

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was an African-American abolitionist, humanitarian, and Union Spy during the American Civil War. Harriet Tubman was born into slavery in Dorchester County, Maryland in 1820. As a child masters to whom she was hired out beat her. Early in her life, Harriet suffered a severe head wound when she was hit by a heavy metal weight because when she was asked to help restrain a runaway slave, she refused. The injury caused disabling seizures, narcoleptic attacks, and headaches, which occurred throughout her life (Tubman, 2014).

In 1849, Harriet Tubman initially escaped to Philadelphia with two of her brothers, Henry and Ben. A notice of their escape was published offering large reward for their return. Harriet's brothers started to have second thoughts and decided to return to the plantation. However, Harriet had no plans to remain in bondage as she called it. Therefore, after seeing her brothers home safely, Harriet continued her journey alone traveling nearly 90 miles using the Underground Railroad to Philadelphia. Feeling relieved as she crossed into the Free State of Pennsylvania Harriet Tubman stated, "When I found I had crossed the line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything; the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in Heaven" (§ 8).

In December 1850, Harriet received a warning that her niece and her two children were going to be sold. Instead of remaining in the safety, Harriet Tubman decided to go back to rescue her family and other slaves. Traveling by night, this was the first of many trips by Harriet Tubman, who earned the nickname "Moses" for her leadership. "Over time, she was able to guide her parents, several siblings, and about 60 others to freedom" (Tubman, 2014, § 9). Harriet Tubman made more than nineteen trips to rescue more than 300 slaves using the Underground Railroad. "One family member who declined to make the journey was Harriet's husband, John, who preferred to stay in Maryland with his new wife" (Tubman, 2014, § 9). The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, required law officials in Free States to aid efforts to recapture slaves. Therefore, Harriet Tubman guided slaves farther north into Canada, where slavery had been abolished in 1834 (Tubman, 2014).

Harriet Tubman was well known and respected and she became an American icon in the years after she died. Harriet Tubman was one of the most famous civilians in American history before the Civil War. Harriet Tubman continues to inspire generations of Americans struggling for civil rights with her bravery and bold action.

Shirley Caesar

Shirley Ann Caesar-Williams, known professionally as Shirley Caesar (born October 13, 1938, [Durham, North Carolina](#)) is an American [Gospel music](#) singer, songwriter and recording artist whose career has spanned over six decades. A multi-award winning artist, with eleven [Grammy Awards](#) and seven [Dove Awards](#) to her credit, she is known as the "First Lady of Gospel Music".

Beginning recording at the age of 13 in 1951, Shirley Caesar has released over forty albums, exploring her gift and spreading messages of faith. She has participated in over 16 compilations and three gospel musicals, *Mama I Want to Sing*, *Sing: Mama 2* and *Born to Sing: Mama 3*.

Her credits also include a series of commercials for [MCI Communications](#) and several awards for her recordings. She has won or received 11 Grammy Awards, 13 Stellar Awards, 18 Doves, 1 RIAA gold certification, an Essence Award, McDonald's Golden Circle Lifetime Achievement Award, NAACP Achievement Award, SESAC Lifetime Achievement Award, as well as induction into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame. According to Soundscan, she has sold 2.2 million albums since 1991. Pastor Shirley has made several notable appearances including the televised *Live from Disney World Night of Joy*, the *Gospel According to VH1*, a [White House](#) performance for George Bush, and a speech on the Evolution of Gospel Music to the US Treasury Department.

Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth was an African-American abolitionist and women's rights activist. Truth was born into slavery in Swartekill, Ulster County, New York, in 1797, but escaped with her infant daughter to freedom in 1826. After going to court to recover her son, she became the first black woman to win such a case against a white man. Sojourner Truth was named Isabella ("Bell") Baumfree when she was born. She gave herself the name Sojourner Truth in 1843. Her best-known extemporaneous speech on gender inequalities, "Ain't I a Woman?", was delivered in 1851 at the Ohio Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. During the Civil War, Truth helped recruit black troops for the Union Army; after the war, she tried unsuccessfully to secure land grants from the federal government for former slaves. She bore five children, all born after she and Thomas (an older slave) united. Truth died on November 26, 1883, at her home in Battle Creek, Michigan. More than 3,000 people crowded into the Battle Creek Tabernacle to pay their last respects to the black heroine. Uriah Smith presided at the services. She was buried at Oak Hill Cemetery in Battle Creek, beside other family members and many Seventh-day Adventist pioneers.

