

African American/Black History
Month
2012

Black Women
in
American Culture and History

African American/Black History Month

From the American Revolution to the present, African American women have played a myriad of critical roles in the shaping of our nation.

African American/Black History Month

During the years following the Civil War, the Great Migration occurred, when a large percentage of Black Americans moved from the South to industrial cities in the Northeast and Midwest.

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African Americans searched for a safe place to explore their new identities as free men and women. They found it in Harlem.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

African American/Black History Month

New York's Harlem became a cultural center for poor and middle-class Blacks.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

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During the 1920s and 1930s, New York was one of the few states that outlawed school segregation. Blacks moved from all over the country to receive an education there.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

African American/Black History Month

The *New Negro Movement* began as a series of literary discussions in Greenwich Village and Harlem.

Later termed the *Harlem Renaissance*, this movement brought unprecedented creative activity in writing, art, and music, redefining the artistic expressions of African Americans.

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The Harlem Renaissance marked the first time in American history that the White mainstream took notice of the creative talents of Black America.

African American/Black History Month

At the heart of this cultural explosion were talented women who took their experiences of being Black females and shaped their stories into careers as artists, writers, and musicians.



Their art, writing, dance, and music addressed not only race issues but gender issues as well.

African American/Black History Month

**Marian Anderson—Singer
(1897-1993)**



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

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Marian Anderson

Marian Anderson began singing at a young age and, by the time she was a teenager, was singing at Carnegie Hall as a soloist.

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Marian Anderson

Anderson gave her first concert at New York's Town Hall where she received poor reviews—especially for her singing of a German folk song.

Determined to improve her singing in foreign languages, she traveled to Europe.

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Marian Anderson

Anderson was popular throughout Europe, where little attention was paid to the fact that she was African American.

However, in Salzburg, authorities refused to allow her to sing based on race. While she was eventually allowed to sing, she was not officially recognized as part of the festival.

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Marian Anderson

In 1939, Anderson was denied the use of Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR).

In protest, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the DAR, catapulting Anderson into national prominence as a symbol in the struggle for racial equality.

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Marian Anderson

In 1955, Anderson broke racial barriers by becoming the first African American to sing with the Metropolitan Opera.

She served as a Goodwill Ambassador for the U.S. State Department from 1957-1958, and she sang at the presidential inaugurations for both Eisenhower and Kennedy.

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**Nancy Elizabeth Prophet—Artist
(1890-1960)**



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Nancy Elizabeth Prophet

Raised under modest conditions, her father was a city worker, and her mother was a housewife.

Encouraged after high school, Prophet enrolled in the renowned Rhode Island School of Design, working as a domestic to pay her tuition.

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Nancy Elizabeth Prophet

In 1922, with financial assistance from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, Prophet went to Paris to study.

While there, the artist Henry O. Tanner was impressed by her work, and he recommended her for the Harmon Foundation Prize, which she won.

African American/Black History Month

Nancy Elizabeth Prophet

Still, the Harlem Renaissance artist felt the pangs of racism when she was blatantly denied the opportunity to stand with her work at New York art showings.

Curators told her that her Black and Indian appearance was "socially unacceptable."

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Nancy Elizabeth Prophet

Prophet moved to Atlanta in 1932 to teach art at Atlanta University and Spelman College.

Unfortunately, she still suffered because of the racism of Southern art moguls. She was marginalized and could not show her work.

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Nancy Elizabeth Prophet

She returned to Rhode Island in 1945. The persistent lack of contacts in her field forced her to give up her art.

Prophet returned to work as a domestic.

Prophet died in 1960 in poverty and obscurity.

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Zora Neale Hurston—Writer

(1891-1960)

At age three, Hurston's family moved to Eatonville, FL, the first incorporated Black community in America. Her father served as the community's mayor.

In her writings, she would glorify Eatonville as a utopia where Black Americans could avoid the prejudices of White society.

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Zora Neale Hurston

Hurston was a utopian, who believed Black Americans could attain sovereignty from White American society and bigotry, as demonstrated in her hometown of Eatonville.

Never in her works did she address the issue of racism, an emerging theme among Black writers in the post-World War II era.

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Zora Neale Hurston

Hurston published poetry, short stories, novels, and an autobiography. Her 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a coming of age story of an independent Black woman, initially met with mixed reviews.

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Zora Neale Hurston

Hurston's literary influence faded. She died in poverty and obscurity.

In 1972, Alice Walker wrote an article in *Ms. magazine*, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston." The article triggered a reprinting of the book, and it is now a highly acclaimed novel.

African American/Black History Month

“Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me.”

— Zora Neale Hurston



Courtesy Library of Congress

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**Georgia Douglas Johnson—Writer
(1880-1966)**



Photo courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

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Georgia Douglas Johnson

Johnson was born in Georgia to parents of African American, Native American, and English descent.

She graduated from Atlanta University Normal College and studied music at the Oberlin Conservatory and the Cleveland College of Music.

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Georgia Douglas Johnson

After graduation, she taught and worked as an assistant principal.

