylvania. The pastorate that made him famous, however, was at Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City. Under Powell’s leadership, Abyssinian practiced a social gospel that did not limit itself to the pulpit and pews; the church operated a facility for the aged, helped feed the poor, and agitated for racial and economic justice. By the mid-1930s, Abyssinian claimed 14,000 members, making it the largest Protestant congregation in the United States.



THE POLITICIAN

P.B.S. Pinchback, 1837-1921

Pinckney Benton Stewart Pinchback was the free-born son of a White planter and a woman the planter owned and later freed. In 1862, he was assigned the duty of recruiting African-American volunteers for the Union Army forces, but resigned his captain’s commission in protest of the discriminatory treatment of his men. During Reconstruction, he was a leader in the founding of the Louisiana Republican Party and was elected president pro tempore of the state Senate in 1871. Pinchback became lieutenant governor when the incumbent died. Then, the governor was suspended during impeachment proceedings, and Pinchback succeeded him, too, serving as acting governor of Louisiana from December 1872 to January 1873. He was the first African-American governor in history and, until L. Douglas Wilder became chief executive of Virginia in 1989, the only one.



THE FILMMAKER

Oscar Micheaux, 1884-1951

Oscar Micheaux came of age during the days when filmmakers routinely ignored African-Americans or confined them to subservient, demeaning roles. This was, paradoxically, the key to his success. During the ‘20s and ‘30s, Micheaux wrote, directed and produced about 30 films keyed to Black audiences. Micheaux operated on a budget of next to nothing, raising money directly from his audiences. Thus, there was no such thing as “Take two” in a Micheaux movie — not even when an actor blew his lines. Not surprisingly, the movies were usually awful. Also not surprisingly, an audience starving to see itself reflected on screen flocked to his films. Micheaux, a consummate promoter, would travel from town to town, screening his current movie while raising funds for the next.



THE SOLDIER

Henry Johnson, 1897*-1929

Early on the morning of May 14, 1918, Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts were standing sentry on a bridge near the Aisne River in France when, without warning, they were attacked by a force of 32 Germans. Cut off from their regimental headquarters and armed only with pistols, knives and a few hand grenades, the two Black soldiers somehow stood off the much larger force, pressing the fight even though Johnson was wounded three times and Roberts twice. At one point, the Germans rushed the pair and took Roberts prisoner. By now reduced to using only a bolo knife and the butt of his empty pistol, Johnson nevertheless charged the Germans. He managed to wound as many as 10 of them and to kill at least four more. The startled Germans dropped their prisoner and ran. Johnson and Roberts were both awarded France’s highest military honor, the Croix de Guerre.

*Approximate year of birth



THE FIGHTER

Jack Johnson, 1878-1946

Before there was Muhammad Ali, Joe Louis or Jackie Robinson, there was John Arthur Johnson, a boxer who became history’s first Black heavyweight champion in 1908 with a victory over Tommy Burns. Johnson spent 15 rounds whipping Burns, carrying on a running dialogue with him as he did so. Finally police stopped the bout. The victory was all the more impressive in light of the fact that Burns’ manager served as referee — a concession Johnson had to make in order to get Burns to agree to the fight. Johnson’s victory polarized the nation — a state of tension made worse by the fact that he was a swaggering, boastful champion given to publicly romancing and marrying White women. Proponents of White supremacy seized upon former champion Jim Jeffries as their “great White hope” for snatching the title back from this unruly Black man. But the overweight Jeffries, who returned from retirement for the bout, was no match for Johnson, who toyed with him for 15 rounds before knocking him out.