Septima Poinsette Clark

Known as the "Grandmother of the American Civil Rights Movement," Septima Poinsette Clark was an educator and civil rights activist who played a major role in the voting rights of African-Americans.

In 1920, while serving as an educator in Charleston, Clark worked with the NAACP to gather petitions allowing blacks to serve as principals in Charleston schools. Their signed petitions resulted in the first black principal in Charleston. Clark also worked tirelessly to teach literacy to black adults. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter

awarded her a Living Legacy Award in 1979. Her second autobiography, *Ready from Within: Septima Clark and the Civil Rights Movement*, won the American Book Award.

Mary Jane Patterson

Born into slavery, Mary Jane Patterson is largely recognized as the first black woman in the United States to graduate from an established four-year college.

Born in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1840, Mary Jane Patterson became the first African-American woman to receive a college degree when she graduated from Oberlin College in 1862. The daughter of fugitive slaves, she went on to have an illustrious career as an educator and was known to be a mentor to many African Americans.

Mary Jane Patterson was born in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1840. She is believed to be the oldest of seven children, and that her parents, Henry Irving and Emeline Eliza Patterson, were fugitive slaves. In 1852, her family left Raleigh and moved to Oberlin, Ohio in 1856, in hopes that the children would be able to get a college education. Growing up, her father -- a childhood friend of Andrew Jackson -- supported the family through his work as a skilled mason. To help make ends meet, the family also boarded black students.

In 1835, Oberlin College admitted its first black student and two years later became the country's first coed institution of higher education. It was also the first college in the country to grant undergraduate degrees to women. These changes paved the way for Mary Jane Patterson, who studied for a year in the college's Preparatory Department. There were still only a few black students enrolled at the college during her four years leading to her graduation in 1862. By earning her B.A., Patterson became the nation's first African-American woman to receive a bachelor's degree. (Patterson's brother, John, and her sisters Emma and Chanie Ann, all would graduate from Oberlin and go on to pursue teaching careers.)

Jim Brown

James Nathaniel "Jim" Brown was born February 17, 1936 in St. Simons, Georgia to Swinton and Theresa Brown. His father was a professional boxer and his mother worked as a domestic. He is best known as a former running back with the Cleveland Browns and as an actor.

Brown attended Manhasset Secondary School in Long Island, New York and while there, he earned 13 letters playing football, lacrosse, baseball, basketball and track.

Upon graduation, he attended Syracuse University. As a senior there, Brown was a unanimous first-team All-American. He finished 5th in the Heisman Trophy voting. Perhaps more impressive was his success as a multi-sport athlete. In addition to his football accomplishments, he excelled in basketball, track, and lacrosse.

In 1957, Brown was a first round draft pick by the Cleveland Browns. He departed in 1965 as the NFL record holder for single-season and career rushing, as well as the all-time leader in rushing and total touchdowns. He was the first player ever to reach the 100-rushing-touchdowns milestone.

In 1971, Brown was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. He is also a member of the College Football Hall of Fame and the Lacrosse Hall of Fame. Brown is widely considered to be one of the greatest professional athletes in the history of the United States. In 2002, he was named by the Sporting News as the greatest professional football player ever.

To this day, Brown still works with the Cleveland Browns as an Executive Advisor. He also continues his acting career with his latest movie having been released in 2014. Jim Brown has been a major influence to many others over the course of his life. For this reason and his many accomplishments, we recognize him during Black History Month.