She moved to Washington, D.C. in 1910.

When her husband died in 1925, she supported her two sons by working temporary jobs until she was hired by the Department of Labor.

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Georgia Douglas Johnson

Johnson opened her home every Saturday evening to writers, intellectuals, and artists.

She invited them to come together as a community, encourage each other, work on their crafts, and celebrate and debate Black culture and politics.

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Georgia Douglas Johnson

Johnson is remembered not only for her writing, but for her considerable energy in fostering community among writers and her deep commitment to aspiring writers.

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**Regina Anderson Andrews—
Playwright/Civil Right Activist
(1901-1993)**



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

African American/Black History Month

Regina Anderson Andrews

Andrews was the first Black Supervising Librarian in the New York Public Library (NYPL) system.

Her accomplishment was not an easy one. She fought the NYPL administration for equal opportunity for promotion and equivalent pay.

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Regina Anderson Andrews

“I’m American,” Andrews wrote in 1923 on her application for a position at the New York Public Library when asked to identify her race.

Andrews received a request to discuss her answer. Again asked her racial designation, she stated she was an American. She was told, “You’re not an American. You’re not white.”

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Regina Anderson Andrews

“This library was a transformed and transforming space. It was a library, but it was also a museum, an experimental theatre, a lecture hall, a community meeting hall, and a work space for writers.”

—Karin Roffman

Modernist Annex: American Women Writers in
Museums and Libraries

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Regina Anderson Andrews

Additionally, Andrews and W.E.B. DuBois co-founded the Krigwa Players, later called the Negro Experimental Theatre.

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Regina Anderson Andrews

The Negro Experimental Theatre served as inspiration to theatre groups around the country, and encouraged Black theaters and playwrights.

In 1931, Andrews wrote a one-act play, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, about a lynching that took place while people prayed in church.

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Regina Anderson Andrews

Andrews was one of ten African American women whose contributions were recognized at the 1939 World's Fair in New York.

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Augusta Savage—Sculptor

(1892-1962)

Florida-born Augusta Savage, despite great opposition from her family, was determined to pursue a career as a sculptor.

With no opportunities for training and employment in the South, she migrated to the North.

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Augusta Savage

In New York, she enrolled in a free art program while taking in washing to make ends meet.

Later, she was selected to participate in a program in France, but she was denied access to the program by the French government because of her race.

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Augusta Savage

Savage publicized the incident, and, while the decision was not reversed, she did receive an offer to study with Herman A. MacNeil, a leading sculptor.

She became a portrait sculptor and sculpted busts of leading Black figures, including W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey.

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Augusta Savage

After returning home from Europe, Savage shared her art and experiences in the Harlem community.

In 1932, Augusta established the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts to provide adult art education.

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Augusta Savage

She later became the first director of the Harlem Community Arts Center, where she played a crucial role developing young African American artists.

Her extraordinary talent opened doors that led to her becoming one of the most influential Black teachers of her time, and a strong voice for civil rights.

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“If I can inspire one of these youngsters to develop the talent I know they possess, then my monument will be in their work.”

—Augusta Savage



Courtesy of Florida Division
of Cultural Affairs

African American/Black History Month

**Nella Larsen—Writer
(1893-1964)**



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

African American/Black History Month

Nella Larsen

The daughter of a White Danish mother and a Black West Indian father, novelist Nella Larsen explored the complex issues of racial identity in her fiction.

Though critics remained conflicted about her novels, they agreed her work was groundbreaking in American literature.

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Nella Larsen

Larsen is considered one of the most important female voices of the Harlem Renaissance. She was also the first Black woman to win the coveted Guggenheim fellowship for creative writing.

Through her writing career, Larsen worked as a nurse and as a children's librarian at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library.

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Nella Larsen

Larsen's first novel, *Passing*, was inspired by her experiences as a mixed-race woman in Harlem, the Southern United States, and abroad.

She wrote about hypocrisy, prejudice, and her failed efforts to fit into both White and Black communities.

The novel won the Harmon Foundation prize.

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Nella Larsen

In spite of her literary success, Larsen was unfortunately typical of many Harlem Renaissance figures. Her career was short, though brilliant.

When the Depression triggered the end of this literary flowering, she quit writing. She spent her last 30 years as a supervising nurse in a hospital in New York.

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Nella Larsen

Though her books remained out of print for some time, in recent years she has regained a reputation as a writer whose work revealed the complexity of her subject, reflecting sensitivity and clarity.

African American/Black History Month

The Harlem Renaissance made an indelible mark on American culture in ways still seen today.

From the lingering sounds of the great jazz riffs to present day films, art, and books, the creative fingers of the Harlem Renaissance still touch America today.

African American/Black History Month

In slavery and freedom, Black women's struggles have been at the heart of the human experience. Still, their triumphs over racism and sexism are a testimonial to our common human spirit.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

African American/Black History Month

Today, they are remembered and respected not only for their talent and accomplishment, but for their ability to inspire.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress and Florida.gov

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Prepared by Dawn W. Smith
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