

Broadening Black History

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Recently I shared the stunningly beautiful [Before She Was Harriet](#) in a [lit lesson](#). It is a masterful picture book, and Harriet Tubman is certainly worth celebrating during Black History Month. (But may I quickly add that it is my deepest hope that we delve into Black history all year instead of devoting one month to this pursuit?)

I am compelled to add that if our celebration of Black history begins with slavery and ends with the Civil War or the civil rights movement, we are doing our students a disservice. If the only image they see is one of struggle, we are merely offering a single piece of a jigsaw picture filled with joy and success as well.

So, today's encouragement is to paint a more complete picture, expanding both ends of that timeline, weaving into our students' lives portraits that will enrich, enlighten, and inspire. What follows is a list to get us started, but it is by no means comprehensive (in fact, it's possible I didn't include the first people who come to your mind), so be sure to add your favorite people from then and now. You'll find more information about all of them in books and online.

A)

- Alice Ball (1892–1916) was the chemist who developed the first successful treatment for Hansen's disease (leprosy).
- Aretha Franklin (1942–2018), singer and songwriter, the undisputed queen of soul with 18 Grammys, was the first female performer inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.
- Ava DuVernay (1972–) has several film industry wins, including being the first Black woman to be nominated for a Golden Globe Award for Best Director.

B)

- Barack Obama (1961–) was the 44th president of the United States and the first African American to serve in that office.
- Ben Carson (1951–). A renowned neurosurgeon, Carson also served as the United States secretary of Housing and Urban Development.
- Benjamin O. Davis Sr. (1880–1970) was the first Black general in the American military.
- Bessie Coleman (1892–1926) was the first licensed Black pilot in the world and a pioneer in aviation.
- Bessie Smith (1894–1937). If Aretha is the Queen of Soul, Bessie is the Empress of the Blues.

C)

- Chadwick Boseman (1976–2020) was an American actor and playwright who stole our hearts in 2018 as T'Challa/Black Panther.

D)

- Duke Ellington (1899–1974). Many of us can't think of swing or big-band jazz without thinking of Ellington, a composer and bandleader with 11 Grammy Awards.

E)

- Ethel Waters (1896–1977), a 1962 Emmy nominee, was the first African American to star in her own TV show. (Side note: She is the only famous person I've ever met. She was warm and kind, and I will never forget her.)

F)

- Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) went from escaped slave to prominent abolitionist, author, and public speaker, and was the only African American to attend the first women's rights convention in 1848.

G)

- Gabby Douglas (1995–) is an Olympic gold medalist, best known for winning the all-around event in gymnastics.
- Granville T. Woods (1856–1910) was an inventor who held more than 60 patents and made valuable contributions to the development of the telephone, streetcar, and appliances for electric railways.

H)

- Hattie McDaniel (1893–1952) became the first African American to win an Oscar, which she received in 1940 for her role in *Gone with the Wind*.

I)

- Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862–1931) was an early leader in the civil rights movement as well as a prominent investigative journalist.

J)

- Jackie Joyner-Kersey (1962–) won three Olympic gold medals and set many records during her track-and-field career.
- Jackie Robinson (1919–1972) was the first African American to play Major League Baseball.
- Jane Bolin (1908–2007) was the first Black woman to graduate from Yale Law School, and also the first Black female judge in the United States.
- Jason Reynolds (1983–) is a beloved American author for young adults and middle-grade students, as well as the Library of Congress's national ambassador for young people's literature for 2020–2021.
- Jesse Owens (1913–1980) was a four-time Olympic gold medalist and world record holder in track and field.
- Jimi Hendrix (1942–1970). In addition to songwriting and singing, Jimi was hailed by the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as the most gifted instrumentalist of all time.

K)

- Kamala Harris (1964–) is an attorney and the first female vice president of the United States.

- Katherine Johnson (1918–2020), mathematician and physicist, became known to us for her genius and math calculations in the movie *Hidden Figures*.

L)

- Louis Armstrong (1901–1971) is one of the most influential jazz musicians of all time. His career spanned five decades.

M)

- Madam C. J. Walker (1867–1919) created hair care products especially designed for African American hair and was one of the first American women to become a self-made millionaire.
- Mae Jemison (1956–) was the first African American woman to go into space, on the shuttle *Endeavour*.
- Mansa Musa (ca. 1280–1337) was king of the ancient empire of Mali in West Africa. Some historians believe he was the richest man to have ever lived. His estimated wealth today would be \$400 billion.
- Marian Anderson (1897–1993) was the first African American to perform with the New York Metropolitan Opera.
- Mary Jackson (1921–2005) worked as an aeronautical engineer at NASA during the Space Age.
- Michael Jordan (1963–). Many believe he is the greatest basketball player of all time. Nike even made a shoe for him.
- Michelle Obama (1964–) is a lawyer and author, and the wife of former United States president Barack Obama.
- Minnie Riperton (1947–1979), mom to the funny and talented Maya Rudolph, was an amazing singer/songwriter with a five-octave range. (She did that high schwoopy thing long before Mariah Carey.)
- Muhammad Ali (1942–2016). Given his professional heavyweight record of 56-5, it is easy to see why he was “the greatest.”

N)

- Neil deGrasse Tyson (1958–) is an astrophysicist who has used his exposure through *NOVA ScienceNow* to introduce us all to science and space exploration.

O)

- Oprah Winfrey (1954–). First African American female billionaire. Host of the longest-running daytime talk show in television history. Owner of her own network. Publisher. Generous philanthropist.

P)

- Phillis Wheatley (ca. 1753–1784). Though she had no formal education, she became the first African American to publish a book of poems (1773).

Q)

- Quincy Jones (1933–) has spent the last five decades producing the soundtrack of our lives. He was the first Black composer nominated for an Academy Award, has earned 79 Grammy nominations, and has won 27!

R)

- Rebecca Lee Crumpler (1831–1895) was a nurse for eight years, applied to medical school in 1860, and then became the first Black female doctor in the United States.
- Ronald McNair (1950–1986) was a physicist and astronaut, and one of the seven crew members killed when the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded.
- Ruby Bridges (1954–) was only six years old when she became the first African American student to attend William Frantz Elementary in Louisiana. Now 67, she chairs the Ruby Bridges Foundation.

S)

- Serena Williams (1981–). Undisputed tennis great with a 128 mph serve, 23 Grand Slam singles titles, and several Olympic gold medals.
- Shirley Chisholm (1924–2005) was the first Black woman elected to the United States Congress.
- Stevie Wonder (1950–) has written and performed hit after hit since his first number one song in 1963.

T)

- Thurgood Marshall (1908–1993). A Supreme Court justice, Marshall is most famously remembered for his victory in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which forced public schools to desegregate.
- Tiger Woods (1975–). This professional golfer became the youngest man and the first African American to win the U.S. Masters.

U)

- Unita Blackwell (1933–2019) was the first African American woman to be elected mayor in the state of Mississippi.

V)

- Venus Williams (1980–) is a champion women's tennis player with four Olympic gold medals to her name.

W)

- Wilma Rudolph (1940–1995) was the first American woman to win three gold medals in track and field at a single Olympics.

X)

- X, Malcolm (1925–1965) was a prominent leader in the civil rights movement, though his beliefs often put him at odds with Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy of nonviolence.

Y)

- Young, Whitney (1921–1971) was an American civil rights leader and served for 10 years as the head of the world's largest social–civil rights organization, the National Urban League.

Z)

- Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) was an anthropologist and the author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (a not-for-kids portrait of a strong black woman in the 1930s).