Tom Wiggins

Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins was an African American musical prodigy on the piano. He was born on May 25, 1849 to enslaved parents and thus a slave as well. Since he was born blind he was unable to complete the normal work demands of an enslaved person. He was able to roam about the plantation and became interested in the piano upon hearing the daughters of the plantation owner playing. He was allowed to come into the home and play. Ultimately he was allowed to move into the plantation house. He would play at different times during the day including times when the Bethune’s were entertaining or meeting with others in the plantation home. By age five, he had reportedly composed his first tune, The Rain Storm. He reportedly played the piano twelve out of twenty-four hours.

As a child, he began to echo sounds accurately around him such as the sounds of a rooster or a singing bird. He was also known to repeat conversations up to ten minutes in length. However, he was barely able to communicate his own needs and wants.

He was hired out as an entertainer by General Bethune. He would perform as many as four times a day. It is reported that Tom Wiggins earned the Bethune family as much as \$100,000 in one year which was a huge amount of money during the mid-1800’s.

In 1860, Blind Tom performed at the White House before President James Buchanan. He was the first African-American to give a command performance at the White House. Mark Twain attended many of Blind Tom's performances over several decades and wrote about them.

Tom often referred to himself in the third person. His piano recitals were complimented by other talents, including uncanny voice mimicry of public figures and nature sounds. It is also documented that "One of his most remarkable feats was the performance of three pieces of music at once. He played 'Fisher's Hornpipe' with one hand and 'Yankee Doodle' with the other and sang 'Dixie' all at once. He also played a piece with his back to the piano and his hands inverted." Many felt that his concerts were a slight of hand trickery. As a challenge, a group of skeptics played to new compositions. Tom Wiggins was able to play them flawlessly. After this event, the "audience challenge" became a regular part of his concerts.

Tom Wiggins would be diagnosed with autism and blindness in today's society. He is not only a famous African American but also a famous person with a disability that embraced his disability and shared his gifts with the world. He lived to be 59 years old.

Compositions include: WELLENKLANGE: Voices Of The Waves, March Timpani, Sewing Song, The Oliver Gallop, Reve Charment, Battle of Manassas, and Water in the Moonlight.

Maggie Lena Walker

Maggie Lena Walker (July 15, 1867-December 15, 1934) was an [African-American teacher](#) and [businesswoman](#). Walker was the first female bank president of any race to charter a bank in the United States. As a leader, she achieved successes with the vision to make tangible improvements in the way of life for [African Americans](#) and women. Disabled by paralysis and limited to a wheelchair later in life, Walker also became an example for people with disabilities.

[Walker's restored and furnished home](#) in the historic [Jackson Ward](#) neighborhood of [Richmond, Virginia](#) has been designated a [National Historic Site](#), operated by the [National Park Service](#).

Josephine Boyd

She was a pioneer for desegregation of schools in North Carolina.

In May of 1954, the school board in Greensboro, NC became the first city in the South to publicly announce that they would abide with the court decision of Brown vs. the Board of Education and admit African American students into all white schools.

However, it was not until the 1957-58 school year that six African American students began school in the formerly all-white schools of Greensboro, NC. Josephine Boyd was the oldest and only high school student to enroll in Greensboro Senior High School which later became Grimsley High School. Although North Carolina was not as violent as the neighbors to the South, it was not easy for Josephine Boyd who graduated with honors from Greensboro High School that year. She suffered through name calling and objects thrown at her as she walked to the building. This was not an easy decision for her family to allow their daughter to go to the school where she was the only African American student among 1, 200 students. This would not be an easy senior year. One of the reasons that her parents decided to enroll Josephine in Greensboro High school was because of the distance she had to travel to attend the African American School. The Boyds were not known as activist in the Civil Rights Movement but only wanted to have the best education for their children. The family did suffer hardships due to their decision such as her mother losing her job as a maid and her father's business being mysteriously burned to the ground during the night.

Warren Hervey Wheeler

In North Carolina, aviation experienced important developments in the late 1920s. In 1928 the state's first airmail flight landed at Lindley Field in Greensboro. By 1929 Raleigh introduced commercial air passenger service. Shortly thereafter, flights began to serve Greensboro and Charlotte. At the beginning of the 1930s, Charlotte, Greensboro, and Raleigh were served by the recently founded Eastern Airlines.

White Americans controlled all flying services. In fact, because of high fares, few African Americans took flights. However, by the end of the 1960s, more middle-class Americans could afford to fly. Because of this, all Americans began viewing airplanes as an economical way to travel. Yet not until 1969 did an African American own an airline. That person was Warren Hervey Wheeler.

Wheeler was born in 1943 in Durham. His father, John H. Wheeler, was a well-known businessman and civil rights leader. Wheeler's mother, Selena Warren Wheeler, was a well-respected businesswoman and librarian. Having a distinguished economic and social heritage, Warren Wheeler began his pursuit of a special dream.

Wheeler became interested in flying in the mid-1950s. According to his mother, "From the very beginning, I could see that flying was in Warren's blood." The year was 1957, and Wheeler was fourteen years old.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Wheeler received two very important items: a diploma from Durham's Hillside High School and a private pilot's license. After high school, Wheeler entered North Carolina A&T State College (now University) in Greensboro. There he studied electrical engineering; however, after his first year, he became bored and chose to continue his aviation training to receive a commercial pilot's license. Because of racial segregation, earning a commercial pilot's license was not possible for Wheeler in North Carolina or any of the other southern states. In order to realize his dream, he had to leave the South.

The first commercial pilot training center to accept Wheeler was the American Flyers School in Ardmore, Oklahoma. According to Wheeler's mother, a school official stated: "We have never had [an African American], but if you send him, we will see what we can do." Wheeler's studies at school were successful, and in 1962 he achieved a major part of his dream: He was fully accredited and licensed to fly multiengine planes—at the age of nineteen! In fact, Wheeler obtained both his multiengine rating and his commercial license from the American Flyers School. He was the school's first African American graduate.

With credentials in hand, Wheeler returned to North Carolina in 1962, only to find that job opportunities for African American pilots were few and that he lacked adequate hours of flying experience. He learned that certification by one of the top domestic flight training schools was not enough to obtain a position with a major airline. Realizing this, Wheeler, with financial backing from his family, opened his own flying school in 1962 at the Horace Williams Airport in Chapel Hill. His rationale behind starting the school was to obtain enough flight hours to meet the requirements for employment by the major commercial airlines. To do this, Wheeler purchased his first small aircraft and began instructing white students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to the school, Wheeler also began a charter service "to gain more flight experience."

After three years of operating a flying school and charter service successfully, Wheeler accumulated enough flight hours to qualify for employment by a major airline. His race continued to be a factor, however. None of the large airlines was willing to consider his application, until former governor Terry Sanford recommended him to Piedmont Airlines.

While governor (1961–1965), Sanford had flown on charter flights with Wheeler as pilot. Because of his confidence in Wheeler, Sanford recommended him to the president of Piedmont Airlines, Tom Davis. Out of respect for Sanford, Davis allowed Wheeler to take Piedmont's pilot examination. Wheeler met all of the qualifications, and in March 1966, at the age of twenty-two, became the first African American and one of the youngest pilots that Piedmont Airlines hired.

Although Wheeler was proud of integrating the pilot ranks at Piedmont, he was not through making history. He became the first African American to own a commercial air carrier when he founded Wheeler Flying Service in 1969. Wheeler advertised his company as a charter, air cargo, and aircraft maintenance service. As

president, he developed it to include eleven single- and twin-engine propeller aircraft. In its early years, the flying service averaged 8,000 passengers annually.

*This article was written by Charles W. Wadlington From Tar Heel Junior Historian 43:1 (fall 2003). Charles W. Wadlington, a retiree of state government, works as an independent researcher in Raleigh.

Other references include:

The Biography Channel

Wikipedia